

Beloved: Sexual Intimacy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 February 2018

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] I'm glad that you're here. I'm glad that we can continue in the series that we started a few weeks ago. We've been looking at a book in the Old Testament called The Song of Songs, or some people call it The Song of Solomon. This is a book of poetry that is written by King Solomon. It's divinely inspired.

It's a vision of ideal marriage, marriage as God intended it, and the marriages between Solomon and a woman we've come to know as the Shulamite, the Shulamite woman. And so we've been looking at this book, and we've been looking at the central theme of The Song of Songs, which is the theme of intimacy. Extremely important, because God made you for intimacy. He made us for intimacy with one another, and he made us for intimacy ultimately with himself. And intimacy is being fully known and fully loved by another. And so because we are made for this, it's something that we need as much as we need air or food or water. We need intimacy, otherwise we wither. And so today, we've been focusing on different aspects of this over the last few weeks, and today we're going to focus on sexual intimacy. Now when I say that, a lot of people think that sex and intimacy are interchangeable, that they're one and the same. But that's not at all the case. Sex is a kind of intimacy.

Sex is meant to build or enhance or deepen intimacy. But it's just one kind of intimacy, and emotional intimacy, psychological intimacy, these are broader categories of intimacy of which sex is just a part. And yet even though sex is meant to deepen intimacy, more and more in our society what we see is that sex and intimacy have been torn apart. They've been separated. With the rise of things like pornography, which is essentially ubiquitous now, with the rise of casual dating and casual sex and the hookup culture, we have more and more and more the reality that sex without intimacy is more and more and more the norm. And intimacy is seen as a kind of add-on option when you're at a point in life where you're ready for a committed relationship. But sex without intimacy is more and more the daily or weekly experience of people in their lives. And so in our culture, we have more and more and more people who have the ability, whether it's through pornography or with another person, to have as much sex as they want. And yet we have more and more people, including more and more married people, people who've been married for years, who have very little understanding of what intimacy is. And they have no idea how to build it. And so it's an extremely important topic for us to spend time discussing. And that's why we're going to do it. And we're going to look this week at Song of Songs, chapter 6, verse 11, through chapter 7, verse 13. The entire book is a book of erotic poetry, but this is the most erotic part of the book. You'll see what I'm talking about in just a second.

But we're going to read this with this question in mind. What makes sex intimate? How do you build sexual intimacy? What does that look like? What does it take?

So let's pray, and then we'll read the passage, and then we'll draw out a couple of ideas that we can maybe apply to that question. Lord, we do pray, as we have done every week, that you are the God of love, the God of intimacy, the God who created and gifted us with sexual intimacy. And so we pray that as we sit here, that these would not just merely be human words or human wisdom, but that in the power of your spirit, you would illuminate this text, that you would teach us and show us that for which we were made, that which can only ultimately be realized in your son, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So Song of Songs, beginning in chapter 6, verse 11. Let's walk through this, and I'll help you understand a little about what's going on. As I've said before, this is a song. It was probably a song or a collection of songs meant to be sung at a Jewish wedding. And so we have different parts. We have the woman's part, the man's part, and the chorus chimes in every now and then. So she, the Shulamite woman, sings this.

[4 : 43] I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsmen, a prince. Now I want to say a couple of things about this. These references, nut orchard, that is the reference to the nut is a reference to both male and female genitalia.

It's an ancient Near Eastern symbol, poetic symbol for that. So that's a very intimate image. Remember, this is poetry. So we're looking for metaphor. We're looking for creative plays on words. And this is full of that. When you talk about the blossoms of the valley, whether the vines are budding, whether the pomegranates are in bloom, these are all images of fertility, more erotic imagery. Verse 12 is notoriously difficult to translate. The commentators have a field day trying to figure out what this means. And frankly, as much study as I've done on it, I have very little to add to what the commentators have already done. The ESV, which is this version, does a pretty decent job. But essentially, I would summarize this as the woman is daydreaming about being in the countryside and she's feeling amorous. And as she daydreams about being in the countryside, she's daydreaming about being there with her lover. She's essentially saying, I wish we could get away and be in a romantic vineyard together. And so that's essentially what's going on here.

