

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

Song of Solomon



CIRCLE 01/04: **SOLOMON'S SHOEBOX**

"Why does our guest room smell like blue cheese?" I asked my wife while stepping into a semi-abandoned room on the backside of our apartment. Sniffing the air, I followed the scent like a vest-wearing dog at the airport. Our senses led us to a closet in the corner. As we opened the door, our faces wrinkled, and our muscles tensed at what we saw — a massive leak.

What was in that closet? Well, I didn't really know, but it was certainly wet. It turns out there was a bunch of storage boxes, a fur coat we found at an estate sale, and a shoebox that my wife immediately tried to rescue. In a panic, she ripped open the shoebox to reveal hundreds of letters, cards, menus, playbills, and little trinkets. She was relieved to see that nothing was majorly damaged. "What are all these things?" I asked. "These are all the memories I collected while we were dating," she blushed. While the leak was stressful, unearthing this collection was delightful.

With a smile plastered on my face, I flipped through the love notes we exchanged during our long-distance relationship. I smirked at cheesy anniversary cards celebrating seven months of dating. I laughed while looking at the reservation slip from the restaurant we visited on our first Valentine's date. "This was the first time I tried to kiss you," I remarked.

Love letters are great, aren't they? Whether it's a note passed in class, a bold text followed by a typing bubble, or a cheesy anniversary card sent in the mail, writing back and forth during young love is a right of passage. It's that way now, and it's been that way since the invention of language.

In this study, we get to peek into an ancient conversation between two starstruck lovers who recently tied the knot in marriage. Yes, we will get to open up a box of love letters written a few thousand years ago. These lovey-dovey messages appear in an Old Testament book called "Song of Solomon." It chronicles the romantic exchange between Solomon and his new bride. Think of it like King Solomon's shoebox full of love letters.

Here is a warning. Some of these verses may make you blush. After all, you are reading the words of a young married couple in their honeymoon phase. They say exactly what they are feeling, and sometimes it's a bit PG-13. This book was traditionally censored out of Jewish texts until after a young man's bat mitzvah. When he became a man, then he was allowed to see this steamy section of Scripture.

While some of these words may make you squirm, I believe God wanted Song of Solomon in the Bible to remind us that romance is good, that it's God's design, and that He desires His people to experience the life-changing blessing of a healthy relationship. Together, we are going to explore modern lessons from ancient love letters. As we dive into the first chapter of a Jewish love poem, we are going to see three traits of God-honoring romantic relationships. Simply put, these are the three qualities of a high-quality partner. Look for them.

(For the sake of this study, we are going to mark Solomon's words in blue and his bride's words in pink.)

READ: Song of Solomon 1:2-3

Kiss me and kiss me again, for your love is sweeter than wine. How pleasing is your fragrance; your name is like the spreading fragrance of scented oils. No wonder all the young women love you!

One: You Respect Them

When the bride speaks of Solomon, her first verses aren't about his handsome looks, humor, or fashion sense. She comments on how his "name is like the spreading of a fragrance." Her first source of attraction is his character and reputation. Using a metaphor, she compares his personality to perfume. What does that mean? When you're wearing perfume, people notice. The same is true for your reputation. People notice it. Everyone acknowledged the wisdom, demeanor, and high standards of Solomon. She finds that attractive.

Godly character is the most important trait of a good mate. Have you ever heard someone say that they "always seem to attract the wrong girls or guys?" This likely has more to do with reputation than bad luck. My grandmother used to say, "if you keep catching the wrong fish, use different bait." While the metaphor is dated (she was born in the 20s), it can be decent advice for your dating life. If you aren't attracting the right people, then you need to honestly evaluate your reputation and character. If it's not in the right place, then you need to wait.

While waiting on the right person, focus on becoming all that God wants you to be. Grow closer to God. Fill your daily routine with God's Word. Worship with every facet of your life. Obsess over obeying God's great commandment to "love God and love people." As you do this, not only will you grow, but you will begin to attract the perfect person for you. Refuse to get it backwards. Don't pursue girls; pursue God. Don't pursue boys; pursue Jesus. As you pursue God, the right person will come along.

Song of Solomon 3:5-6

I am dark but beautiful, O women of Jerusalem— dark as the tents of Kedar, dark as the curtains of Solomon's tents. Don't stare at me because I am dark -- the sun has darkened my skin. My brothers were angry with me; they forced me to care for their vineyards, so I couldn't care for myself—my own vineyard.

