

The Centrepiece

3.6 – 5.1

(Studies One—Four)

Study One:

Finally...the Wedding Day! (3:6-11)

1. READY?

The Questions

The following questions are designed for personal study and also for group use. If used in a group setting, feel free to read all seven questions, and then select two or three for focused discussion. Another possibility is to spread the study over a two week period.

1. Weddings are a common event in almost all cultures in all of history. Why do you think this is so?
2. What is the most enjoyable and meaningful wedding that you have attended (apart from your own!)? What features made it so memorable?
3. Carefully read the Song of Solomon 3.6-11. What aspects seem important to the author in this tenth century B.C. wedding?
4. What is the overall mood or atmosphere in this passage?
5. What role do others (the sixty men, the daughters of Zion, the mother) play in making this wedding a success? What role could parents, and the male and female wedding parties, play at our weddings?
6. What do you think is a reasonable amount of time and money to invest in a wedding experience (including the rehearsal before and the reception after the event)?
7. Critique this statement, "Except for a couple rings on a couple fingers, the two people getting married are pretty much the same after the wedding as they were before the wedding."

The Quest (for more understanding)

1. Divide the group into two smaller groups and stage a debate. Both the pro and con sides should come up with good reasons and good strategy, and then debate the following: "A couple is wise in choosing to go to a justice of the peace for a marriage certificate, and skipping all the stress and hassle and expense of a public wedding." Is a couple without a wedding, a married couple?
2. As a group, come up with an ideal wedding service. Which elements would you consider as essential, and which ones optional?
3. Compare and contrast the wedding passage in Song of Solomon 3.6-11 with Psalm 45: the wedding psalm.

II. REFLECTION

Cathy and I have counselled about thirty couples toward marriage over the years, and I have performed about thirty weddings. At one rehearsal all was going well: the groom and bride-to-be blew out their candles of singleness, ready to light that candle of marital oneness, followed by... the kiss!

What we all forgot the next night was that brides normally wear veils. As she moved toward the candle, her veil caught on fire!! I have a complete memory lapse on my response: did I gently slap the veil and douse the flame, or did I fling a nearby glass of water, or did I wait on the groom to rescue the bride? I do not remember...

Some marriages go up in flames, whereas others develop a steady glow that brings light and warmth over the years to two people, and many more besides. But marriages normally start with weddings.

In almost every culture and in almost all of history, a young man and a young woman signal a new development in their relationship by announcing and planning and carrying out a public wedding.

It is intriguing that the three occasions when otherwise quite godless people sense a need to be in church, in the place where "God hangs out", is at a baptism or christening, at a wedding, and at a funeral (or as an Anglican friend once put it to me, "when they are hatched, matched, and dispatched"). And while the subject of the "Christian activity" is quite unconscious at the beginning and end of life, being quite asleep or quite dead, the wedding is a conscious choice. Why do people seem to feel a marriage has a better chance of success if it starts with a preacher and steeple and stained glass somewhere in the picture?

Weddings also occur in scattered places all over Scripture. Psalm 45, the Cana wedding that Jesus salvaged, and the celebrations at the end of Revelation are examples. And a wedding is the centrepiece of the Song of Solomon in Chapter 3.6-11, from which we can learn at least five things:

1. Transition

A couple, slightly more dressed up than usual, are essentially the same two people leaving the church as they were entering the church. And yet, everything has changed!

After March 31, 1973, Cathy and I disappeared into the same room every night, and there was someone else in my bed every morning. That was new. We savoured the words husband and wife like embracing a new taste, and I paused often at the magic of saying or writing, "Mrs. Pott..."

Marriage promises also opened the door to marriage privileges. Tim LaHaye so rightly calls sexual intercourse "the marriage act" and, as we shall see, all three sections of the courtship (1.1-3.5) end with a clear and firm no on experiencing sex before marriage (in 1.8, 2.7, and 3.5). The wedding is a transition to something new, or certainly should be! There is enough enjoyment spelled out in married sex in chapters 4 and 7 to make a grown man blush, and wait...

2. Anticipation

The excitement in this passage is contagious. It starts with a question, “Who is this...?” and continues with “Look! It is Solomon’s carriage....” Since the “who” is feminine, Solomon probably followed Israelite custom, and had sent a fine carriage north a hundred miles or so to fetch his bride, from northern Galilee or southern Lebanon. Solomon’s carriage arriving at her home would be the talk of the village for weeks! (Picture a limo arriving at an African village situated beyond the last dirt road...)

