

Part 4: Love's Garden

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In the 1970s, the band Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young wrote a song about a journey out of pain and back to the place of peace and love. The chorus concluded with the repeated plea: "And we've got to get ourselves back, back to the garden."

The song obviously played off the biblical imagery of Eden. In a world torn asunder by political and racial tensions--they needed paradise. They needed a place where love and peace ruled.

But the song's title revealed what that garden was: "Woodstock." For many people in 1969, Woodstock was paradise. It was a place of community, love, sex, rock and roll, and peace.

It was a huge success and cultural phenomenon. The problem was, they couldn't recreate or return to the garden. The festival suffered attempts to resurrect and duplicate its experience—all of which were failures, culminating in the violent riots and fiery vandalism of Woodstock '99.

We've been working through a book of the Bible called Song of Songs, and today our two lovers get back to the garden. They find unity, love and peace, and it seems endlessly so. The place in which they find all of this isn't a festival, it's the beautiful reality of sex between one man and one woman in marriage.

The history of humanity has shown that every age and era has had groups of people who are anti-sex, but Christianity has consistently been—in every era—pro-sex. Why is that? Because God created it, and his word speaks of it. The Bible is not a book about sex. But the Bible does talk about sex. And it paints a picture that should excite a godly zeal for sex rightly placed in marriage. But it also stretches far beyond the intimacy of a husband and wife pointing to recreation and reunion sinners have by faith through Jesus Christ.

Today, we finally get to the long awaited honeymoon suite of our two lovers and our main point is simple: **Sex is special, especially for the Christian.**

Our song today reveals the uniqueness of Biblical sex in four ways: Biblical sex: **Celebrates Beauty, Provides Joy, Promotes Intimacy, and Points to Christ.**

It's my guess that there are many in here who are already turning their ears into airplane mode. But, here are four brief reasons why anyone and everyone should pay attention to this passage today.

1.) All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). God's word orients our hearts. Even if you'll never write a scientific paper on gravity—gravity grounds each one of us. And even though you might wonder if this topic is relevant to you—it is the whole scope of God's word that helps us navigate life and find joy.

2.) If you're sharing the gospel with someone--a theology of sex is the apologetic issue of our day.

3.) A proper view of sex helps you categorize and fight sexual sin in your own heart.

4.) A proper view of sex is needed for Christian friendships to flourish. Our world says that if you are friends with the opposite sex, you probably like them and should express that sexually. But the Bible has a category for sex with one life-long friend, which brings a whole lot of clarity in our relationships with all of our other friends.

With that in place, let's examine our passage today. Last week we saw the wedding ceremony of our two lovers, and this morning we get to the wedding night.

Our passage today consists mostly of two songs sung by the husband—each one describing his wife in growing detail, culminating in invitations and response.

The first song begins this way: **Song 4:1-7**, "Behold, you are beautiful my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost its young. Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like the tower of David, built in rows of stone; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warrior. Your two breasts are like fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you."

Here we see our first point this morning: **Biblical sex celebrates beauty.**

Maybe you've heard that Christianity and biblical sex ethics are body negative and shame based. Maybe you've seen a YouTube influencer share the ways in which a biblical desire for purity and modesty has made them feel ashamed of their bodies. While modesty and purity are biblical virtues—so too is the reality that we are made in the image of God and that our bodies, their beauty and physicality, are part of God's beautiful display.

In fact, it's only the Christian worldview that claims that humanity is made perfect. Shame didn't come when God showed up. Shame came when we removed God from the picture. In Genesis 1 and 2, God created a perfect world which included Adam and Eve without any clothes to cover them. But it tells us of what that reality was like from the human perspective and the divine perspective. In Genesis 2:25, we see that Adam and Eve were naked and were not ashamed. God viewed all of this and Genesis 1:31 tells us that "it was very good" in his eyes.

But notice what happened after Adam and Eve sinned: **Genesis 3:7**, "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."

God created a beautiful world, but sin ruined it. Sin removed the boundaries of perfect holiness and changed how we view ourselves and others. Modesty, then, is when men and women dress appropriately according to context not because the body that we see is bad—but because our hearts which we cannot see are. It attempts to reconstruct safe boundaries. There are both men and women who desire to use their body's appearance to bring sinful confidence that only God can bring. There are sinful men and women who, if we all tried to go naked again, would abuse, harm and destroy. There are

sinful men and women who prioritize their own comfort and perceived freedom over the love and care of others. Sin, not skin, is the problem.

Sin removes boundaries. Like the fruit which was beautiful to the eye but deadly to the taste—sin uses beauty and drives us past its appropriate boundaries. But there is a theology of beauty and of sin!

I heard one pastor say that when he sees a woman who is attractive--instead of trying to act like she's not attractive, or treating her like she's medusa, he looks at her appropriately and then prays in his heart, "God you are a God who makes beautiful people. And while that woman's beauty is not for me to enjoy any further, I pray that you would satisfy me with your beauty. How much more lovely is the God who made all things beautiful."