Song of Solomon 1:8-11

If you don't know, O most beautiful woman, follow the trail of my flock, and graze your young goats by the shepherds' tents. You are as exciting, my darling, as a mare among Pharaoh's stallions.

Two: They Respect You

There is a lot of ancient context to unpack here. In the first love letter, Solomon's spouse opens up about one of her biggest insecurities. She says, "I am dark...as the curtains of Solomon's tents." What's she talking about? Using hyperbole, she suggests that her skin looks like some black-out curtains used to block the sun. To sum it up, she is self-conscious about her complexion.

At first, this seems offensive, but let's unpack their context. Today people put a lot of work into tanning their skin. There are multi-million dollar industries entirely built around helping people look as bronze as a statue. That was not the case back then. If your skin was too tan, it meant that you worked in the fields under the hot sun all day. That indicated that you were poor. It had nothing to do with complexion and everything to do with the fact that she felt inferior to be with Solomon, an ultra-successful member of the royal family. She felt as though he was out of her league, and she opened up to him about that insecurity.

Look at how her groom replies. Solomon says that she is like "a mare among Pharaoh's stallions." Did this guy just call her a horse? That seems kind of strange. Call her a unicorn, maybe, but a horse? It's actually an adorable response to her vulnerability. The Egyptian Pharaoh was known to only use horses that were white as snow. These horses weren't just majestic; they were basically worshipped. People believed Pharaoh's steeds were practically supernatural, and the Egyptians esteemed them as a deity.

How cute is that? She opened up about her insecurity, and Solomon immediately loved her insecurity away. He respected her so much that he refused to let her believe a lie about herself. Look for this kind of respect in your relationships. If you feel worse about yourself whenever you finish spending time with someone, then you may need to reevaluate their respect for you. A God-honoring partner respects you, encourages you, inspires you, and helps you see yourself the way God sees you. Fall in love with someone who helps you love yourself more.

Three: They Respect God

Song of Solomon 1:7

Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?

Smack dab in the middle of chapter one, there is a strange analogy. The bride comments that she does not want to appear like "a veiled woman." This is not a reference to a wedding veil; it's actually quite the opposite. She's alluding to a person who lived and loved loosely. Someone who gave their love away easily and often. You can fill in the blanks.

If you want to see whether someone respects God, then look at how they respect God's standards for love. Romance was God's idea and his design. He loves it when people fall in love. However, God designed romance to be safe and closely protected.

We should strive to love with God's standards in mind. It's not because He wants to control you. God just wants to protect you. When you reserve physical intimacy for the safety of marriage, then you are saving yourself from pain, heartbreak, and disappointment. It's certainly counter-cultural, but strive to build your relationships on honoring God. How do we do that? By putting his commandments into practice.

It's easy to take shortcuts to chemistry, but don't just create chemistry by connecting physically. Create chemistry by connecting spiritually. Don't date just anyone. Wait for the right person. Pursue God together. Worship together. Obey God together. When you do this, you are building your future success on a strong foundation.

If you are reading this and feel pain or shame, please hear this. If there is guilt in your past, there is forgiveness for your future. God gives mercy. God wipes the slate clean. You are not defined by your mistakes; you are defined by Jesus and who He says you are. Simply commit to building character, respecting others, and respecting God from this day forward — all the way into the fulfilling future that God has for you.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: Think of a couple that has a great marriage. What are they like? How do they seem to treat each other?

Q2: Why is character so important in a relationship? What character traits make someone a respectable and encouraging partner?

Q3: How should a healthy relationship make you feel about yourself?

Q4: What does it look like for a healthy relationship honor and respect God?

Q5: Why do you think it's important to God that we save ourselves for marriage?

Q6: What is the significance of understanding God's grace as you navigate dating?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Isaiah 49:14-16

John 20:24-29

Romans 8:26-30

Psalms 103

1 Corinthians 2:9

John 13:34

1 Corinthians 13:1

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/04: SEASONS OF LOVE

People have a funny habit of jumping into seasons prematurely. Fall is a prime example. As soon as a single leaf falls onto the ground, some folks start wearing flannel, drinking pumpkin spice, and lighting cinnamon-scented candles. Season skipping is especially evident over the holidays. People start playing Christmas music when most houses still have jack-o-lanterns on their front steps. The American culture loves jumping into the next season too soon.

It's tempting to jump ahead to the next season because it's new. It's exciting. It's a much-needed change of pace. While it's relatively harmless concerning the weather or holidays, it can be detrimental when we jump ahead in our relational seasons. We get to see all the seasons of love develop in the romantic exchange between Solomon and his bride.