As the carriage moves south, men at front and back were probably waving censers full of aromatic herbs and, combined with the dust stirred up by the entourage, the column of fragrant smoke could be seen for miles. As Solomon waited expectantly, ready to go out and meet her, his anticipation was probably heightened by the absence of a cell phone...

Sometimes in present day weddings, anticipation and excitement is smothered under the weight of photographers and music and cake and squabbling relatives. We must not let conflict or fatigue nibble away at the wonder of the wedding.

3. Preparation

Solomon did not only make *her* carriage, and select sixty warriors to accompany it, he also “made for himself” (I believe the emphasis is supposed to surprise us) a travelling chair, presumably a two-seater. As the most powerful monarch of his day he could easily have delegated this assignment to skilled workmen. But no, he did his own woodwork, using strong and fragrant cedarwood from her country, which she would instantly recognize. What a nice touch! Somewhere on the long journey from Lebanon to Jerusalem, he would meet her and welcome her onto his carriage. We enjoyed learning that an Ethiopian groom carefully and lovingly makes a wedding bread-basket for his new wife.

I have always enjoyed distinctive and unique weddings, which carried the fingerprints of groom or bride or both: their own vows, a song or a poem, or a handmade gift or handpicked bouquet... Care and preparation invested in a forty minute wedding could be a good signal for a later investment in forty years (or more) of marriage.

Another suggestion for our weddings: why not make an effort to create a more active role for the young man, since he is usually quite able to help prepare for and contribute to this once-in-a-lifetime experience? Cathy and I are somewhat disappointed with this common picture: a bride enters with father in tow, the music changes, and the audience stands and gazes in welcome: “Here comes the bride”. All the while, we may wonder about the groom, “Where did he come from? And when did he come in?”

Isn’t it time to put to rest that common and pervasive myth that “the wedding day is for her, and the wedding night is for him”? Shouldn’t both day and night be for both bride and groom?

4. Participation

A wedding should be a very public and visible event, and the presence on Solomon’s day of sixty men and numerous maidens and his own mother helped to make it so. (A

wedding party of girls helping a bride out of the second floor window upon her elopement, and a half dozen groomsmen steadying the ladder below... is not quite the same!)

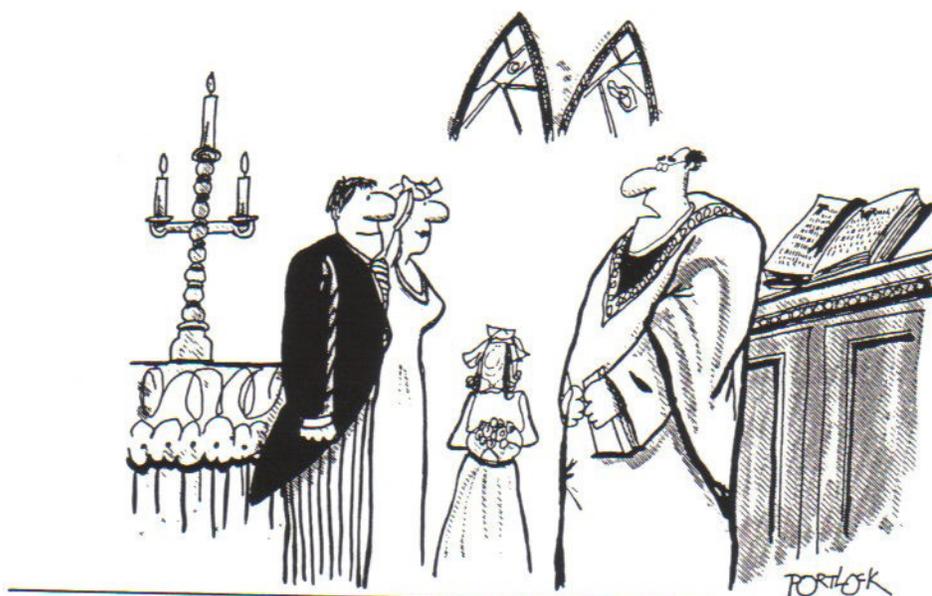
Sixty noble warriors are charged with protection on the outside, since the carriage and its occupant are priceless, and the journey will include a few nights. Back in Jerusalem, the daughters of Zion, or court ladies are in charge of provision on the inside. They decorate the seating area with gold and silver, and make sure the upholstery is a royal purple (using dye from shellfish found off the coast of her native Lebanon!). Solomon's mother makes her only appearance in the Song by endorsing the marriage as she slips a laurel wreath on Solomon's head. (David has apparently died before his son's courtship and interestingly, mother Bathsheba is not named...)

