

Beloved: Covenant

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[0 : 00] Well, a few weeks ago, we started a series looking at an Old Testament book called The Song of Songs. It's right in the middle of the Bible. It's in a section of Scripture we call Wisdom Literature alongside Psalms and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes.

And it's an old book, but I think that we found over the last few weeks that it's extremely relevant to our world today, to the culture that we live in. And it's a book written by and about a man named Solomon, King Solomon.

And Solomon is someone who lived a long time ago, but very much embodies our modern sensibilities, especially our modern sexual ethic.

This is a man who was able to have as much sex as he wanted with the most beautiful women of the land anytime he wanted.

He was very much like a Harvey Weinstein. This was possible because he had all the power, and so he could do what he wanted. And we look at 1 Kings 11.

[1 : 13] It tells us that he had 700 wives. He had an additional 300 concubines. And Ecclesiastes, which is also written by Solomon, there he says in chapter 2 that over the course of his life, he withheld himself from no pleasure.

In other words, this is a man who indulged completely in whatever his heart desired. Over and over and over, all through his adult life, he indulged. And so it's interesting to follow Solomon and to see him come to the end of his life.

And he doesn't come to the end of this life and say, I'm now fulfilled, I'm satisfied, I look back with great joy at the way that I lived my life, this is what everybody should be doing.

He doesn't say any of that. In fact, as we see in Ecclesiastes, he gets to the end of his life and he's depressed, he's empty, he's lonely.

He says, all of it was meaningless. I was chasing the wind. And at the very end of the book of Ecclesiastes, he concludes, essentially, he says, I spent my life trying to find meaning and fulfillment apart from God and it was completely pointless.

[2 : 33] It was completely pointless. And so the conclusion of that book, he says, my final word is this. Here's what I've realized. Fear God and obey his commandments.

Essentially, he's saying, I look back at my life and I realize I've tried things my way, I've tried everything I know. None of it works. The only thing that works is God's way. So that's his conclusion.

So my belief, as we look at the Song of Songs, which is also a book that Solomon wrote at the end of his life, my belief is that that realization, my way doesn't work, it has to be God's way, that that's what led him to eventually write the Song of Songs, which is not about his actual life, but it's a vision of what Solomon came to realize is God's way for intimacy.

It's a song about a marriage, an idealized marriage between Solomon and the Shulamite woman, but it's about much more than that. In fact, we've come to see that this is a book ultimately about intimacy.

It's about the kind of intimacy that we are meant to have with one another. So marriage, but also friendships, community, like a church community. So it's about that kind of intimacy, but ultimately it's also a book about the kind of intimacy that we are made to have with God.

[3 : 51] So that's what we've been doing each week in this series. We've been using this as a guide to teach us about intimacy. And today we come to the very heart of the song, chapter 3, verse 6, through chapter 5, verse 1, where we see the actual wedding take place between Solomon and his bride.

And so what we're going to do this evening, as we've done each week during this series, it's going to be a little more technical than we normally do here at Advent, and that's because it's Hebrew poetry.

And I really want you to understand what's happening here and see the connections to the points that we're making. So we're going to be putting it up on the screen. We're going to read through it together, and then I'm just going to make one point tonight.

So we're going to read through the text, and then we'll just draw out one point that I think is the central message of this section of the song. So let's pray. Our Father, we know that even now as we sit in this room, you are present.

Your Holy Spirit is here. You're in us. You're in our midst. And that you're a God who has promised across the ages to speak to your people, and you have fulfilled that promise again and again and again.

[5 : 02] And so, Lord, this evening as we gather around your word, we ask that you would speak. That your Holy Spirit would illuminate these words. That we would hear the voice of the living word, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So before we dive into the actual text, I want to take a moment to help you understand the overall structure of the Song of Songs.

And this will help you learn a little bit about how to understand Hebrew poetry in general. If you read Song of Songs, if you just, you know, went home after the first week and picked it up and started reading, or those of you who read the Bible, you know, just kind of in order, when you get to Song of Songs and you start reading it, it's very confusing.

You read, and at one point it seems like right off the bat, in the first four verses, this couple is having sex. And then just a few verses later, it seems like they're really trying not to have sex.