In the second love letter within Song of Solomon, the poets leverage spring-like language to compare the sparks in their relationship to the changing of the seasons. Going back and forth, their poem paints pictures of fruits, flowers, trees, and the arrival of spring as a direct parallel to the new and exciting season they are stepping into as a couple. This passage reveals three significant seasons that every relationship will go through.

READ: Song of Solomon 2:11-12

See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.

One: The Single Season

If their blooming love is spring, then singleness was winter. Interestingly, singleness is the most important season of your relational journey. This is where you develop as an individual and become a mature person who is ready for a healthy relationship. During singleness, you build the character required to sustain a God-honoring romance. You have all the free time in the world to pursue the quirks, passions, hobbies, and interests that make up the fabric of your personality.

So many people despise their single season, which is a shame. What does it look like to despise your single season? It's when you're constantly looking for your next fling, sending out dozens of messages in hopes that someone shows interest, or spending a massive chunk of time daydreaming about your future romantic endeavors. It's not wrong to desire a partner, but it's dangerous to despise your singleness. You are in this season for a reason.

Don't rush into your next season prematurely. Just like when people rush into the spring after a long hard winter, jumping into the next season can trigger some serious discomfort, or even frostbite. Don't do it. Truly seize your single season. Develop great friendships, fall in love with Jesus, and focus on your own faith formation. When you utilize your single season to become better, your future relationships will be stronger.

READ: Song of Solomon 2:8-10

Listen! My lover! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice. My lover spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me..."

Two: The Honeymoon Season

Look at this dramatic language. Can't you just feel the puppy love leaping off the pages? He's not just walking. He's gliding over the hills like a gazelle. He's not just saying, "wanna hang out?" He's whisking her off of her feet and into the sunset. It's all very corny. If you can relate to this kind of intensity, then you are in your honeymoon phase.

Welcome to the most exciting part of any relationship — the honeymoon. This is when you finally tell each other you like each other, you're texting every day, and you cannot stop thinking about your newfound partner. Everything is exaggerated in this season. The good experiences feel like you're dancing atop a mountain and the bad moments feel like you're falling into the valley.

The psychological phrase for this stage is "infatuation." There is a scientific reason why your budding bond feels so amazing. Your endocrine system pumps oxytocin, the love chemical, through your veins at the mere thought of your new partner. It's like a literal high. Infatuation is our culture's entire concept of love. It's what all the songs, movies, books, and stories describe. The good news is that infatuation feels fantastic. The bad news is that it doesn't last forever. Scientifically speaking, your body will only release oxytocin anywhere from a day to five months into your relationship. It's pleasing, but not permanent.

Most adolescents live in this season, which is why some people seem to have a major breakup every year. When the honeymoon wears off, they assume they've fallen out of love. However, that doesn't have to be the case. Just because the feeling evolved, it doesn't mean it's extinguished. Eventually, the intensity of infatuation will wear off. That's a good thing! After the oxytocin fades, your legitimate connection begins to burst forth. That brings us to the next season of discovery.

READ: Song of Solomon 2:14-16

My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.

Three: The Discovery Season

Everyone wants to experience a verse sixteen kind of love. "My beloved is mine and I am his." This kind of feeling is not instant. It requires investment and development. In the last section of their second love letter, Solomon makes it clear that he simply wants to look into his new bride's eyes and listen to her stories. This is not a physical

attraction, but an emotional connection. Our puppy-loving poets find themselves in the season of discovery, which encompasses their long-term development.

During discovery, we strive to learn every little thing about our "beloved." As your relationship flourishes, you should strive to learn something new about your partner every day. Talk about your childhood. Discuss their past. Share each other's dreams, desires, goals, and aspirations. Long-lasting relationships hinge on the season of discovery. Depth happens in discovery, but it's also important to focus on authenticity.

I've seen so many great couples crumble because they didn't handle discovery correctly. Don't treat dating like a talent show. When you find a partner with serious potential, be sure to show your authentic self. Share your shortcomings, insecurities, and struggles. More so, don't pretend to be something you're not just to impress someone. If you're dating them, you should be in this for the long haul. You don't want someone to fall for a fake version of you. Be real. Be honest. Truly explore the depths of each other's experience, identity, and personality.