So if we move forward, then the chorus chimes in and they say, return, return, O Shulamite, snap out of your daydream. Return, return, that we may look upon you. And what they actually mean, there's a play on words, return can also mean turn or leap. They want the Shulamite woman to dance for them. This is a wedding. We're celebrating. Join in the dance. We want to see you dance.

And then we have the voice of Solomon. Why should you look upon the Shulamite as upon a dance before two armies? I don't want her to dance for you. I want to dance for me. I want her to dance for me and me alone. And we can imagine that that's what happens because then he begins to praise her in very intimate ways. Chapter seven, verse one, how beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter.

She's dancing at this point. That's why he started with her feet. Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. So he's moving his eyes up her body. If we keep going, your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat encircled with lilies. I'll just tell you these are plays on words and the word navel, the word belly, these can also mean much more intimate parts of the female anatomy. So we're not talking about a literal heap of wheat here. I'll just leave it there. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon by the gates of Bath-Rabim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon. That's a good thing, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel and your flowing locks are like purple. A king is held captive in the tresses. How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights. I really won't have to unpack this next image for you. Your stature is like a palm tree and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine and the scent of your breath like apples and your mouth like the best wine. So at this point we have a shift in speakers, but it becomes increasingly obvious as we look at the imagery that is being used that the Shulamite woman is not only dancing, but she's dancing naked. She's removed all of her clothes. It's a very intimate moment. And then she responds, it goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth. This is, I think, the most important verse in the entire Song of Songs. I am my beloved's and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages.

[8 : 45] Let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded. Remember her daydream? She says, I want to go to that place I was imagining being with you. Let's go there. Let's find a village somewhere and go out into the countryside. Let's see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love.

The mandrakes gave forth fragrance and beside our doors are all choice fruits, new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, oh my beloved. An incredibly intimate image. And as I said a moment ago, it becomes increasingly clear as you look at this. And I know it's shocking that something like this would be in the Bible. But this woman, this bride, is dancing, unclothed in front of her husband. And then as they both are feeling amorous, she suggests that they depart from the city, that they go out to the countryside, that they find some secluded place where they can be together and have privacy. And she says, there I will give you my love.

And so what we want to do is look at this. And I said, we want to ask this question. What is it that makes sex intimate? What is it that helps us build sexual intimacy? And this is poetry. It's not a how-to manual. And yet there are themes that are very powerful that recur again and again and again that show up here that are directly connected to sexual intimacy. So we're going to look at two things.

The first thing that you need to build sexual intimacy is communication. You need communication, holistically speaking. One of the things that you see in this passage and throughout the entire Song of Songs is that both Solomon and his bride are almost fearless in their ability to very directly state their desires, their wants, their needs to describe one another in very intimate detail.

They don't hold back anything. And for us reading it, it can be shocking. It can make you blush and squirm to read or to read aloud in a room like this. These words, they're incredibly direct.

[11 : 04] And one of the most amazing things is actually how the woman is portrayed. You know, most of history, especially in religious communities, the Jewish community, the Christian community, for most of our history, women have been expected to be quiet and submissive and demure. And when it came to sexuality, there was not much thought or priority given to women and their enjoyment of sex.