And then a few verses later, it seems like they're married. And then a few verses later, it seems like they're courting. And a few verses later, there's a weird chase scene. And they don't know, they've lost each other. And then a few verses later, they're having sex again.

[6 : 08] And there's this big question as to how to make sense of this book. And if you read it, just chapter one, two, three, expecting a linear story, it's not going to make any sense. It's not meant to be read in the way that a lot of modern prose and poetry would be read today.

It's ancient Hebrew poetry, and it has a specific structure to it, which is called chiasmatic structure, or a chiasmatic pattern. A chiasmatic pattern in poetry looks like this.

As you begin reading, you're introduced to the first theme, what we'll call theme A. And then you keep reading, and it shifts, and there'll be a different theme, theme B. And then you come to maybe a third theme, theme C. And this can just keep going and going and going.

But for our purposes, A, B, and C. Well, then what happens is after you pass the middle of the text, you see a recurrence of theme C, and then another recurrence of theme B, and then another recurrence of theme A.

And so you have these thematic pairs as you come closer and closer and closer to the center of the poem. In other words, if you want to know the point of a chiasmatic structure, a poem with this kind of structure, the point does not come at the beginning or the end, like much of our writing, the point comes right in the middle.

[7 : 21] That's the place of emphasis. It's the hinge on which the entire work swings. And all of the other themes are simply variations or riffs off that central theme.

So as you can see, this loose breakdown of the Song of Songs, theme A is the theme of love and longing, desire for intimacy. Let him kiss me with the kisses of my mouth. And then when we get to theme B, there's this interesting scene of losing and finding where she wakes up and he's nowhere to be found and she goes out into the streets looking for him.

And then we come to our section this evening and we see the third theme, the theme of marriage, and then the theme of consummation. Those go together. But if we keep reading as we will next week, we see another interesting chase scene.

Very similar to the first one where she goes out, searches the streets, goes to the watchman. Very similar to what we've already seen. And then as we keep going, we again see the recurrence of the themes of love and longing.

And so we have these pairs and right in the very middle, the point of the entire song, marriage and consummation. So this is how we know that the entire song is actually about marriage and marital intimacy.

[8 : 31] And we're going to talk a little bit more about that in a little while. But I wanted to orient you to that so you know that we are now in the very heart of and the central theme of the Song of Songs. So now we're going to jump into it.

This is where we ended last week. It's the very last verse of that passage where the Shulamite woman is warning the daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles of the does of the field, do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

This is her warning and it's a refrain that happens throughout the poem. We're going to explain that in a little while. As we move forward to the next verse, she shifts her focus.

A new theme begins. What is that coming up from the wilderness? Like columns of smoke. She's looking down the road and she sees dust rising, right? And some commentators say this evokes the column of smoke that led the Israelites through the wilderness in the desert, right?

What is that coming up from the wilderness? Like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant. Well, what is it? As it gets closer and she's looking down the road, she realizes, behold, it's the litter of Solomon.

[9 : 37] Around it are 60 mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel. All of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh against terror by night. This is a formidable force of men all leading the way for this great processional at the center of which is Solomon in his palanquin or his carriage.

King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple, its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. Solomon spared no expense. This is the nicest of nice and it's the Cadillac of carriages and he's done it with the full support and excitement of the community.

The daughters of Jerusalem enthusiastically helped pull this together. Go out, she says to all of her friends. Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon.

She's essentially saying, everybody come, look, he's here. Look upon King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding. The time has come.

[10 : 43] It's the wedding day. The day of the gladness of his heart. This is the happiest day of Solomon's life. So what's happening here in this first section? Well, I think it's pretty clear from the language that this is a royal wedding procession.

This is the wedding day. Now let me explain a little something about weddings back in this time period. They weren't quite like our weddings today. An ancient Jewish wedding had two phases. First, there was the betrothal. The families would get together. They would agree on a bride and groom. Sometimes the bride and groom had a say, many times not. And they would agree on all of the things that needed to be worked out.

And they would agree on a time frame. And the couple would be formally betrothed to one another. Now once that happened, they were essentially married. So this is not like an engagement. They were essentially married.

The only thing that hadn't taken place was they were not cohabiting together. And so what would happen is they would get betrothed. The families would work out the timeline.