How can we communicate more effectively the social nature of weddings, that it takes more than two people to make a marriage work? Could the wedding party contribute more than just grinning for an hour while trying to keep their balance? Could the family and friends and other attenders do more than just attend?

5. Celebration

All these heavy questions should not distract us from the light-hearted nature of the occasion! The closing phrase "the day of the gladness of his heart" suggests that the words "Christian" and "party time" can actually live in the same sentence. Israel's weddings could last from one to seven days, and were filled with food and wine, and with songs and stories and dancing.

Even more, this was a royal wedding! The name Solomon occurs seven times in the entire Song, twice in the first chapter and twice in the last, but three times in this short passage. And two of these occurrences have the word *king* attached. As king, Solomon committed all his energy and resources to make this a memorable occasion, ensuring that the verbal and visual snapshots of this day would last across the years!



And do you Ann take Arnold to be your husband, to have and to hold, love and cherish, until things get a little tough, you get burned-out, and split?"

III. RESOURCES

Some background on Jewish wedding ritual at the time of Christ:

The first phase was the promise. This could be set aside or broken, much like today's engagement.

The second phase was the betrothal which was considered final and usually took place one year before the marriage. As the bride and groom committed themselves to each other in this way, a legal document was prepared, recording the dowry each brought. It was during this period that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1.18).

On the day before their marriage the bride and groom fasted and confessed their sins in prayer.

When the big day came, the groom with his attendants, singers, musicians, went to the bride's house for her and sometimes met her half way. Bridesmaids sang and danced around the bride all the way. The whole wedding party then went to the groom's parents' home. Wedding processions took right of way over everything else on the road including funerals.

The bride was veiled from head to foot in white with jewels and wreaths of myrtle leaves (compare the clothing of the bride of the Lamb in Rev. 19 and 21. Her hair was always flowing (unless she was a widow). The bride stayed with the women and did not join the celebration until the feast was over and then her veil was removed.

The groom usually wore a crown of flowers and a new tunic made especially for the occasion. At the marriage itself the groom gave the bride a legal document in which he promised to work for her, honour her, keep her, and care for her.

Following the marriage, the marriage supper, which could last from one to seven days, began. Finally, the bridegroom's friends led him to the bridal suite whence the friends of the bride had already taken her, and the marriage was consummated.

The wedding banquet and celebrations were presided over by the ruler of the feast (John 2.8-9). He was the equivalent of today's toastmaster.

IV. RESPONSE

Consider celebrating your anniversary each year by replaying the memories, and the photos/video, and renewing your commitment to each other. You may write down your intentions below...

Study Two

Focus...The Wedding Night, Stage One

(4.1-7)

1. READY?

The Questions (for personal study, or group use)

1. What is the purpose of a honeymoon?
2. If you are married, were you ready for your honeymoon, and for your marriage? If you could do it all over again, what things would you change?
3. In our passage today, what is the king's focus? What are common emotions, or concerns, for both the new husband and the new wife on a night like this?
4. Share your reaction to this statement: "Prose slips into poetry when love is too big for ordinary words."
5. Where does the king start and where does he end in his description, and why is this important? What number of things does he call attention to, and what could that mean?
6. As best as you can, try to visualize and then put into words what he is saying in each picture.
7. Is the king speaking the truth in the last phrase of verse 7? How would you respond to such a comment from a boyfriend or husband?

The Quest (for more understanding)

As a couple, pretend that you have received a letter from a cousin in a far-away city. She says, "I so enjoyed visiting last year, and having such good conversations with you. As you know, Philip and I are getting married in six weeks. Plans for the wedding day are coming along nicely, but I am increasingly anxious and worried about the wedding night. Since the two of you seem to have a good marriage, can you give me some advice?"

As a couple, either itemize the counsel you would give your cousin, or write her a letter, and then share it with the larger group.