A willingness was enough. It was really about procreation. But what you see here is this portrayal of a woman who is fully sexually realized, powerful woman. She gets the majority of the verses in the Song of Songs. She, I think, speaks roughly half of the verses. In many of those places, she is directly, boldly, sometimes almost aggressively stating what she desires. And it's very clear, there's very little reference to procreation here. It is very clear that what this is focusing on is the enjoyment of sex. Purely the enjoyment of it. The delighting in one another. And that level of intimate communication between this husband and wife is staggering to many people reading it, I think, then and now. Communication is essential for intimacy. There's a book written by a guy named Dr. Kevin Lehman called *Sex Begins in the Kitchen*. Sounds a little salacious as well. But what's actually the subject of this book is he says, sexual intimacy begins long before you get in the bedroom. Sexual intimacy is rooted in how you communicate in places like the dining room around your dinner table or the living room or as you're going about the daily tasks of living that you have to accomplish together. And when it talks about communication, it's not just talking about content dumping. That's not really communication. You know, I've been married 10 years and one of the things that we have learned in our marriage is that now that we have three kids, we really don't have a lot of time to really tell each other everything that happened in our day. When we finally get the kids down and everything is finally quiet and we have about 45 minutes of energy remaining before we're unconscious, we have to use that time very well. And content dumping is just not a good use of that time. And what we've come to realize is that what we don't need, we don't actually need the content.

What we really need to feel connected is the emotional reality that we've inhabited that day. So I could tell you about all the things that I did and all the people and all the meetings and all that, or I could just tell you, there was this one point in the day where I felt tremendously insecure and I felt incompetent and that was really hard. And just a 10 minute conversation like that is worth more than an hour and a half of content dumping. And so real communication means opening your heart up, becoming vulnerable, sharing not just the content of your day, but your emotional experience of the day. So when you talk about your day, focus not on what happened, but focus on how you felt about what happened. When something makes you feel insecure in your relationship, admit it. Share your experiences with your intimate partner. Share those experiences that have caused you to feel shame. It's hard to get more intimate than sharing experiences of deep shame. And those are not things that you share with lots of people. You share them with only your most intimate, trusted, loved ones. Talk about your hopes and desires. Talk about what you like and what you don't like. When it comes to sexual intimacy, be willing to discuss things that make you feel comfortable and uncomfortable. A good rule of thumb is in sexual intimacy, if you can't talk about it, you shouldn't be doing it. You shouldn't be doing it. Now I know that a lot of this is focusing on and assuming a married relationship. And I'm doing this because in this case, this is when we talk about sexual intimacy, this is how we need to deal with it. And my assumption is that even if there are a lot of people in this room who are not married, your desire is to be married.

And so learning how to communicate, learning how to communicate and be vulnerable and be intimate and access and communicate those feelings, that's extremely important to be doing right now, whether or not you're married. So we see this communication happening. And the other thing I want you to notice before we move on is the bride suggests that they should go out into the countryside.

And this is significant because all throughout the Song of Songs, there's a contrast between the city, which is a place of alienation and missed connections and misunderstanding and sometimes anxiety.

[15 : 50] And then you have the times in the garden, punctuated throughout. There are times when they're in the countryside, they're in the vineyards, they're among the blooming flowers and the pomegranates, they're together in the pastures alone. And those times in the garden are times of profound intimacy.

It's extremely important in an intimate relationship if you want to build intimacy, especially in your marriage, that you have regular times alone together. Times of seclusion, times when you're not being distracted by your work or by smartphones or by your kids, but times when you are alone.

And that means, and I would suggest that you try to have at least an hour every day where you are alone together, making eye contact, being affectionate.

The TV's off. Don't just veg out in front of Netflix. That has to be a priority. At least an hour every day. I would say at least a day a week. If you can make that your Sabbath, I think that's the ideal scenario. You take a weekly Sabbath together. On top of that, in addition to that, a weekly date night where you're getting out or even you're staying at home, but you make it special. And these are times to focus on that kind of intimate communication. And then beyond that, regularly getting away. D.C. is surrounded by wonderful, beautiful vineyards and countryside. Go out, get away, get weekends together. All of these are extremely important. It's amazing when we have so many dual income households in D.C. where both people have to work to cover all the expenses of living in a place like D.C. where people just work all day. They come home. They kind of see each other.

They do the evening routine and then they just keep working until both of them collapse. And that can just so easily become the norm. It can't be. You cannot have intimacy without those times in the garden together. So communication is a huge piece of building intimacy. The next piece, the second thing that we'll see about building sexual intimacy that's very clear here is that we need covenant.