[11 : 47] And then the groom would say goodbye to his wife and would go away to prepare their home. And often that meant he would go to his father's house and he would build an addition on the house.

And so if you go to Israel today, you can see lots of houses that have additions sticking out. Because the groom would go and build an addition. So when they finally consummated the marriage, they would come live in the groom's father's house.

And so the groom would leave and the wife-to-be would wait. The betrothed would wait. And it could be a period of six months up to maybe even two years. And she's waiting on this to happen. And they're not living together, maybe not even seeing each other. And then all of a sudden, unannounced, one day, the groom would come. And so the bride would be waiting. She walks outside.

She hears a commotion. She looks. She sees in the distance dust rising. Who's that coming? She hears music. She hears shouting. She hears the friends who are going out ahead of the groom shouting that he's coming. And she realizes, the time has come.

[12 : 48] It's my wedding day. And so he would come in the carriage. And he would take his bride up into the carriage. And then the great processional would go from her house to his house, their

new home that they were going to share together.

And they would get down. And they would go into the room, their bed chamber that he had prepared. And they would close the doors. And everybody would hopefully mind their own business for a little while while they consummated their relationship.

They had sex. And then once that was done, they would come out. They would announce that it's official. You know, we've done the deed. And then they would, a big celebration would break out.

And they would, and there would be a week of feasting and singing and merriment. And the bride and groom would be treated like a king and queen. They would do very little work. And they would do a lot of celebrating. I think in many ways, this is a fantastic way to have a wedding.

You know, minus the, we just had sex announcement. I don't think many people would like that. But I think that the rest of it is really great. This big week-long celebration. This is very clearly what's happening in this section.

[13:53] The wedding day has come. The Shulamite woman was the betrothed. And now the wedding day has come. And they've gone to consummate their relationship. And here we see, beginning in chapter 4, verse 1, here's the consummation.

So imagine this. And imagine that the processional has arrived. They've gotten down. They've gone into the bedroom. They've closed the door. Everybody's kind of off getting ready for the party. And they have some time alone.

And maybe they haven't seen each other in a long time. And imagine Solomon beholding his bride. Right? I mean, it might sound a little illicit. But imagine that she disrobes.

And he's beholding her in this incredibly intimate moment for the first time. And look at what he does. Behold, you are beautiful, my love. Behold, you are beautiful.

And then it begins with her eyes. 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.

[14:55] And not one of them has lost its young. She has nice teeth. Obviously. Your lips are like a scarlet thread.

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 warriors.

Imagine a necklace with a lot of metal plates hanging down like this. It looks like a thousand shields. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that graze among the lilies. And then he, in verse 6, begins to issue this invitation.

I can't wait to share life with you. I can't wait. I'm so excited that we are now going to share life together. But do you see what he's doing there? As he goes, as he encounters this woman, he's specifically starting with her eyes, going to each part of her body and proclaiming it beautiful. Each part of her. However, he's stating, I love this part of you. And we can imagine, I love your ears. You know, I love your earlobes. You know, I love your neck. I love your chin.

[16:04] I love your dimples. You know, I love the hollow of your neck. I love your collarbones. I love your shoulders. You can imagine just every single part. He pauses to praise it.

To tell her how beautiful she is. And then it changes, and in verse 9, if we go to verse 9, he says, You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride.

That sounds weird to us. She's not actually his sister. This is an ancient Near Eastern term of endearment. We can translate it sister, but it had a broader meaning back then.

So very intimately connected people would often use that language as a kind of term of affection. So he begins to use that language. Bride very much means bride. You've captivated my heart, my sister, my bride.

You've captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. And then we go on. How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride. How much better is your love than wine. And what we see here is he's now using the language of captivation, and he's pledging himself.

[17:06] I'm totally yours. I'm captivated by you. I'm not going anywhere. The fragrance of your oils better than any spice. Your lips drip. Nectar, my bride. Honey and milk are under your tongue.

The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon. Keep going. And now he says in verse 12, A garden locked is my sister, my bride.

A spring locked. A fountain sealed. And obviously this language of garden and fountain, this is referring to female anatomy. And by saying that she is a garden locked or a fountain sealed, he's essentially saying, You're a virgin.