That is a wonderful way to acknowledge a biblical view of humanity while redirecting our gaze to God in proper perspective. So far in the Song, whenever the man sang of his lover's beauty, he described only that which was appropriately visible: her face, eyes, neck, hair, and smile.

But now, they are in the honeymoon suite. He's gazing at her in her wedding dress, and the boundaries have appropriately changed. In marriage, we are able to enjoy the beauty of our spouses to the full degree God would have us—without shame, without selfishness, wrapped in the warmth of love. He now allows his eyes to linger on parts of her body he otherwise refrained from. He looks at the shape of her body in full and concludes: "Wow, there is no flaw in you."

He's excited for what's to come, but he graciously and gently speaks in a way that makes her comfortable: **Song 4:8-9**, "Come with me from Lebanon, my bride; come with me from Lebanon. Depart from the peak of Amana, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions, from the mountain of leopards. You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace."

Men, it's easy to make a mistake that because you think your wife is hot, that she thinks the same about herself. There is an innate, and delicate vulnerability that God designed females with—and you should be aware of that.

As odd as it sounds, that's why he calls her his sister. That was the closest relationship a man and woman could have outside of marriage. So in essence he's saying, "You should be as comfortable with me in this context of marriage, as you would if we were siblings." Their intimacy precedes and supersedes sexuality. "You're safe with me, I care for you—not just in your beauty but in your person." And he acknowledges that vulnerability and says, "Come, come away, come out of the darkened clefts, and come with me. You've captured me, you have my heart, and it is safe then for you to give your body."

This leads to our next point: **Biblical Sex Provides Joy.**

At some point, the looking gives way to touching. In fact the word used for "love," in vs. 10 can be translated "caresses." Now, in the confines of marriage, she touches him in a newly appropriate way and it's better than wine. He describes her kisses in verse 11, "dripping with nectar, sweet as honey."

Now, when it comes to a clinical definition of sex, I don't think that has happened yet. It's my view that the clothes don't come off until the end of verse 11 when he speaks of the fragrance of them, probably as she removes them.

This is important because we often think that whatever we do with our boyfriends, or even our fiancés, is totally fine as long as we don't "go all the way." If clothes are on, things are good. If an article is missing here or there, that's fine. But here we see that intimate touching, passionate kissing, and unrestrained imagination is an exclusive privilege for marriage.

They are certainly progressing to something, but they are content to live in these first few verses for as long as they want. Why? Because this is good. Intimacy is far more than a brief biological action. God desires for us to exercise restraint physically until marriage because he wants to greatly expand the joys of the marriage bed. He's not showing us the privilege of the award winning roller-coaster in the middle of the park—he's calling us to enjoy in marriage the vastness of the theme park of love.

God gives marriage as a place to enjoy our spouses broadly. This is meant to be a correction and a recalibration of physical limits in dating—but this should also be one that applies to biblical marriages.

If I were to lead in being vulnerable, my study of this book moved me to repent to my wife of my neglect of this kind of intimacy. It's all too convenient with a busy schedule and four kids to approach intimacy as a product and not a process. But I was convicted that I'm actually shortchanging both of our joys.

If we are careful to reserve for our spouses what God has designed, then we will find he has set the table with more means of joy than we ever imagined.

Pornography and hook-up culture has substituted utilitarian biology for biblical love. If we can't have it now, if it's not same day delivery, if the microwave can't cook it fast enough—we aren't interested. But it's the gentle exploration of intimacy, even outside of the sheets, that reminds us that intimacy is far more than what the world makes it out to be. For the Christian, sex is still sex, but the intimacy and exclusive passion far surpasses one individual moment.

But now, as the clothes come off the song continues: **Song 4:12-15**, "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes with all choice spices--a garden fountain, a well of living water and flowing streams of Lebanon."

Here is our third point: **Biblical sex promotes intimacy.**

Here's the beauty of the Bible. The most descriptive we get as an image is her breasts, but here--under the beauty of poetry--he describes his wife in ideas that surpass images.

One of my wife's fears in this sermon series is that I'll say something too intimate which would expose her. But here we see the kindness of a good husband, and the grace of God. Formerly the metaphors were tied to something concrete: teeth and sheep, eyes and pools. But now the images are tied to other images: shoots and gardens, streams and fountains. God protects us from explicit images while impressing us with intimate experiences.

For those who are mature, we don't need to press the images or ponder the metaphors to know what is being described. We can say, "That garden looks great." And kids in here can look at these images of lush gardens, flowing streams, and sweet smells and say, "That garden looks great."

God doesn't need to use detailed words and images to give a theology of sex because sex is meant by God to express what words and images themselves could never express.

Now, Sarah and I did a lot of things at our wedding which we look back on and would change. So I say this not to shame anyone, but to draw out the beauty of what is happening in this passage. It's no surprise that as sex outside of marriage has become so common, that wedding have now become fixated on some sort of "unity" ceremony. I've seen candles lighting each other, sand being poured into the same vase, knots tied, and clothes dyed.

I laugh at these rituals, because they are grasping at something the Bible makes obvious! "If only we could find an analogy to express how two can become one..." But that's the beauty of what we see here isn't it? This is the unity ceremony. This is the special moment. Even for those who have sinned before, here for the first time—it is unity in the way God has designed.