II. REFLECTION

Karl Barth, perhaps one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, suggested that the Song of Solomon could be seen as a commentary on Genesis 2.24-25. In this last glimpse of Paradise, we see a man and a woman leaving, cleaving, and “weaving” in complete openness with one another, and we have an amazing glimpse of the marriage God created and intended for us.

But perhaps this is not the last glimpse? Perhaps in skies cloudy and grey and overcast after the fall, the sun does still break through from time to time?

In the wedding scene we observed last time, we saw clear hints of public leaving and personal cleaving, and now in chapter four the private “becoming one flesh” or “weaving” gets underway. It is a story of candour and restraint, moving in seventeen verses of beautiful imagery from focus to foreplay to fulfilment...

Solomon takes the lead after his wedding party has brought him to the bridal chamber (after the first day or the last day of the celebration: the experts are not in agreement). The bride has been waiting there with her attendants, her face covered by a transparent veil. Solomon helps all potential grooms by three things he does in this passage:

1. He focuses on her. On a night such as this, it would be quite natural and understandable for each partner to be somewhat preoccupied with themselves: he with his “performance” and she with her appearance!

But Solomon’s “bookends” in the first and seventh verses are other-centered. (“How beautiful you are..., All beautiful you are...”) The second person singular occurs 13 times, and the word “I” is almost completely missing! Another German theologian, Herman Oeser, says in a very arresting way, “If you want to be happy, do not get married!”, but then adds, “If, on the other hand, you want to make someone else happy, marriage may well be for you...”

2. He focuses on her with words. Imagine Solomon’s colleagues asking him six weeks before the wedding, “So king, what are you looking forward to on your wedding night?” They would have expected, perhaps with a nudge and a wink, that Solomon would focus on the action. What a surprise when his likely answer would be, “You know, I can’t wait to tell her some things, and see her reaction.” The wedding night is full of words, seventeen verses of them. In fact, this book in the Bible is the only one composed almost entirely of conversation! Dare we say in a rather candid way, especially to the men: The part of your anatomy above your chin is more important to your marriage than that part below your belt!

3. He focuses on her with words of poetry. Part of what makes the Song of Solomon so interesting, and often infuriating, are all the figures of speech and all the similes and metaphors. If I had used this language with my wife on our wedding night (“your hair is like a flock of goats”) we may have had to settle for separate beds, and perhaps even separate bedrooms...

We need lots of practice in getting our imaginations jump-started. We need practice in seeing well, not only hearing well. We need practice in letting these

pictures soak into our mind and memory. Solomon's pictures focus on various body parts, but often have connections with or allusions to her character.

He gives her a seven-fold (complete, perfect!) succession of praise, starting with her eyes and ending with her breasts. As we shall see later, the next time he visits her body in detail, both the number and the order are very different.

Solomon starts with her eyes. They capture his attention, allowing him to look into these "windows of the soul". Her eyes are gentle and innocent, revealing and yet hiding mysteries behind her wedding veil...

And the hair? Cathy and I were helped on this one in Ethiopia last June. We saw black goats weaving their way down a distant hillside and could more easily understand Solomon feeling mesmerized by her black and flowing hair, dancing with every slight shake of her head...

Teeth all in a row, nicely flossed and brushed, also added to the picture. The image of a sheep just shorn, appearing with bubbles on its head from the washing tub, says so well: "You make me smile!" And her lips and mouth were delicate and softly red in colour. (Do not forget to take along breath spray on your honeymoon ... and into your marriage!)

Her temples are also flushed softly red in anticipation of the night ahead and are reminders of the inside colour of a pomegranate (this fruit also happened to be a symbol for love and lovemaking.) Her neck is strong and confident, symbolic of character with which she had firmly resisted all the wrong suitors in order to allow inside only the right one. Associating his father's strong reputation with her strong character is a good move on Solomon's part!

And finally, he moves from admiring the toughness of her neck to admiring the tenderness of her breasts. Many of us understand the urge of wishing to stroke and fondle the tawny hide of a baby deer, and Solomon once again chooses just the right words to capture his feelings.

And, says he, this lovemaking adventure we are embarking on tonight is not a twenty minute sexual release, but the start of a twenty year (or forty or sixty) sexual relationship: "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee..." In other words, all night long! They are off to a fine start.

III. RESOURCES

The drawing below is provided for all those friends who insist on "reading the Bible literally".