You have kept yourself until this night, until the night of our wedding. And your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all the choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all the trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all choice spices, in a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.

So he's essentially asking her, asking her if she will allow him to make love to her. This is his, he's entreating her, but he's waiting for her invitation.

[18:15] He's not being pushy. He's not being forceful. He's not being manipulative. He's praising her beauty. He's, he's, and he's essentially putting the ball in her court, if you will, to invite him to be intimate with her.

And so we go to the next verse, and here she is speaking, and she says, Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind. Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits.

I think it's safe to assume she says yes. And then he says to us, 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. Those, those double pairings of words essentially mean I held nothing back. I've praised your beauty.

We're in this context of our bedchamber together. I've beheld you. I've waited for an invitation.

You've invited me. And now, now that they are intimate, they're holding nothing back, nothing in reserve.

[19:18] They're, they're all in. Completely giving themselves to one another. So this is our passage. And so what we see, the first part, we see the kind of great day of the wedding, where the wedding, the great wedding processional.

And then we see the couple alone together where he praises her beauty and they consummate their union in sexual intimacy. So they're clearly describing this Jewish wedding day.

And so there's only one real main point I want to draw out from this passage that we'll spend the rest of our time on. And that is this. Intimacy only thrives within covenant relationships.

Intimacy only thrives within covenant relationships. You can have the beginnings of intimacy. You can begin to experience it with, in many different contexts.

But it will not last, it will not sustain, it will not grow, it will not thrive unless it is protected by a covenant. It will eventually fade and wither and die.

[20:20] Intimacy can only thrive in covenant relationships. So what we see here at the very heart of the Song of Songs is this formal wedding celebration. But I want to make sure you know that the entire song encompasses their marriage.

If you go all the way back to chapter 2, all the way in the very beginning, she says, my beloved is mine and I am his. And if you go all the way to the end, chapter 8, she says, set me as a seal upon your heart.

And that's very clearly covenant language. And so the entire song is meant to be understood in the context of a marriage. Sometimes they're reflecting back on the early days of their relationship.

And as we'll see in a little while, in another week, sometimes they're thinking about major problems and difficulties and arguments that they had. But this is covenant language. So whatever intimacy we have in our relationships, it's not going to last, it cannot last, it cannot thrive unless we make a covenant.

And this is why, by the way, she repeatedly warns throughout the song, I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love before it pleases.

[21:29] What she's essentially saying is, now that I'm feeling this, now that I'm in this relationship, I realize that love and desire are powerful and sometimes dangerous things.

And she says at one point early on, I'm sick with love. I'm emotionally exhausted. I had no idea that it would wreak such havoc on me. And so she's saying, this is not the kind of thing you want to play around with.

It's not the kind of thing you want to mess with. And she's realizing how precious and how fragile and how sometimes completely irrational it can be to be deeply in love with somebody.

And so she's saying, don't rush into this. It needs to be the right time. It needs to be the right circumstances. Right? So that's her warning that she says throughout the song.

And then on the other hand, the other refrain that we hear is, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. So she's essentially saying, don't awaken this until you're ready.

[22 : 27] And then once you're ready and you enter into a covenant, then you're all in. You're all in. I'm his, he's mine. We belong to one another. So she's saying, this really needs to be all or none.

It can't be halfway. Right? And that's why we see that the Bible is filled with covenant relationships. You know, of course we see the covenant of marriage, which doesn't just turn up in the Song of Songs.

We actually see that all the way back in creation in Genesis chapter 2, verse 24, where after Adam and Eve have met for the first time, God says, therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

Right? Two whole selves, whole lives, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually becoming one. The two shall become one. That's a covenant. Right? We also see this show up in the form of a friendship, covenant friendship.

You see in 1 Samuel 18, Jonathan pledges himself to David, gives what he has to David, says, for the rest of our lives, I am yours. I want to love you.

[23 : 32] I want to be with you. I want to spend life with you. And we, in our modern ears, hear that. And the only way we can make sense of it is to assume that this is a same-sex relationship. But what's actually happening is this is a covenant friendship made of deep, intimate love between two men.

And we don't have a context for that anymore. And I think that's a huge issue. I think that we're missing something vital in terms of what it means to be human.

