

Love Is Strong As Death: Song of Solomon 8:5-14
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This morning we come to the end of our study through Song of Solomon. Some of you may be happy about that. Others of you may be disappointed. I know that this study has been painful for some of you, because you've been so deeply hurt in the area of romance or sex. For others, maybe this book of the Bible is difficult because it has challenged you in ways that you don't want to hear. You've gotten used to a mediocre marriage, and you don't want to put the time or energy into improving it. Or you're a single person, and you don't want to be told that sexual intimacy is only for married couples. I know that this has possibly been a very painful few Sundays for some of you. As unique as this book is in many ways, it is still just like the rest of the Bible in that it challenges us and convicts us.

Do you remember the passage of Scripture I preached on right before we started this series? I preached from 2 Timothy 3 where it says that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." I really believe that's true. I believe that is true, even of books like Song of Solomon. And that's why it's my life mission to exposit book after book after book of the Scriptures, because I know that somehow God is going to use each part of His Word for the building up of His people. I like how Paul put it in Acts 20:27, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." That's what I want to do with my life—declare the whole counsel of God. And believe it or not, there's an entire 8 chapters in the counsel of God that is solely devoted to romance and sex in the marriage relationship. And it needs to be taught. It needs to be taught for the sake of those who are already married, so that we might glorify God more in our marriages. It also needs to be taught for the sake of those who are not yet married, that you might prepare yourself well for marriage (if that would be God's plan for you someday). And for all of us, whether you ever get married or not, we all need to see what an amazing thing God designed human marriage to be, because human marriage is a pointer to the marriage of Christ and the church. This is about the Gospel. The beauty of the one flesh union between a husband and a wife is a God-ordained reality that points us to the far greater reality of the spiritual union between Christ and believers.

This morning we'll look at some of the concluding verses of Song of Solomon, and the line that stands out more than any other is in verse 6, "love is strong as death." And so I want to talk

about the permanence of marriage. There are also some verses here that speak of purity before marriage. So I also want to talk about preparing for marriage. This sermon will be in two parts, then, but the main point over the whole thing is that statement in verse 6, “love is strong as death.” And the two main implications that I want to draw from that are 1) marriage is permanent, and because marriage is permanent, 2) you should prepare yourself for marriage and save yourself for marriage.

I hope these points will impact married couples and single people alike. This is important for all of us, in our view of marriage. If you’re in a marriage, you need to know that your union with your spouse is permanent. It’s lifelong. There are no legitimate grounds for you to say you can divorce your spouse. And so you need to work things out and repent and reconcile and persevere. For those who are single, you need to know this about marriage before you get married. If you choose to get married someday, you need to know that you are making a lifelong covenant with that person, and you are making that covenant before God. You can’t walk into marriage thinking, “Well, if things don’t go well, we can always get a divorce.” No. You need to sense the gravity of the marriage covenant. And you also need to see the beauty of God’s plan for intimacy in marriage. God created sex to be an amazing and wonderful and exciting way for a husband and wife to establish the lifelong union between them. God is infinitely creative, and we should give Him praise for this. And with this realization I hope that single people will desire to remain chaste until you enter into that marriage covenant. Sex is a uniting act, and that’s what makes it such a positive and edifying aspect of marriage. It’s also what makes it so destructive and painful outside of marriage. When you have sex, but you don’t have a lifelong commitment to one another, it’s like getting torn apart in the depths of your being.

Love is powerful. Marital love is permanent. It’s lifelong. And the sexual intimacy that is for the marriage relationship is not be messed with by those who are unmarried. Honor God and honor God’s plan for marriage by saving yourself for marriage.

The Permanence of Marriage (verses 6-7)

Let’s start in verse 6. The wife is speaking at this point, and she is speaking to her husband about the depth of their love and commitment to one another. She says, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.” A seal in the ancient world was a way of indicating possession. If there was something very valuable that belonged to you, you would put your own personal seal upon it—like stamping your name on it. This wife wants to put a seal on the heart and arm of her husband. And what is the

seal? It's her very self—"set *me* as a seal upon your heart." This is beautiful. She wants to belong to her husband, and she wants her husband to belong to her in the deepest possible way.