Look at the quirky phrase in verse fifteen. Solomon says, "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards." Weird, right? Let's break this down. A few times in this collection of letters, they use the term "vineyard" to allude to the most guarded parts of themselves like their emotions, their intimacy, and even their physical attraction. What do foxes do to vineyards? They sneak around, eat the grapes, and tear up the vines. A few nips to a few vines can render an entire vineyard barren, fruitless, and dead. By catching the foxes, they are committing to protecting their relationship at all costs.

What are some common foxes in our relationships? Lust can be a little fox by objectifying your perspective of each other. Dishonesty can be a little fox by breaking your trust. Pornography can be a little fox by poisoning the way you perceive intimacy. Codependence can be a little fox by making you assume that your partner has the power to save you. In all seasons of your relationships, you need to catch all the little foxes that can creep in unnoticed and cause damage.

Solomon uses the language of seasons because he understands that your relationships are going to change, grow, develop, and evolve. There may be a winter season where things feel hard; that's normal. There may be a spring season full of big changes; that's natural. In every season, build your relationship on the only unchanging foundation — *agape*. Real, long-lasting relationships are rooted in the love of God. That's how you build a connection that can withstand every season.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

1. Why does the Bible compare love to seasons? What does that reveal about God-honoring relationships?
2. How can we embrace our season of singleness in a way that glorifies God?
3. What characteristics of a romantic relationship must be developed in order for it to progress beyond the season of infatuation?
4. Think of a healthy, God-honoring marriage. How does that couple seem to grow and evolve their relationship through different seasons of life?
5. What are common "foxes" in relationships that threaten their health, longevity, and integrity? How can they be avoided or worked through?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 3:1-3

John 17:20-26

Romans 8:12-17

Hebrews 12:1-3

1 Corinthians 15:33

Proverbs 7:1-5

Philippians 4:8-9

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/04: THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT

So far, our journey through Solomon's love letters has been so sweet you need a glass of milk. The pages have been packed with pet names, loving encouragements, and the kind of romance that puts butterflies in your stomach. It's been like a Hallmark movie — adorable, predictable, and overwhelmingly happy. All of that is about to change.

Real relationships are more than walks on the beach, tagged Instagram posts, cute texts, and holding hands. Conflict is inevitable. Disagreements will happen. Tension can take time to resolve. That's where real love gets put to the test. We are about to watch some conflict unfold in Solomon's love letters. The honeymooning couple is about to get into their first fight. Let's take a look.

READ: Song of Solomon 5:2-6

I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking: "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night." I have taken off my robe— must I put it on again? I have washed my feet— must I soil them again? My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him. I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the bolt. I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer.

These verses drip with the drama of a soap opera. The daylight drifted away, and darkness had taken over their city. It was the middle of the night, but the couple was not together in their room like usual. Solomon's bride watches the minutes turn into hours and the hours turn into an entire evening. Still, Solomon had not come home. Uncomfortably laying in her bed, she stares at their door like a guard watching the gate. She thinks, "Where is he? What is he doing? Why didn't he tell me he was going to be out so late?"

Suddenly, Solomon shows up a half dozen hours too late. He was expecting to be met with open arms and a kiss, but that's not what happened. He knocked, and the door remained locked. He could hear her. He could smell her perfume. However, she refused to come to the door. His actions hurt his beloved bride. He discouraged her, and she locked him out. While this story is thousands of years old, it still reveals two timeless causes of conflict.

One: Assumptions

She assumed that he would be home at a decent hour, or at least communicate his plans, but he stayed out all night assuming things would be fine. Instead of owning up to his mistake, Solomon condescendingly turns on the charm by calling her pet names through a crack in the door. He says, "my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one." Notice how the names progressively grow more intimate and personal. My guess is that he had practiced this speech on his way home. Regardless, his flirtation was met with agitation. Solomon didn't apologize or seem remorseful. He just assumed his charm would erase the harm he had done.

The vast majority of disappointment in relationships comes from unmet expectations. This is when you think things are going to go one way, but they don't. This is when you anxiously await a good morning text, but your phone stays silent. This is when you expect captivating conversation at dinner, but your partner just stares at their phone. If you're in a relationship, you know what it's like when your expectations go unmet.

This entire fight could have been avoided with a text message or letter. It's amazing what clear communication can accomplish. When you think about it, most of our unmet expectations are actually un-communicated expectations. Pastor Ty Bennet hit the nail on the head when he taught, "you cannot expect what you do not express." You cannot expect your boyfriend to be a mind reader. You cannot expect your girlfriend to know exactly what you want. Strive to communicate your expectations, desires, needs, and heart. It's unfair to expect what you do not explain. Clear communication will protect you from the vast majority of conflict.