Because especially for men, we have no idea how to have that kind of relationship unless it's sexual. We have no idea. And likewise, we see the same thing between two women, Ruth and Naomi.

We see them in Ruth 1. After terrible tragedy, Naomi tries to send her daughter-in-law back home. And her daughter-in-law says, no, don't send me away. Don't you understand?

And she says, for where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. Your God, my God. Where you die, I will die.

[24 : 33] And there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more. Also, if anything but death parts me from you. Right? From death, us do part.

Till death, us do part. Covenant language. Right? She's pledging herself to her mother-in-law. So we see covenant friendship as well as the covenant of marriage.

But then ultimately in Scripture, our understanding of covenant is rooted in God himself. It's rooted in the character of God and the kind of relationship God desires to have with us.

You know, in our culture, I think it's safe to say that most of us assume it works like this. You meet somebody. You start hanging out. You have a lot in common. You enjoy each other. And you begin to build intimacy. And if the intimacy works and there's chemistry and connection and the intimacy continues to build and you fall deeper and deeper and deeper in love, then somewhere way down the line you say we have enough intimacy now and enough feeling and enough connection that we should make a covenant.

So intimacy first and then covenant. And the thing that we need to realize is that God works in the exact opposite direction. God comes to somebody and says, the first thing that we need to do, if we want intimacy, we have to make a covenant.

[25 : 49] Covenant has to come first. And then in that context, we can build intimacy. So he creates Adam and Eve and makes a covenant with them. He comes to Noah, introduces himself to Noah in person and then makes a covenant with Noah.

He comes to Abram and introduces himself to Abram. And the first thing he does is he makes a covenant with Abram and all his descendants. And then after he sets his people free from slavery in Egypt, he makes a covenant with Moses and the people through Moses.

And you see God in every case saying, I want you to be my people. I want to be your God. But the first thing we have to do is make a covenant. You'll be my people. I'll be your God. And in that context, we can have intimacy. And then, of course, ultimately, in Jesus Christ, God has made a covenant with all of us.

His church. Right? But the first thing that had to happen is God had to cut a covenant, which is literally the Hebrew word. You cut a covenant. God had to cut a covenant in the flesh of Jesus Christ in order to make possible intimacy with us.

So again and again and again, you see this pattern. And the reason is because intimacy can only thrive inside a covenant relationship. Let me give you three reasons why that's true.

[27 : 00] Three reasons why intimacy requires a covenant in order to grow and thrive. Number one, a covenant means that you pledge to love every part of someone even if you haven't yet seen it.

Making a covenant means you're pledging that you will accept and love every part of a person, whether you've seen it or not.

You're saying, even if, even if I see something that I don't like, even if I see something that I didn't expect, I'm committing already to loving that part of you because it's you.

Right? So our deepest need as human beings, our deepest need is to be fully known and fully loved. Fully known and fully loved.

That's the heart of intimacy. But our great fear, at least my great fear, if you're anything like me, our greatest fear is the more somebody gets to know me, the more they see, the more likelihood there is that they will see something that will cause them to reject me.

[28 : 10] Right? So, you know, the more you get to know me, and it starts with the physical things like, oh gosh, what if they see that my, you know, that my belly hangs over my waistband or what if they see my cellulite or what if they realize that I burp a lot or what if they realize, you know, and it's the little things, right?

But then it gets more and more and more personal. What, you know, well, what about when you see the way I act when I'm frustrated? Or what about when you see the way I treat people when I'm in traffic and the kind of things I yell at other cars?

Or what if you begin to see what I'm like when I haven't gotten a lot of sleep or what I'm like at 3 o'clock in the morning? Or what I'm like when I feel insecure or what I'm like when I feel threatened?

Or what I'm like when our kids are driving us crazy and I lose my temper and I blow up at my kids?

And what if you, when you see that for the first time that I'm screaming at our kids at 3 o'clock in the morning? Or what if you see how nasty I can get when you come at me and you make me feel little?

What if you see how nasty I can get?

What if you see that passive-aggressive side of me that has only ever come out around my family?

But now that we're together and now that we've been together for 10 years, now that's coming out at you. What if you see that I fake that I'm compassionate but I'm not really that compassionate?