The Song of Solomon Illustrated

(For our literalist friends.)

"How beautiful you are, my darling,
 How beautiful you are!
 ...Your eyes are like doves behind
 your veil...
 ...Your hair is like a flock of goats...
 ...Your teeth are like a flock of
 newly shorn ewes...
 ...Your lips are like a scarlet
 thread...
 ...Your temples are like a slice
 of pomegranate...
 ...Your neck is like the
 tower of David... built
 with rows of stones
 on which are hung a
 thousand shields...
 Your two breasts are
 like two fawns,
 twins of a gazelle
 Which feed among the
 lilies...
 ...Your lips, my bride,
 drip honey... honey and
 milk are under your tongue,
 And the fragrance of your
 garments is like the
 fragrance of Lebanon...
 ...Your navel is a round goblet...
 Your belly is like
 a heap of wheat...

...your nose is like the tower of Lebanon, which faces toward Demascus..."

...from Song of Solomon Chapters four and seven.



IV. RESPONSE

This page is available for your own comments, writing down changes you'd like to make in your own marriage, or special friendships. How can you employ your tongue in spreading a bit more heaven and a bit less hell, in your closest relationships? You may also wish to name those who will hold you accountable.

(As we know from history, Solomon started very well but ended very sadly. We can allow and invite him at least to be a model for us in this earlier stage of his life...)

Study Three

Foreplay...

The Wedding Night, Stage Two (4:8-11)

1. READY?

The Questions (for personal study, or group use)

1. How do you react to the word “foreplay”? How do we decide on the fine line between being prudish and being permissive?
2. Discuss the following observation: “Foreplay is an excellent way for the husband to show that he understands his wife.”
3. What is the role of Lebanon in these four verses?
4. Why and how does Solomon call his bride away from home? What would make leaving difficult for her (and for us)?
5. What are the values and what are the dangers in the African practice of bride price or lobola?
6. What role can and should the four parents (and other relatives?) play in the marriage after the wedding? Should such a role be discussed with all involved, and if so, when?
7. In what other ways does Solomon prepare her in verses 8-11 for the “marriage act”?

The Quest (for more understanding)

Please feel free to make use of one or both of these case studies provided by David and Janet Cunningham in their *Enjoy Your Marriage*.

How would you respond to this woman who has only been married for one year?

“My mother-in law has come to live with us to help me look after our first child. She is not a Christian and she is very overbearing. She insists in having her own way in the

care of the baby. My husband, who is a Christian, takes her side every time. I am always afraid of doing things wrong. I find it difficult to be cheerful and my home is becoming like a prison. There is no way I can talk to my husband about the way I feel because he has threatened to beat me if I do not obey his mother. I love my mother-in-law because she means well and I also love my husband. What am I to do?"

How would you advise this couple?

The husband is fond of bringing his relatives home to stay with him and his new wife. Even though she enjoys being hospitable, she is feeling under pressure because she is working outside the home as well as caring for her own children. She begins to resent the constant stream of visitors and grows increasingly unhappy. The husband is angered by her apparent lack of generosity and is unwilling to listen to her protests. Both husband and wife are Christians, but they seem to be unable to resolve their difficulties. A barrier of misunderstanding and bitterness has grown up between them.

II. REFLECTION

The wedding night continues... Isn't it interesting that six verses are devoted to the daytime event, and seventeen to the night-time activity?

And the pace picks up too, as they leisurely but purposefully move from leaving to cleaving to the one flesh of "weaving". For the first time in the Song he calls her "my bride" in these four verses, and does so four times! There is a new status, a new sense of belonging, and with it come some new expectations.

But before moving into the very near future, Solomon needs to address the past. His double "Come with me..." is a gentle invitation for her to flee from her anxiety and nostalgia and closeness to home and family, and flee into his arms. She is almost certainly a typical bride, wondering what first time disrobing and first time seeing all of him and first time sex will really be like...And the fears and uncertainty could possibly trigger this thought: "Mom! I would love to have some scones and tea with you just now, under our old apple tree!"

But Solomon says a gentle "no" in verse 8, before assuring her with a strong "yes" in verses 9-11.

God designed that partnering should last a lifetime, but that parenting should have closure. And since it is often so hard for parents to take that final step of letting go (even though the entire parenting process has been one of letting go), and since children often find it hard to leave, this transition is a critically important one.