When Stacy and I were dating our senior year of college, and I was at Wheaton College and she was at Michigan State, we joked about getting each other t-shirts that would say, "Taken." Since we were dating long-distance, people wouldn't see us together, and we didn't want anyone to interfere with our relationship. I didn't want any guys at Michigan State asking Stacy out. That's why I was so excited to put an engagement ring on her finger when I proposed to her. Then we got married, and I put a wedding band on her finger as well, and she put a ring on my finger. And to this day we wear these rings everyday, all the time. "Taken." I belong to my wife. She belongs to me. We are one.

And I would say to married couples, make sure you have wedding rings and make sure you wear them. It's a way of reminding yourself and your spouse and everyone else in your life that you belong to someone. Nobody can ask you out. Nobody should be flirting with you. And your own conduct should be honoring to your spouse, whether your spouse is present with you or not. There's a seal upon both of your lives that reaches down into the deepest parts of your soul and should be evident to anyone you come into contact with. You and your spouse belong to one another.

The next line may be the most well-known in the book. "Love is strong as death." How strong is death? It's extremely strong. Indeed, only One Person has ever triumphed over death, and that is Jesus Christ. Unless the Lord returns in our lifetime (which I hope He will), we will all eventually die. Death is powerful. This verse of Scripture is saying that love is like that. Love has that same measure of power.

The next line is parallel to this one, and it reinforces the point. "Jealousy is fierce as the grave." Now, when we think of jealousy, we think of a sinful emotion. "You shall not covet" is the tenth commandment. But this kind of jealousy is something a bit different. Tremper Longman, in his commentary on the Song of Solomon, points out that "there are only two relationships described in the Bible where jealousy is a potentially appropriate reaction: the divine-human relationship and the marriage relationship. These are the only two relationships that are considered exclusive. Humans can have only one God. If they worship another, it triggers God's jealousy. God's jealousy is an energy that tries to rescue the relationship. Similarly, a man and a woman can have only one spouse. If there is a threat to that relationship, then jealousy is a proper emotion. All that is because

so much hangs on the integrity of the relationship. It is so basic, so deep, that it stirs up strong emotions and passions.” (page 211-212)

So this jealousy is a proper kind of passion for the exclusive relationship of the husband and wife. Verse 6 is saying that this jealousy is fierce as the grave. The poetic beauty and profundity of this verse is in the way that it takes something that everyone is familiar with, something that is powerful and absolutely final, and compares that to the power and finality of love. The comparison does not have to do with the dread of death. Love and death are opposites in that regard. Humans dread death, but love is full of life and therefore full of joy. But the connection between love and death is in the sense of finality, power, permanence. Love is *strong* as death.

Tim Keller writes about the covenantal significance of marriage. He cites different kinds of covenants found in the Bible—“horizontal” covenants, which are made between friends or nations, and “vertical” covenants, which are made by God with individuals or families or peoples.¹ Then he says “the marriage relationship is unique and is the most deeply covenantal relationship possible between two human beings . . . because marriage has both strong horizontal and vertical aspects to it. . . . The covenant made between a husband and a wife is done ‘before God’ and therefore with God as well as the spouse. To break faith with your spouse is to break faith with God at the same time.”

Have you ever noticed in Christian wedding ceremonies that there is first a question that is asked of the man and the woman early in the ceremony to which they each respond “I will”, and then later in the ceremony they each recite their vows to one another? Here is what I have said in weddings, in a traditional Christian format, speaking to the couple early in the ceremony, “in this service of Christian worship you not only stand before your family and friends, but you stand before the Almighty God. Recognizing this, I ask you now to declare your intention to enter into union with each other through the grace of Jesus Christ.” And then I say to the man, “will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others will you keep only unto her as long as you both shall live?” And when the man says “I will,” he is making that affirmation in a vertical way. He is to recognize that he is making this promise to the Almighty God of the universe. And then the woman likewise answers this question. And then later in the ceremony they turn toward one another and make promises specifically to one another. That’s the horizontal aspect.