Two: Reactions

Can't you just feel for the bride in this story? She was hurt, so she locked him out of the house and refused to open the door. She ignores every knock, request, and plea. She basically responds, "I am not coming to the door. You're on your own, pal!" Can't you hear the pain in her response? Her reaction to hurt was likely designed to hurt him back. It's a perfectly natural reaction, but payback has no place in a healthy relationship.

This story could have gone a completely different direction if they chose to take a deep breath, sit down together, and talk it over. Solomon could have owned up to his mistake and she could have been slower with her reaction. However, her reaction led to escalation. He reacted to her reaction by raising the stakes — he disappeared into the night again. Next thing you know, their whole situation snowballs out of control.

When relationships trigger conflict, your gut reaction is always to protect yourself, put up your defenses, and shut down. It's completely natural, but it's not always beneficial. When you find yourself in a mature, God-honoring relationship, then you can trust your partner's intentions to love you like Jesus intends them to and forgive you like Jesus commands them to. Within the confines of a healthy relationship like that, always reassess your reactions. Be quick to forgive. Try to empathize with your partner. Ask difficult questions and embrace difficult conversations. As you slow down your impulses, you will see your connection flourish like a flower in the spring.

Why is a slow reaction so powerful? Because that's how Jesus loves us. He is quick to forgive and slow to anger. He meets our stubbornness with selflessness. He waits for us when we wander. Jesus is the perfect picture of love. Thus, we should strive to love like Jesus. When you build your relationships on the radical love of God, you are building your relationships on the one thing that will last forever (1 Corinthians 13:13).

A Word of Warning

In a student ministry setting, this needs to be said. If you are dating someone and conflict seems to be your default setting, then you may need to evaluate the health of your relationship. Maybe your relationship feels like a constant fight. Maybe communication is as clear as mud. Maybe the silent treatment is a weekly thing. If this cycle has been addressed and doesn't improve, then your relationship may be unhealthy and not what's best for you. I know, it's harsh, but it's worth pondering while only dating.

I've done premarital counseling with people who assume that marriage is going to fix their constant fighting. That's so silly and couldn't be further from the truth. If you fight nonstop while dating, you will fight far more when married. Marriage is like a microscope; it magnifies your biggest struggles, shortcomings, and sins.

Please don't misunderstand me. Conflict is natural and normal, but it should not be constant. If it is, then maybe some distance will do you well. Letting go is hard, but holding on is harder. A breakup does not mean you're broken. A temporary break does not mean a permanent removal. Breaking off from something that's bad for you is what's best for you.

Fortunately for our couple in Song of Solomon, their bickering didn't lead to a divorce. Solomon decided to get a little space to clear his head, so he went away. When she finally rushed to the door, she saw that he was gone. Some distance helped them evaluate their intentions. She asked her friends, "I charge you — if you find my beloved, Tell him I am faint with love" (5:8).

Their conflict led to clarity. They discovered that they shouldn't fight with each other; rather, they should fight for each other. Real love is worth fighting for. Your partner is going to make mistakes—fight to make things right. Your significant other may go through a difficult season—walk the journey with them. Your relationship is far more important than being right. If you've discovered an honoring, healthy, and life-giving bond, then fight to protect it.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

1. How should conflict be resolved in a healthy relationship?
2. How is conflict handled in unhealthy or unhelpful ways in a relationship?
3. What does good communication look like in a healthy relationship?
4. What does poor communication look like in a relationship?
5. How do you know when it's time to end an unhealthy relationship?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Romans 12:21

Luke 6:27-36

1 John 4:7-16

2 Corinthians 6:14-18

Acts 16:6-10

Luke 6:27-36

Psalms 139:1-18

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 04/04: **FINDING THE ONE YOUR SOUL LOVES**

I am an avid collector. I collect art, pottery, and antiques. In my pursuit of collecting, I have managed to handle some extremely valuable items. From abstract Miro paintings to ancient pottery from native tribes, I adore holding something with a history. "Can you imagine all the stories this thing tells?" I comment to my wife while she looks for the price tag.