We liken it to finding one's distance from a campfire. Sit too close and the heat causes sweat and discomfort; sit too far away and the cold causes chilling and distance. In our premarital counselling sessions, Cathy and I ideally like to schedule the final one before the wedding with six people, meaning both sets of parents are asked to come. We then ask the bride and groom-to-be their preferred distance from the fire, and ask for parental response. This can set a tone for expectations after the wedding.

A common practice in Africa, especially now that there are so many two-career couples, is for the groom's parents to come privately to him, and for the bride's parents to come privately to her, asking for financial assistance.

The Mhlangas, who share the cover of this manual with us, came up with a proactive solution. Godfrey and Sibongile said to both sets of parents separately, “After the wedding, we are one as husband and wife. And that will be our primary relationship. If you want or need support from us, in any way, do come to us, and we will let you know the next day if and how we can help.”

Also in many parts of Africa, the initially good practice of lobola or bride price has deteriorated into a prickly issue. The demand for payment in cattle or cash or who knows what else, on the part of the girl’s parents, has often led to an unhappy choice. Should the couple postpone the wedding, creating unnecessary sexual pressure, or should they enter married life with heavy financial obligations?

Dr Moshe Rajuili, Principal of Union Bible Institute in KwaZulu-Natal and a good friend, has suggested better ways to cope in his doctoral thesis on lobola. He suggests ongoing conversations between the young couple and their parents, and the church’s stepping in with financial support if agreement can not be reached. When his oldest daughter got married in Cape Town, both sets of parents exchanged meaningful gifts.

Parents, do not stretch the rubber band to breaking point, but cut it. Give your son or daughter space and freedom to come home. Keep your hearts and your home open to your child’s visit, unless he or she is coming with a suitcase intending to stay...

And for the young couple, do not live with your parents. God did not design a kitchen for two women. A common African proverb is right: “Live in a place where you cannot see the smoke from your mother-in-law’s village.” But then do agree on the frequency and the length of your visits home, learn about the past that shaped you, and use your four parents as consultants and advisors! Imagine the effect on a father if his son-in-law said to him, “You have known your daughter far longer than I have. What are some ways that I can make her happy?”

Solomon’s hard call to leaving is then swallowed up by his heart-felt call to loving... “I am not really alive without you,” he says, “because you’ve got my heart.” She has his heart and his full attention. The closeness increases. What he sees in the first seven verses now gives way to what he smells and tastes. He affirms her lovemaking as delightful, comments on her fragrance twice, and has apparently discovered the art of French-kissing long before the French. (“...milk and honey are under your tongue...”)

Lebanon serves as the bookends in this little passage. Even as he had called her away from living in or leaning on her past, he now learns from the past as he praises the aroma of her country.

The reference to milk and honey makes me wonder just a bit and wander into the grey area of interpreting Scripture. Solomon was king over a land promised to his ancestors as a land “flowing with milk and honey”. And now he is about to claim the promise of a bride who wants to provide experiences for him both nourishing and sweet...

III. RESOURCES

The questionnaires provided are courtesy of the Cunninghams, Family Impact leaders in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Enjoy Your Marriage**DISCOVERY**

	Couples, evaluate how fully you have experienced the leaving process	Yes, mostly	To some extent	Not really
A	We were successful in leaving our parents when we got married.			
B	Leaving family and other close relationships has been a harmonious process for us.			
C	Even though we may have problems from time to time in our marriage, we resist the temptation to run home to our parents.			
D	Both of us are free from manipulation or control by our parents.			
E	Neither of us has tried to force our spouse to be like one of our own parents.			
F	We have established our own residence away from our parents' home.			
G	We are not financially dependent upon either set of parents.			
H	While we may enjoy frequent talks or visits with our parents, our sense of emotional well-being does not depend on such communication.			

Project: Decide to Leave

Do either of both of you still evidence a failure to leave parents completely? Are there any other relationships or activities which you find hold a higher priority in your life than your spouse? Discuss the one or two situations that bring the greatest conflict in your marriage that are rooted in a failure to leave. Strategize how you will each deal with the most difficult situation. Role play how and what you will respectfully say to your parents when certain opportunities arise to demonstrate your commitment to make your marriage a higher priority than your relationship with anyone or anything else.