¹ *The Meaning of Marriage*, page 82-83.

If you are married, you have made a covenant with your spouse, and you have also made a covenant with God and before God. You have promised to God that you will love your spouse in sickness and in health and forsaking all others that you will keep only unto your spouse as long as you both shall live. I would encourage you to reflect on those promises you have made. If you have a video of your wedding ceremony, watch it. If you have your wedding vows written down somewhere, read over them. Listen closely to the words that you spoke. It might have seemed like blur in the excitement of your wedding day. But go back and listen to the things you affirmed, the things you promised, as you entered into this sacred covenant of marriage.

We need to remember this when things get difficult, as they surely will in every marriage. There will be times of sickness, times of financial trials, times of conflict, times of transition, times of difficult decisions, times when you sin against one another in ways that may seem irreparable. It's in those times when you need to remember your vows most of all. And it's in those times that you need to remember that you not only made a covenant with your spouse, you made a covenant with God to remain faithful to this marriage as long as you both shall live. Only death brings a legitimate end to the covenant of marriage.

In Song of Solomon chapter 8, the rest of verse 6 and also verse 7 continues to describe the power and permanence of marital love. "Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord." Or other translations have, "like a mighty flame" (NIV). The shortened form of the divine name is used at the end there (YAH). And so there's debate as to whether it is meant simply as a superlative (a mighty flame), or if it is intended, in fact, to refer to Yahweh (the flame of the Lord). This shortened form of the divine name is used in other places in the Old Testament, and several times in the Psalms. We recognize it in the word *Hallelujah*, which appears in Revelation, meaning "Praise the Lord," "Praise Yahweh."

And even though this would be the only explicit mention of God in the entire Song, I think there's good reason to take it that way, especially when we recognize what a significant passage this is in the book. The rest of the book has been describing the manifestations of the couples love for one another. These two verses probe the depths of love's essence. And it's here, in these grand statements about love, that we're told of the Lord's role in it. Indeed, it is the Lord, Himself, who causes these flames of love to burn. He is the Creator and initiator of love. He, Himself, *is* love, as 1 John tells us (1 John 4:8, 16). And in God's creativity, He made us male and female. And He ordained marriage in such a way that a husband and wife might love each other deeply,

passionately, intimately, and thus be an earthly and physical pointer to His love for us.²

Verse 7 goes on to say that “many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” So love is strong as death, fierce as the grave. It is flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. And this flame of love, given by God, cannot be smothered even by many waters. Not even a flood of trials can quench love. If your marriage is in distress right now, or if it ever is in the future, I am praying that these two verses will help you to persevere. Look to the Lord. Look to His love. Consider His persevering love for us, in spite of our great sins against Him. And ask Him for the grace to sustain the flame of love in your relationship with your spouse. When it seems like everything is going wrong, when it seems like your spouse has done everything wrong, when it seems like life would be so much easier if you could just get out of this marriage, remember God’s design.

Lastly in verse 7 there is another statement about the great value of love. It cannot be bought. “If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.” You can’t buy love. When a woman marries a man simply because he has a lot of money, or when a man marries a woman simply because she has a lot of money, that’s not love. That’s selfish materialism, and it’s despicable, as this verse tells us. You can’t put a price tag on true love.

Incidentally, this is one of the ways that I know Stacy really loves me, because when we first met I had nothing. I was driving my dad’s Nissan Sentra, and I had a job bagging groceries at the local supermarket. (I’m not recommending that. I’m just saying that’s how it was.) That was when we were seniors in high school. Even when we got married 4 years later, still all I had was a bike and a bunch of books. She didn’t marry me for my money, or even with the hope that I would ever make a lot of money. We married for love. We married because we were irresistibly drawn to one another, and we couldn’t imagine being apart. As I shared some last week, we’ve had our struggles. We’ve had difficult times in our marriage, and we’re still growing and maturing in lots of ways, but I certainly see the power and the permanence of the love that God has given us for one another. By God’s grace, nothing will quench that love.