[29 : 16] What if you see the way I actually don't care about people the way I pretend to? What if you see, right, and the burps and the cellulite feel like ancient history? What if you see that part of me?

What are you going to do when you realize I'm not at all the person that you thought you were marrying? What are you going to do? A covenant says you're safe with me.

It says no matter what I see, I pledge myself. I pledge myself to love you. No matter what. Right?

King Solomon goes from body part to body part praising his bride for her beauty. Imagine if somebody were to do that for us not only physically but psychologically and emotionally. Imagine that.

So the first thing is a covenant means you pledge to love every part of a person even before you've seen it. The second reason we need a covenant for intimacy is connected to the first. A covenant protects your relationship from its biggest threat.

[30 : 20] It protects it from its biggest threat. You know what that is? It's you. You are the biggest threat to most of your relationships. I'm the biggest threat to most of my relationships.

You're the biggest threat. Because if you try to love anyone long enough, some of you are very loving people. You're sweet, wonderful, amazing, deep hearted, compassionate, rich people.

You're good at loving others. But if you try to love anyone long enough, the time will come when you want to walk. I don't care how good a person you are.

You will reach that point. You will reach that point where your heart is no longer in it. You no longer want to be there. You're burned to a crisp. You're dried out. You've got empathy fatigue.

You can't do it. You know? And you reach that point. Maybe 5, 10, 15, 20 years into the relationship. But you'll hit it. Where you say, I'm out of here.

[31 : 18] I can't take it anymore. But you made a covenant. And you know why you made a covenant? Because you knew that day would come.

You didn't know when. But you knew the limits of your own heart. You knew that if you relied only on your feelings and only on your emotions, that wouldn't be enough. And you knew the day would come when your feet were already headed out the door.

And the only thing that would keep you there, the only thing that would keep you in that home, or in that friendship, or in that church, the only thing that will keep you there is the covenant that you made.

And you knew that. And so you made the covenant before it all happened. Because you knew you needed something stronger than your emotions. Because you know that it's worth it.

Because this is the kind of intimacy you were made for. Right? So many people think that love, just to focus on marriage for a second, many people think that love is what sustains a marriage.

[32 : 15] I've got to wait, marry the right person, and make sure we really fall in love. And there's a lot of desire there. And I've got to make sure that the love stays in the marriage. And if our love dies, if we fall out of love, we've got to panic.

And maybe that means we've got to rethink this marriage. Right? But we have it entirely backwards. Love doesn't sustain marriage. Marriage sustains love.

That's how it works. Marriage sustains love. The marital covenant is like a hard protective armor. Because all of these forces are slamming down on you over the course of your life.

And the covenant protects what's inside. And what's inside is your love and intimacy. But that love and intimacy, it can't withstand anything. Right?

All those forces would destroy it. So you need that armor. That love that you feel, that's a fragile, effervescent, often completely irrational, unpredictable thing.

[33 : 19] Sometimes it's like the tiniest little ember. And the covenant protects it. It keeps it from getting completely destroyed by the things that life throws at you. So we need a covenant to protect our relationship from its biggest threat, which is very often us.

And the third thing that we need, the third reason that we need a covenant is a covenant can actually increase the satisfaction that you feel for the one that you love. Did you know that? There was an interesting study done, interesting research done a few years ago, where researchers created an art class.

And they created two groups, group A and group B. And group A was told, everybody was told, we want you to create over the course of the class two paintings. And at the end of the class, group A was told, we want you to choose one of the paintings to take home and we'll keep the other one.

But once you make your choice, it's irrevocable and you will be stuck with that painting. So choose wisely. Group B was told, we want you to pick one of your two paintings, take it home.

But if at any point you change your mind and want to come back, you can come back and we'll make the exchange, no problem. Then they waited six months and a year and five years, eight years. And they followed up with these people and they asked about their level of satisfaction with the choice that they made.

[34 : 32] Are you happy and satisfied with the painting that you have? Guess which group was significantly happier with their choice? It was group A. Group A said, yeah, I love this painting.

I've thoroughly enjoyed it. Have you ever had any second thoughts? No, I really haven't. This is a great painting. This is the one I want. We've so enjoyed it. Group B, on the other hand, when they asked group B, group B people said, you know, I don't know.