	Evaluate how you as a couple presently relate to both sets of parents.	Yes, mostly	To some extent	Not really
A	We show honour and respect to our parents, even when we may not feel they deserve it.			
B	We have learned to ask for wise counsel from our parents, but are free to exercise our own judgments in the actual decisions.			
C	Neither of us deliberately tears down our parents or in-laws to our spouse.			
D	We are independent of our parents' control and authority. We don't feel obligated to obey their every wish.			
E	We respectfully yet firmly choose which activities will be done with (or without) the in laws.			
F	We both accept the humanity of our parents and have chosen to forgive them for any wrongs done against us.			
G	We are united, not taking sides with our parents against each other.			
H	We enjoy a healthy, mature relationship with both sets of parents.			

Project: Ensure Healthy in-law Friendships

Most healthy relationships are built on respect. Enhance your relationship with your parents and your in-laws by tangibly honouring them. Creatively choose how you will express your love and appreciation – letter, framed picture, audiotape, scrapbook, meeting some of their needs, videotape, or some other creative means. Even if there are hurts in the past, focus on those things which are positive – happy memories, admirable character qualities, enduring family traditions, values, hobbies or skills they passed on, good advice they gave, etc. Present your “Tribute” in a special way and discover the blessing you get from blessing others.

IV. RESPONSE

How do you hope to improve and strengthen your relationship with your in-laws? This page is large enough to contain several ideas (for both of you, if married). If you are single, you can helpfully reflect on your relationship with your parents. Where are you in the leaving process?

Study Four

Fulfillment...the Wedding Night, Stage Three (4.12 - 5.1)

I. READY?

The Questions (for personal study, or group use)

1. Describe the media's overall portrayal of sex. To what extent are you affected by it?
2. How was sex in general, and marital sex in particular, spoken about and treated in your growing up family?
3. When and how and from whom did you learn about the "facts of life"? When and how would you like your child(ren) to be informed about this area of male-female relationships?
4. How does our passage today steer between being too clinical on one hand and too coarse on the other, avoiding both prudishness and permissiveness? What is your emotional response to these six verses?
5. What do "his" verses in 4.1-15 and "hers" in 4.16 suggest about roles in lovemaking? What caused her response, and why does it often seem missing in today's marriages?
6. Discuss the following, "You can give away your virginity only once, but you can offer your purity for a lifetime"?
7. How can the church in all its expressions address sexual issues more candidly and more helpfully?

The Quest (for more understanding)

1. Prepare a sketch (a short skit or a play) of two parents communicating the facts of life to their pre-teen in a very clumsy and ineffective way. Have the larger group evaluate.
2. Give a typical magazine to each cluster of three in your group, and ask them to determine the editor's view of sex.
3. Prepare a five-minute talk for an O-level or high school audience, "Why God designed male and female bodies differently, and designed them for sexual union".

II. REFLECTION

Many years ago a seminary friend and I toured Europe, North Africa and the Middle East for six months. In Marsa Matrouh, Egypt we attended an open-air movie, a pretty good Western. It was attended only by men, who were vocally involved with all the action on the screen, until... the “required” love scene. As two sets of lips started moving toward each other, the men started chatting amongst themselves, and then the scene faded as the camera pulled away. In less than ten seconds the hero was safely on his horse again.

Sex is wonderfully ambiguous, causing all kinds of reactions in us. If leaving is the public side of the wedding, and cleaving the personal, then the one flesh “weaving” is private (and yet in our magazines and billboards and small and large screens, is anything less private these days?) In our own situation our four children know that Mom and Dad “did it” at least four times, but still profess great disinterest and even pretended revulsion when their parents kiss too publicly...

But the sex issue must be addressed because in most surveys, expectations and adjustments in this area are among the top three causes of marital disharmony. And Scripture does address it, repeatedly in this Song.

Cathy and I propose three resources that could make the initial sexual experience a little easier and more enjoyable. Separate visits to a competent physician would ensure that all the necessary body parts of bride and groom are in “good working order.” Secondly, a visit alone or together to a godly and able counsellor could ensure that damaging or possibly traumatic sexual experiences in the past are not hindrances to enjoyable sex in the present. And thirdly, it would help for the couple during the last six months before the wedding to read and share impressions of a good book on sex, or even discuss it as a foursome with a trusted older couple.

Scripture holds out high hopes for the best. Song of Solomon 4.12-5.1 is one of the outstanding sex passages in all of world literature. It is a masterpiece!