Of all the random trinkets I own, one of my prized possessions isn't terribly valuable, but it's extremely sentimental. It's a fourteen-inch crystal bottle that sparkles like the New York skyline at night. I didn't find it at a gallery or antique store; I found it in my grandmother's closet shortly after she passed away. After doing a little research, I discovered that my grandparents proudly displayed this decanter upon the "bride and groom" table at their wedding. From that day forward, it was their go-to centerpiece for special events. They'd bring it out for holidays, parties, and anniversaries.

Whenever I remove my beloved bottle from the cabinet, how do you think I handle it? Do you think I toss it around, put it in the dishwasher, or attempt to do tricks with it? Certainly not. I carry it the same way you would a newborn baby—gently, carefully, and respectfully. I treat it like a treasure, not a mere trinket or trash. We should see our relationships the same way.

Can we play pretend for a second? Let's say your boyfriend or girlfriend eventually becomes your fiancé and your fiancé eventually becomes your spouse. (Congratulations, by the way.) On your wedding day, with all your friends and family watching you, God is lending you his prized possession. He is entrusting you with a one-of-a-kind work of art. Be sure to treat them as such—with value, dignity, and respect. We can see this sentiment expressed in the third chapter of Song of Solomon, where our poetic partners reminisce about their wedding day.

READ: Song of Solomon 3:1; 9-10

I sought him whom my soul loves; King Solomon made for himself the carriage; he made it of wood from Lebanon. Its posts he made of silver, its base of gold. Its seat was upholstered with purple, its interior inlaid with love. Daughters of Jerusalem, come out, and look, you daughters of Zion. Look on King Solomon wearing a crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced.

With beautiful imagery, this passage tells the story of their wedding day. Yes, their outfits were gorgeous. Yes, the carriage sounds grand. Yes, I am sure their playlist was popping. However, I want to focus on a repeated phrase in this chapter. She celebrates, "I sought him who my soul loves." How beautiful is that thought?

When you are looking for "the one your soul loves," then you should be looking for these three traits.

One: They Help You Grow Spiritually

When you look for a spouse, I hope you aren't just looking for someone who is beautiful, handsome, successful, funny, or has the same taste in music as you. Those things are important, but they're not the ultimate. I hope you, like Solomon, find someone that your soul loves. Your relationship shouldn't just be emotional or physical. God-honoring relationships are deeply spiritual.

Imagine Jesus sitting in the front row of your wedding. What does he think of the union? Do they help you draw closer to Him? Do they treat you like a treasure? Do they prioritize God over everything? If not, please follow the advice of Solomon's bride: "Do not awaken love until it so desires" (3:5).

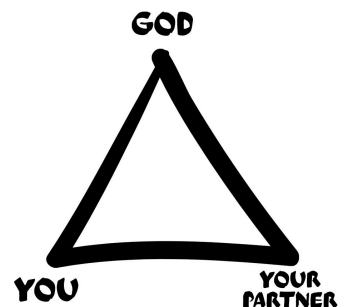
Two: They Help You Develop Personally

God-honoring relationships help you develop into the person God made you to be. Your partner should encourage you to continue growing and changing as you pursue your calling from Christ.

I hope as you date, you develop. I hope they bring out the best in you. I hope they push you towards holiness. I hope they encourage you to follow God's will for your life above their own desires for your life. Sometimes God calls us to a school that's far away, a job that consumes our weekends, or outreach that takes up a lot of our free time. Follow God's calling for your life and the right partner will not only support you, but encourage you in those endeavors.

Three: They Pursue Jesus As They Pursue You

You should be in a love triangle. No, I am not talking about a cheesy Hallmark movie plot. Rather, your relationship should include three individuals — you, your partner, and your Savior. Jesus should be at the top. As you both grow closer to God towards the top of the triangle, then you are also growing closer together as a couple. It's basic geometry right? Relationships thrive with God's presence as the number one priority.



As you grow closer to each Jesus, you should be growing closer to each other. If your relationship pulls you away from time in God's Word, church services, or Jesus, then you need to take a little inventory. Pursue God above all things, and your relationships will be better for it.

So what is my advice to you? Run after God with everything you have. The right person will keep up. If you don't see that person yet, then just keep running. They will show up at the right time.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

1. How should you treat someone you love?
2. How should someone who loves you care for you?
3. What does it look like for a relationship to glorify God? How can a couple really center their relationship around Jesus?
4. How does a God-honoring relationship help us grow spiritually and personally?
5. What healthy choices can we make now to prepare ourselves for a good, God-honoring relationship in the future?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Romans 10:1-13

Ephesians 2:1-10

Proverbs 14:4-6

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Galatians 2:20

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Luke 15

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.