I kind of like it, but I kind of like the other one. And maybe I made a mistake. And a number of them had gone and swapped it out a couple of times. And I just really don't know. And there's markedly different reactions, right?

Well, what does that tell us? Well, we live in a society where we assume that happiness is connected to choice. That the more choices I have, the happier I'm going to be. But what this research shows us is happiness is not about the number of choices.

Happiness and satisfaction is much more about the depth of your commitment. It's not the number of choices. It's not knowing that you have an out. Not knowing that you have a back door.

Satisfaction comes when you're all in.

[35 : 37] When you're committed. Irrevocably. That's the power of a covenant. Right? So intimacy can only thrive inside a covenant relationship.

But this is something our culture, frankly, does not understand. We don't understand this. And I think one of the main reasons, and this is just me, but I think one of the main reasons our society is so starved for intimacy is because we have largely done away with the whole idea of covenant. It really does not play a big part in our life anymore. Right? So people say, well, we still have marriage, right? That still happens. Well, we no longer have a covenantal understanding of marriage.

Most people think of marriage not as a covenant, but as a contract. They're two very different things. A covenant says, I'm all in 100%. I'm pledging myself as a person to you as a person regardless.

That's a covenant. A contract is very different. A contract is 50-50. It's an agreement of an exchange of goods and services. A contract says, I'll uphold my end of the bargain.

[36 : 40] If you uphold your end of the bargain. But if you fail to meet my needs or uphold your end of the agreement, I'm out. If my needs get met, I'll stay in it. But once my needs aren't getting met anymore, once you're not fulfilling your obligations to me, the contract is rendered null and void.

It's a very different understanding of marriage. And because of this shift in our society, Stephanie Kuntz, who's a historian who studies marriage, says that, quote, everywhere, marriage is becoming more optional and more fragile.

Everywhere, the once predictable link between marriage and child rearing is fraying. So marriage, we no longer think of it as a covenant. We think of it as a contract. One more example I'll give you for the sake of time is in the area of sexual ethics.

Got to talk about that. Right? Because of the idea that sex should be contained and reserved for the covenant of marriage, that idea of sex happening in the covenant of marriage, most people today, even most Christians, consider to be completely antiquated, obsolete, unrealistic.

It's a relic of the past. It's like, that's like an idea that you go see in a museum somewhere, back when people actually did that. Right? And so, instead of an ethics built around covenant, we now have the ethic of consent.

[38 : 05] That's what's replaced it. And all you have to do is read the news on any given day these days to see story after story after story that will hopefully show you that consent is insufficient.

It's insufficient. It's absolutely an important idea. Right? It's better to have that than nothing. But it's not enough. It's anemic.

It's virtually powerless to protect people from the kind of evil that is occurring on a daily basis. But that's what we have. And it begs the question, why would we insist on this ethic when we see time and time and time again it fails?

It fails. And the reason I think that we insist on consent as the sum total of our sexual ethics, the reason that we're not willing to rethink this, I think it's pretty clear.

I think that it's because more than anything else, even the well-being of the victims, we want to be able to do what we want, when we want, with whomever we want. And consent is the minimum standard that is the least invasive.

[39 : 21] Consent is an ethical standard that impinges least on my freedom. Right? Because consent says, you can do whatever you want.

You know, office, you know, kind of having an affair in your office between boss and employee, totally fine. Extramarital affair, totally fine. You know, drunken late night hookup sex, one night stand, totally fine.

You can do whatever you want, as long as you have consent. But sex is considered amoral. Right? There's no moral dimension to it, as long as there's consent.

That's the only measure. Anything goes. And I think that we love this idea because it's minimally invasive to the kind of life that I want to live. And I honestly think that this is the elephant in the room that nobody seems to be talking about.

We are more devoted to the idol of sexual freedom than we are the safety and welfare of our people. We're more devoted to the idol of sexual freedom than we are the safety and welfare of our people.

[40 : 23] We don't ultimately want to change anything, even if there are casualties. Because to us, it's worth it. And at the core of this is a distorted, twisted definition of freedom that has become an idol in our culture.

You know, we think that freedom means the ability to do what I want. More choices, the better. That's how we think freedom works. But in Scripture, when God liberates his people from generations of slavery, right?