Preparing for Marriage (verses 8-10)

Let’s move on now to the next few verses and what they have to say about preparing for marriage. In verses 8-9 there’s debate concerning who is speaking. It’s not the husband or the wife here. It’s another group of folks. It’s in the plural (we). It

² See Richard Hess, *Song of Songs*, page 240.

could be that this is the chorus of Jerusalem girls whose voices we have heard at other points in the song. But it seems more likely that these are the words of the brothers. The woman mentioned her brothers back in chapter 1:6. She said there, “My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!” She was not happy about it, but apparently these brothers of hers had a great deal of responsibility for her and authority over her. And as we read this passage in chapter 8, it’s also evident that they were seeking to protect her.

It’s interesting that there’s no mention of her father anywhere in Song of Solomon. Her mother is mentioned, her brothers are mentioned, but her father doesn’t appear anywhere. It could very well be that she didn’t have a father in the home. She didn’t know her father. And that’s why these brothers are taking on the role of the father in her life. They are committed to taking care of her and watching out for her purity as she grows up.

That’s what they’re saying in these verses. Verse 8, “We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.” That is, she has not yet reached womanhood. She is still a girl. And yet they’re already thinking about her sexual purity, and appropriately so. “What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for?” That’s a reference to her wedding day—the day when she is spoken for. They’re wondering how they can protect their sister so that she’ll be sexually pure for her wedding day. That’s a good question to ask. Men, you should be asking this question. For the girls and young women in your family, how can you be a protector of their purity? Dads, how can you watch over your children in such a way that they are protected from those who would seek to take advantage of them, and how can you shepherd their hearts in such a way that they desire purity and see the beauty of chastity?

In verse 9 they consider two possible scenarios—if she is a wall, or if she is a door. These are descriptions of her purity, or lack of purity. Being a wall is to resist the advances of the young men who may want to be intimate with her. Being a door is inviting those advances, encouraging those advances. And the brothers are saying, “If she is a wall, we will build on her a battlement of silver.” In other words, we will protect her, and we will honor her for her purity. Her chastity is a precious thing, and we will seek to honor and adorn her because of it. On the other hand, “if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar.” In this case, if she is seeking to be promiscuous, we will need to take some drastic measures to protect her.

Now, in verse 10 she says, “I was a wall.” She was not promiscuous. She was not seeking sexual intimacy before marriage. She was modest and mature and godly. She saved

herself for her future husband. And when she developed into a woman and found the man of her dreams, they were able to enjoy one another freely and passionately. The word towers has been used earlier in the book to describe her neck. It's a way of complementing her beauty. She says here that her breasts were like towers. She had been a little girl without breasts, but then she grew into a woman and was ready for love. And the second part of verse 10 says, "then I was in his eyes as one who finds peace." That's a wonderful statement. It shows the depth and joy of her relationship with her husband, and that is connected with her commitment to remain pure leading up to marriage.

Some people think you need to have sexual experience before getting married. That's how you prepare for marriage. Have sex, live together, see if you're compatible. Get some practice in before the real deal. That's the world's way of thinking, and it is totally backwards and utterly foolish. You don't need experience. Once you get married, there will be plenty of time to gain experience. And any experiences you've had before marriage will only be baggage that you'll be trying to get rid of. Sexual experience before marriage is not an asset to marriage. It's a severe detriment.