[17 : 54] And we've talked about this before, but it comes up again and again. It's something that we cannot talk enough about. In our culture, the vast majority of people consider the idea that you should be abstinent outside of marriage to be a ludicrous and entirely unrealistic standard. And as somebody who was unmarried and single until I was 30, I very much resonate with the sense of difficulty and unrealism that we feel when we think about that kind of thing. I absolutely understand it. And yet, we have to wrestle with this fact that when you look at the teaching of the church, from the teachings of Jesus to the writings of the New Testament apostles to the teachings of the early church fathers, through the teachings of all of the Catholic church, the Orthodox church, the Protestant church, across all time and across all history and across all space, while they have disagreed on many issues, they have never disagreed on this one. Entirely unified teaching about sexuality within a covenant, the covenant of marriage. And there's a very good reason for this.

The reason is that the Christian understanding of sexual freedom is radically different from the definition of the prevailing culture. The prevailing culture, ever since the sexual revolution, has come to define sexual freedom as the freedom to have sex with whomever I want, whenever I want, married or unmarried, as long as there is mutual consent. So freedom is the freedom of choice, that I should be free to have sex with whomever I want. And that directly runs against the definition of sexual freedom that you see in the Christian understanding of human nature. Because Christians have long understood sexual freedom, not as the freedom to have sex with whomever we want, but rather the freedom to be fully known, fully naked, fully exposed to another person, and to be fully loved.

It's the freedom to take down all of the facades, all of the fig leaves, all of the cover-ups, all of the excuses, and to feel completely known and completely loved. That is sexual freedom, according to Scripture. And in this passage, you know, we look at this Shulamite woman dancing naked before her husband, and we read that, and we think that's so salacious. You know, it seems scandalous to us. But what we're really looking at here is a beautiful picture of sexual intimacy.

This is a wonderful picture of sexual intimacy. And this woman is truly free. This is true freedom on display. Could you ask, how could you, you know, if you imagine yourself, if you're a man or a woman, imagine yourself doing that, and imagine, how could I possibly do that and not feel some sense of self-awareness, some sense of self-consciousness, you know, worrying about, you know, especially as you get older, you know, I mean, we don't know how old she is at this point, but you can imagine thinking about the rolls and the creases and the wrinkles and the cellulite and all of those unsightly parts of yourself. And we look at this and we say, could she possibly be such, so unaware or unconcerned that this would be a pure dance of joy and delight? And the answer is yes. And the reason she can do that is because of this truth that is lodged deep in her heart. Chapter 7, verse 10.

I am my beloved's and his desire is for me. If you know that, if you know that, it eradicates shame and self-consciousness and embarrassment. They cannot coexist. Because sex is a way of saying to another person, I belong to you. Sex is a way of saying to another person, I am exclusively and completely yours. It's an act of self-donation. And that's what we mean when we say that sex is covenantal. When you make a covenant, a marriage covenant, the vow is a self-donation. You are giving yourself and pledging yourself exclusively, completely, permanently to that person no matter what. And then every time in that marriage, you have sexual intimacy. Every time you do that together, you are restating or re-embodiment that same covenant. So sex is a covenant renewal ceremony. And every time you do it, you're renewing and restating those vows. I'm giving myself to you completely, permanently, exclusively yet again. And over time, that builds profound intimacy and trust. Because when you know that you belong to your spouse and they belong to you, you can feel complete freedom to be naked together. Not just physically naked, that's just the barest outer layer of what we're talking about. We're talking about deep emotional intimacy, deep psychological intimacy, financial intimacy, all of the different kinds of intimacy that we're created to have.

[23 : 18] The poet James Lynn Festy has written a book about 50 years of being married and written poems all along the way. And it's an amazing book. I've been at the recommendation of a friend reading it. Some beautiful stuff.