Imagine that. Your parents and your grandparents and their parents, they all grew up slaves. It's a people who, they've forgotten what freedom is. They have no idea how to live as free people because all they can remember is slavery.

And God finally liberates them from Egypt, brings them into wilderness. And what does he do? Does he say, you're free, go, do whatever you want. Fly away, little birds. Go, live your lives. Be free, be free. No. They have no idea how to be free. God has to teach them how to be free. You know how he does it? Covenant. Through Moses.

[41 : 28] I'm going to teach you how to be free. Because the definition of true, real freedom is very different than what we think it is. Freedom is not just the ability to choose.

Anybody can do that. It's the ability to choose well. Freedom is not getting what we want when we want it. Freedom is being able to want that for which we were made.

That is what sets you free. To want that for which you were made. And we were made for intimacy with God and with God's people.

And freedom then means desiring that more than anything else. That is what will set you free. So this is why as a church we understand that covenants are extremely important and that that is the road to the vehicle of freedom in the Christian life.

So we take marriages very seriously. And we treat marriages as covenants. And we put a lot of work and thought as much as we can into helping people make good decisions.

[42 : 38] Into making sure they get good premarital counseling. Into making sure that the community is involved. Whenever we do a wedding whenever I do a wedding we announce it from up front. We announce the bans of marriage just to let you know this is happening.

We want the community to be a part of it. We encourage people who get married in D.C. to invite the whole church. And then once people are married we fight for those marriages. At their wedding we tell people we're going to make you agree publicly here to support and uphold this marriage. Everybody has to say that if you come to one of our weddings. And then we make sure we do all that we can to support and fight for marriages. And we do everything we can to make sure that divorce is not even an option. To fight against it as long as we possibly can.

Right? This means even more than that that I think that we also need to recover the lost practice of covenant friendships. Like David and Jonathan like Ruth and Naomi.

We need to create a context in the church where people can pledge themselves to long term friendship. There are a lot of people in the community who may for whatever reason never have a nuclear family never get married never have kids.

[43 : 42] We need to recover the construct of covenant deep spiritual intimate friendships. that needs to become normative in the church I think.

We've got a lot of work to do but I'm very convicted about that. Another thing it means is it means that we practice covenant membership in our church. We strongly encourage people once they've been a part of our church for a while make a covenant with this community.

Commit yourself to love and intimacy in this community. Become a stakeholder in the life of this community. So it means those things and last and most importantly if we understand what this is saying which I think we do it means that ultimately we don't put all of our hope in great marriages or great friendships or even great church membership that we put all of our hope ultimately in the covenant that we have in Jesus Christ.

That we as a church understand that ultimately that is the greatest source of hope for any human being. Because all Christians who have believed the gospel and repented and come to Jesus desiring his grace and forgiveness all Christians are in a way betrothed to Jesus.

If you're a Christian you're betrothed to Jesus. Now you don't have a wedding ring but what do you have? You have your baptism. Your baptism. Your baptism is the symbol of the covenant that exists between you and Jesus Christ.

[45 : 07] And just as Jesus tells his disciples in John chapter 14 don't worry I'm going away but I'm going to prepare a place for you in my father's house.

Did you ever understand why he said that? That's wedding language. You're my bride. I'm going to prepare a place for you in my father's house and when it's ready and when the time is right I will

come for you.

And we see what that day will look like in Revelation chapter 19 that the day will come when we're going about our business and all of a sudden we look up and we see maybe dust rising in the distance and we say what is that?

And then we realize it's the great wedding processional that Jesus has come again and he's coming for us and Jesus will draw up to us and he will reach out and he will draw us to himself and we will become one.

The two shall become one flesh and then Jesus in that intimacy will behold us. He will look at all that we are all that we've done everything that we've all of the mistakes that we've made all of our flaws all of the things that we hid even from our spouse even from our best friends all of the things that we hoped nobody would ever see and he will look at all of those things and because of his grace he will look at each part and say behold you are beautiful my love you are beautiful and once he's done that the celebration will begin and the streets of the new Jerusalem will be filled with singing but the singing won't just last seven days at this wedding celebration the singing will last for all of eternity and that is the great promise and hope of the gospel let's pray and pray five and you you to and you and it will