To pursue physical intimacy before marriage is a sin against God. And to be clear, I'm not just speaking about intercourse. There are plenty of other ways to be physically intimate that are inappropriate outside of marriage. Young people, I don't want you to have the mentality that you can basically do whatever you want as long as you don't "go all the way." The question often comes up, "How far is too far?" That's exactly the wrong question to be asking! The question you should be asking, rather, is "How can I pursue greater purity? How can I honor God with my life? How can I seek my joy and delight in Him and His good guidelines for me?" You should be seeking to be a wall, which is beautiful in God's eyes and will be beautiful in the eyes of your future spouse.

To be sexually active before marriage is not only rebellion against God's commands, it's also a recipe for emotional agony, not to mention it will obscure all objectivity in your mind as you try to discern if a particular person would be a godly husband or wife. For these reasons, and more, I plead with you, single people, to have a passion for purity. Elisabeth Elliot has a book by that title (*Passion and Purity*), which could be a great encouragement to you. It's the story of her relationship with Jim Elliott, who became a martyr in Ecuador not long after he and Elisabeth were married. Elisabeth Elliot has written several books, and she has a lot of wisdom to share about love, romance, manhood and womanhood, and purity.

Finally, I want to speak to parents about how we need to be attentive to our children and shepherd them well through these years of adolescence. How can we protect their purity and prepare them for marriage, if God would have them to be married someday? I think some of these conversations with our kids need to start relatively young, even in the elementary years. There are some good resources out there that can help you with this. *The Squire and the Scroll: A Tale of the Rewards of a Pure Heart* is a good book for a dad to read through with his young son. *The Princess and the Kiss: A Story of God's Gift of Purity* is great for a mom to read with her young daughter. The ministry of FamilyLife with Dennis Rainey has some great materials for talking to your children about sex and purity. One of them is called Passport2Purity, designed to be used when they're entering the teen years.

That's one important aspect of this—teaching your own child and shepherding their heart and praying for them that they might know God and love His Word and want to obey His commands.

But then another important aspect is simply protecting your child from those who may seek to take advantage of them. And Dennis Rainey has another great book on this topic, entitled *Interviewing Your Daughter's Date*. Some people may shudder even at the idea of a father interviewing his daughter's potential date, but I agree with Dennis that it's the responsibility of every Christian father to do so. Our daughter, Milaina, is 8, and Annalyse is 3, and I've already decided that they can start dating when they're 25 (just kidding). So I'm going to be studying this book for the next several years. He gives some really simple and clear advice about just having a 20 minute conversation with the young man who wants to take your daughter out on a date, and telling him in no uncertain terms that you expect him to treat your daughter with respect and absolute purity. My favorite part is that he has a baseball bat that's called "The Respect Her." And after some of those interviews he would get it out and have the young man sign it. I may be investing in something like that in a few years.

The point of me telling you all this is simply to get you thinking about how you, as a parent, can protect your children and instruct them in the ways of the Lord. Chiefly, this is a matter of prayer, because God needs to work a heart-change in our children if they are going to love Him and obey Him. We pray that by God's grace they might recognize that love is strong as death and that they might save themselves for a lifelong marriage.

As we wrap up this sermon series, I want to close by thinking of the love of Christ. We've talked a lot about human

love, marital love, romantic love between a man and a woman. But what I want us to remember most of all is that this is ultimately a pointer to Christ's love for the church and the eternal union between them—that eternal marriage of which human marriage is a faint portrait. This morning we've looked at the statement that love is strong as death. Marital love is permanent. It is to be life long.

We also understand from Scripture, though, that marriage is *only* life long. It is not eternal. Jesus tells us that there will not be human marriage in heaven (Luke 20:34ff; and parallel passages in Matthew and Mark). That may be discouraging or disappointing to happily married couples, but it's also a good warning to us that we not make an idol out of marriage. Marriage is beautiful and wonderful and exciting, and it's to be enjoyed as a gift from God. But it should never take the place of God. We have to remember God's purposes for it and remember that it is not an end in itself, but a foreshadowing of something greater. Death brings an end to a human marriage. But Christ's marriage to the church has no end. That's why Paul is able to write in Romans 8, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."