And at one of the poems at the very end, the last stanza says this. He's talking about marriage, and here's what he says about marriage. It is gravity, which limits us totally, which makes all life possible.

That's beautiful. You know, we think that freedom is being able to leave the ground and soar and fly around. And he's saying, no, the thing that makes life possible, the thing that makes it worth living, is the thing which also constrains us. Gravity limits us totally and makes all life possible.

That is sexual freedom. That is life-giving freedom. On the other hand, sex with someone outside of covenant, no matter how much you love each other, no matter how much you both want to be together, there can be no real sense of belonging, no real trust. And what it ultimately becomes is a way of taking from one another without giving yourself fully in return. And so what that means is it becomes a kind of consumerism where you are taking without giving yourself fully in return. There's no self-donation. There's no commitment. There's no permanence. And I know when I say that, somebody might say, well, what are you talking about? You're saying that you can't be committed unless you're married?

That's crazy. We can be committed to one another. We don't need a formal ceremony to symbolize our commitment. It's our love that will keep us together. We are committed to one another. Who are you to say that? And you know, I'm a big fan of nuance, and I think many issues in the world need nuance. This is not one of them.

[25 : 14] You're dead wrong. You're dead wrong. And I'll tell you why. There is no such thing as being partially committed. Commitment and trust, by definition, are all or none. They're all or none.

You can't be 70% committed. You can't partially trust somebody. Right? What would that even look like? Well, I trust that person 70% of the time.

What does that even mean? I trust him on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You know, I trust him when he's out with me but not out with his friends. I trust him when he's sober but not when he's had a few drinks.

You know, I trust him when I have access to his email but not when I don't know his passwords. I mean, what does that actually mean? What are you actually saying? You either trust somebody or you don't.

And commitment is the same way. You are either in or you're out. There's no such thing as being 60% committed. That doesn't mean anything. It's a ridiculous concept. Right? You might say, I'm committed to you.

[26 : 22] But unless it's 100% all-in, exclusive, permanent commitment, it's not commitment. You know what it is? It's the kind of commitment that we have towards, say, our toothpaste. Where we keep using it.

We keep using the brand until another brand comes along that is more impressive. It's not commitment. It's brand loyalty. It's brand loyalty. As long as this is meeting my needs, as long as nothing better comes along, this is where I'll stay.

But what happens when the newer, better model comes along? Then what? It's brand loyalty. And you know what that means is unless you have a covenant, you have to continually market yourself.

Right? You have to continually make sure that you are interesting enough, attractive enough, spontaneous enough, fun enough to keep that person's interest. You can't ever fully let yourself open up.

You can't let those undesirable, unsightly parts of yourself be too visible. Because guess what? There'll be a newer, better model down the road that won't have any of those blemishes.

[27 : 28] It's brand loyalty. Unless you have total commitment in the form of a covenant, there can be no real trust. So here's the bottom line.

The more you have sex outside of covenant, the less intimacy you will actually experience over time. You will make intimacy less and less and less likely. And here's why.

Sex is biologically designed to bond us. When you first begin to have sex with someone, it is inevitable that you will begin to feel more and more and more attached.

Now, this is much stronger for women than it is for men. I said earlier in this series, men can many times, they can have sex and walk away. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have any impact on you.

For men and for women, sex is meant to bond us. And if you want to have sex with people and then walk away, you actually have to do something mentally and emotionally to make that possible.

[28 : 25] In other words, you have to wall off part of your heart. You have to hold part of yourself back. You have to go into a kind of self-protection mode. You have to compartmentalize to negate the bond that will otherwise form.

And orgasm is one of, if not the most powerful behavioral reinforcer there is. And so imagine every single time you have an orgasm, you are forging a behavioral association with self-protection, emotional distance, disconnection, and compartmentalization.

What's going to happen over time? You are going to rewire the role that sex plays in your heart and in your mind. And sex will eventually become not a way to connect, but it can actually become the very opposite.