Knowing this we see the call and response to what is next: **Song 4:16-5:1a**, "Awake, O north wind, and come O south wind! Blow upon my garden let its spices flow." She responds, "Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits." He responds: "I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk."

Here we see how unity requires mutual vulnerability. He commends her and says, "You're ready, the spring is ready to be unlocked." But he doesn't have the key—she does. It is for her to unlock. It is hers to give, and his only to receive.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians that the husband's body belongs to the wife, and the wife's body belongs to the husband—but the verb he uses isn't "take therefore," but instead, "give." Intimate love is to be freely given, never taken.

And love freely given and freely taken is a unifying love. She is "his garden" and he is her "beloved." Sex is not a process of interchangeable parts, but a unity of two married people. No Christian should have the experience Jacob had on his wedding night—believing he went to bed with Rachel but waking up with Leah.

This couple doesn't want any garden, they want each other. She is his priority, and he is hers. You could substitute an expert, if there were such a thing, and she'd be disappointed. Her joy is him—and his joy is her. Their love is other oriented—so in a way it is the presence of the other, not the satisfaction of the self, which makes sex joyful.

It's almost as if God so intended the pursuit of biblical sex to be a shadow of biblical discipleship in general. That when we pursue the glory of God, and the joy of others, we find ourselves deeply, intensely, and passionately satisfied.

But, of course, that's exactly how God designed it.

This is what leads us to our final point this morning: **Biblical sex points to Christ.**

Notice how there is a voice that comes out of nowhere in the text after this: **Song 5:1**, "Eat, friends, drink and be drunk with love." Who offers such encouragement? Some commentators say it's the voice of God adding his affirmation.

What's more likely is that it's the affirmation of the community which has surrounded these lovers and helped see them safely home. But the effect is the same. The community of the church is to encourage, protect and rejoice in the biblical romance of others because it is a witness of God's love for his church.

The story of these two finding the garden together is the story of how we will return to Eden after our own sin removed us from it. There are three rich garden descriptions in the Bible. The first is the description of Eden in Genesis 1 and 2, the second is the New Heavens and the New Earth in Revelation 21-22, and the third is the description of this garden love between a man and a woman in marriage.

This is not accidental—and it helps explain our innate longing for such an experience. Scott Mehl says this, **"For the first time since Genesis 2, we see an uninhibited celebration of sex. In the Song, we find not just God's willingness to work in spite of sexual brokenness but also his desire to restore sex to its former glory. We see that a return to the garden—in a fuller sense than had ever been imagined—is actually possible."**

This is why my main point today is: "Sex is special, especially to the Christian." I meant that because God gave sex to men and women as a common grace. You don't need to be a Christian to have this faculty. But, it is only the Christian who understand sex as it was intended. Not because we understand biology-- but because we understand the Bible!

The garden of this love is meant to show us the way in which, and the experience of, our restoration back to union with God: through our husband, Jesus Christ. Crosby, Stills and Nash thought the garden was Woodstock, Christians may make the same mistake in thinking this is the garden we need. But biblical sex understood in person, or only as a sort of parable, points us forward to the garden which stands behind it.

Remember it was sin which caused Eve to not only be blemished, but to feel blemished. Sin darkened the both of them. Sin stained all humanity. But what does our lady lover find here? One who looks at her as she is and says, "Flawless."

In a room this size, in our day and age, a portrait of biblical sex is like a fun house mirror. It seems to show us how disordered and damaged we really are. We have flaws, and we know it. But there is a lover who makes us clean. There is a wedding night where we too will hear those wonderful words.

Consider again, Paul's words in **Ephesians 5:25-33**. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

The beauty of sex is meant to draw us to the beauty of Jesus. The brokenness of our sex is only a glimpse of all that will be restored in our total redemption by Jesus.

The same joy a husband takes in his wife, is the same joy Jesus takes in presenting the church to himself without spot or wrinkle or any such blemish. My wedding night was an intimate experience I will never forget. But Jesus will take even more certain pleasure in you. If your faith is in him, he loves you now and he is laboring for that sweet wedding night of the soul.

It's so common to look at our weddings and wish that we were that bride in white—but that is meant to remind us that one day we will be whiter. It's a glimpse not into who we might be with another human, but who all who come to Jesus will be by faith. Washed, white, and taken forever into the safe arms of our beloved.

One theologian said that God's glory is best displayed when he makes clear his, "divine philanthropy." God's glory is made manifest when we see how, by the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit he delights to save us in the gospel and declare to us: "You are altogether beautiful my love, there is no flaw in you."

Charles Spurgeon commented on this passage saying this, **"Drink that truth in, Christian. If ever there was a honeycomb full of virgin honey, it is here. Though in yourself you are defiled, yet in the eye of Jesus, looked upon as covered with his righteousness...You are as dear to him as though you had never sinned, yes, in his sight you appear without a single fault, he has so cleansed thee in his precious blood that, 'there is not spot in thee.'"**