Solomon pictures his bride as a virgin (“locked up...enclosed...sealed...”) and uses metaphors of a garden and the sources of water necessary to make it flourish. A garden in Genesis and a garden-filled city in Revelation are the bookends of Scripture (there are also rivers in both places, by the way). And in a surprising spot in the middle of history, another garden makes a brief appearance. Jesus says to the dying and believing thief at His side, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Paradise is the Persian word for garden, about as far removed from the agony of a cross that the thief could possibly imagine.

Solomon anticipates both the fragrant appeal of the garden’s flowers and spices to his nose, and the tasty appeal of its fruits to his tongue, and gently requests entry. He does not demand or force his way into the garden.

Oh, but his bride is ready! Her invitation in verse 16 is rather racy! She welcomes her lover into “his garden” (it now belongs to him) and picks up on both the fragrance and the fruit references in his appeal. His heart probably skips several beats.

And between this invitation to sexual union at the end of chapter four, and his rhapsody and reflection on that union in chapter five, sexual intercourse occurs in the silence. There is a time to stop talking.

The king’s wonderful thank you in 5.1 includes the first “I” pronoun and it occurs 13 times. It appears he is swept away by the experience. And for the third time on the

wedding night we have a passage enclosed by bookends: he has entered a garden in the closing verse that was locked in the initial verse.

Let's notice too that this very private activity is also designed for very public good. A spring, a fountain and a well bring refreshing water to a family, a community, and a nation, he says. (We were forcefully reminded of this on a March 2006 visit to Liberia. After 14 years of civil war, the capital city of Monrovia and its 1.5 million people were all served by one well!) And she hopes that the fragrance of their union will be "spread abroad". Amazingly, there just may be a link between healthy bedrooms and healthy throne rooms...

And that leaves the last couplet in 5.1, a puzzle for most commentators who mostly suggest the voices of friends, eavesdropping outside the wedding chamber. A much better explanation might be that this memorable wedding night concludes with the approval and excitement of God Himself!

The Father's Voice addresses them in the very last couplet with the two words they use to address one another: "friends (or darling)" and "lovers". And the dining picture seems to be a reminder that sexual union appeals to all five senses, and should perhaps be as common and frequent as a leisurely meal. Go on, says the voice, this will nourish you.

What clinches the divine voice for me in this couplet is that, were the song to be laid out line by line, not verse by verse, we would find 111 lines prior to this couplet, and 111 lines following it. I would suggest that this couplet is the centre or pivot of the entire Song and perhaps a hint that this union of married lovers on earth is a reflection of the Holy Spirit's communion with us from heaven. Some food for thought: is there a connection between marital intercourse and Pentecost...?

In other words, there should be three people in all Christian bedrooms. God is the discreetly applauding third party, standing in the shadows. He is at the centre of it all as His gift of marital sex is anticipated before the wedding, and celebrated after it. And, as is true in the celebration of leaving, cleaving, and "weaving" at the end of Genesis Two, a marriage is complete without children.

In fact, we would propose that the basic dynamics of healthy partnering and healthy parenting are almost exact opposites! A marriage starts when we extend our open arms toward a complete stranger, who slowly over time becomes a friend, a special friend, a fiancée, and a lifelong partner. Our arms continue to close in an embrace that increasingly wraps up one other person in a lifelong adventure stopped only by death.

Parenting is just the reverse. A helpless infant begins life inside its mother, and then graduates to her secure embrace. But within a year or so, she breaks free and learns to walk and talk on her own, and learns to feed herself. Slowly she makes her own choices and learns about their consequences. And then our arms extend wide after a couple decades or so, as we trust our training and learn to let our children go...

III. RESOURCES

The following books would be helpful, both before the wedding and well after it:

La Haye, Tim and Beverly. *The Act of Marriage*. Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 1976.

Penner, Cliff and Joy. *A Gift for All Ages*. Dallas: Word, 1986.

Wheat, Ed and Gaye. *Intended for Pleasure*. New York: Harper and Row, 1997.

Anything written by team authors Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker.

IV. RESPONSE

If you are single, what are you doing practically to stay pure, and who is holding you accountable? If you are married, how would you rate your sexual relationship on a scale of 1-10? Write down your expectations in this area of marriage, and what you are prepared to do to bring about improvement.



"Sometimes Greg encounters more truth than he can handle."