That you come to powerfully associate sex with disconnection. Right? With compartmentalization. With escape. That lies, that what I just said lies at the very heart of sex addiction.

That's what sex addiction is. It's an intimacy disorder. It's people who try to get intimacy as it was meant to be gotten through sex.

[29 : 41] And yet sex has come to play a very different role. Sex doesn't actually facilitate connection. It facilitates disconnection. It becomes a way to escape reality.

That's sex addiction. So we take this and we contrast this. We contrast this with this beautiful vision that we have of sex within a covenant.

Because the more you have sex inside of a covenant, the more intimacy you build over time. It's the opposite. It's not a fading chance of intimacy. You're actually building it over time.

Sex actually does get better the more you do it within a covenant. It's the opposite phenomenon. You know, I promised Laura I wouldn't use our marriage as an illustration specifically in this sermon.

She made me promise for good reason. But I will just say in general, after being married for 10 years, it gets better. All of it gets better. Right?

[30 : 46] And your bodies change and things change and you're tired and you're at different stages of life. But it gets better. The thing that most people don't know about love is that love is like a multi-course feast.

It's like a multi-course feast. And our culture celebrates the kind of love that you experience through novelty. A new person, a new personality, a new body, a new relationship.

That sense of falling in love, that kind of hormone-saturated, emotionally drenched time where you are just sort of giddy, head over heels. That kind of passionate, erotic love.

That is what our culture celebrates. And our culture says, this is the greatest there is. This is the highest ideal, romantic love. Right? The movie ends with the couple kissing and consummating their love.

And this is the greatest thing. And this is what life is about. Friends, that is the appetizer. That's the appetizer. That's like sitting down at the nicest restaurant you've ever been to, eating the appetizer in the sand.

[31 : 53] That was great. Thank you so much. And heading out into the night. It's ridiculous. There are so many more courses that await.

If you stay at the table, there's another kind of love that comes. It's the kind of love that you experience in your early years of marriage. When you're not in the adventurous, exciting world of dating and you're trying to figure out the very mundane details of making life work together.

Who does the chores? And who does the shopping? And who does this? And it's a very mundane, very unsexy reality. And yet there's a deep but very different kind of love that develops there.

Right? And then there's another course. The kind of love that you experience after your first major fight. Right? When both people say things they don't mean and you've got tears in your eyes and a couple of doors get slammed.

And you say things that you never thought would come out of your mouth. And you cannot believe you're saying them to the person that you claim to love. And then you make up. And you reconcile. And there's a wholly different kind of love that you experience there that wasn't there before you fought.

[33 : 03] And then there's the kind of love that you experience by simply weeping together. As life invariably brings tragedies. And then there's the kind of love that you experience when you get up with the baby in the middle of the night so that your spouse can get a couple of hours of extra sleep.

It's a whole different kind of love. Right? There's the kind of love that you experience when you're bleaching the bathroom because your spouse got the stomach flu. It's a wholly different kind of love.

There's the kind of love that you experience when you're sitting together nervous and chewing your nails in the emergency room. Not knowing what the doctor is going to say. There's a kind of love that develops when you're learning to parent together and making huge mistakes.

And failing again and again and again. It's a wholly different kind of love. That's a whole separate course. Right? There's the kind of love that you experience in the unplanned spontaneous moments of midday affection.

That you had no idea were going to happen that morning. Right? There's the kind of love that you experience that you can only experience after a major betrayal. You know, when someone does something that should be marriage ending.

[34 : 14] And yet there's the choice to forgive. That love is only possible on the far side of that betrayal. It's a different kind of love.

There's the kind of love that you experience when you begin to rediscover one another as empty nesters. There's the kind of love that you experience watching your grandchild draw pictures.

As you look across the room and meet the eyes of your spouse. Right? There's the kind of love that grows stronger even as your bodies give out.

Right? There's the kind of love that you experience when your spouse is slipping away because of dementia. But because of all of those years, when you look at him, when you look at her, you see all that they were.

All that they are and are all that they will yet be. It can only happen with years of history. The poet James Linfesti, who I referenced earlier, wrote a poem called When I Am 80.

[35 : 24] And here's what he says in the last stanza. When I am 80, I will hold the fine silk goblet of my wife in both my hands. That will be all the life I can handle.

With all due respect to C.S. Lewis and his book, *The Four Loves*, which is a tremendous book. There are many, many more kinds of love. There are hundreds, hundreds of different kinds of love.

Different courses in the feast. But in order to even be able to get a glimpse or a taste of those things, you have to stay at the table. Because each one is only possible because of all of the ones that came before it.

It is cumulative. It builds over time. That's why it gets better. The things that we think are important now become ridiculous. In the light of a life shared for decades.

Here's the paradox of intimacy. The more you give yourself, donate yourself to another, the more it fills you up.

[36 : 32] The more that you take, the more it leaves you empty and hollow. That's why Solomon, at the end of *Ecclesiastes*, writes, In all of the sex that I had with all of my wives and all of my concubines and all of the pursuit of pleasure, at the end of it, I was just chasing the wind.

I'm empty. There was nothing there. So we've talked about communication. We've talked about covenant as necessary ingredients for building sexual intimacy.

But the last point I have to make before we end is this, that sexual intimacy, as great as it can be, is nothing. It is a shadow compared to the spiritual intimacy that we are created to have with God and God alone.

And the same two ideas apply to our relationship with God. In other words, spiritual intimacy is also built through regular communication. You cannot expect to have an intimate relationship with God if you are not regularly communicating.

Reading His word and allowing it to seep into the marrow of your bones and your DNA. Prayerfully listening and contemplating and discerning His voice in your life.

[37 : 46] Opening up your soul and confessing your deepest shame. Unless we're doing that regularly. Unless we have time alone regularly with God. We cannot expect intimacy with Him.

And likewise, spiritual intimacy is possible because of the covenant we have with God through Jesus Christ. We can open ourselves up to God. We can confess our sin to God. We can even rage and shake our fist at God.

But His love will never leave us. His steadfast love is said to outlast the heavens and the earth. Even they will fade. But God's steadfast love endures forever.

Just as the Shulamite woman says, Meet me in the garden and there I will give you my love. It's an interesting thing she says. She goes, meet me in the garden.

Meet me in the vineyards. And there I will give you my love. And as strange as it may be to state this parallel, God says the very same thing to us.

[38 : 48] If you look in Scripture, the garden is a place of profound intimacy with God. You see it again and again and again. The garden of Eden.

That's where God gave us love in the form of life and breath and purpose and vocation. And then we move to the garden of Gethsemane.

Where God gave us His love in the form of His only Son. Who He sent to die. To atone for all of the sin of the world. To make intimacy possible with human beings.

And then we see the garden of the tomb. With the stone rolled away. And God gave us His love in the form of resurrection hope. The promise that one day every tear will be wiped away.

And all of the suffering and the loneliness and the alienation and the longing that we feel now. That one day that will be eradicated. No more. And then finally as we look ahead to the very end of our story.

[39 : 48] The garden that sits at the very heart of the New Jerusalem. Where there will be dancing and singing and celebration. The wedding feast of the Lamb. Will have come.

And there will be joy throughout the streets. And every tear will be wiped away. And every hint of loneliness. And every hint of longing will be no more. And there will be profound oneness.

As the bride of the church and the groom of Christ embrace once and for all. And we are enfolded into the arms of our maker. So I encourage you as you desire to build intimacy.

In your marriage. In your marriage. Or as you imagine marriage as it might one day be. But even more so as you desire the kind of intimacy that is open to every single person in this room.

Intimacy with God. That you not only open yourself up and reach out to communicate with Him. But that you spend time in the garden. Meet Him in these places.

[40 : 47] Contemplate what each of these gardens means. And how they convey the love that is right now changing the world. And it's in the name of Jesus Christ we say these things.

Amen.