

Keys to Real Love

Song of Solomon 4:1-7, 9; 5:10-16

Ravishing Love

Which of you women here long to hear a wonderful man say to you, “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you....You have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace?” (Song of Solomon 4:7, 9) And which of you men would melt at the sound of a beautiful woman saying, “My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand...His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable?” (Song of Solomon 5:10, 16a) Everyone wants to be loved, and most of us wish for romantic love with someone of the opposite sex. But judging by the titles on the covers of men’s and women’s magazines, there is a thirst for more than just any sort of love. We long for a powerful love that sweeps us off our feet, turns our world upside down, and thoroughly satisfies us. Men and women long for the ravishing love expressed so boldly in the least-read book of the Bible – the Song of Solomon.

But how can you find this love – this heart-stopping love that turns your world upside down? If the men’s and women’s magazines held the answer, don’t you think they would not need to publish new solutions every month? And think of your friends, or even your own experience. Isn’t the common experience that love is great while you have it, but love is fleeting and illusory? Isn’t love in fact the most frustrating and *unsatisfying* part of life for many of us? Is real love an illusion, a myth pursued only by poets and other dreamers?

And what should Christians do about love? Most Christian teaching on love is about the sacrificial love that Jesus displayed when He died for us on the cross. Most Christian teaching affirms marriage and agrees that affection is an important part of a healthy marriage. But Christians often seem to focus more on the negatives of erotic love. “Do not have sex before marriage, and do not enjoy it too much in marriage” seems to be the attitude of the church. So are we caving in to our sex-saturated culture by even having a message devoted unabashedly to romantic love?

Romantic Love is Normal

Love has been under attack for most of recorded history. It is such a powerful and volatile emotion, it causes a multitude of problems – from heartache to unwanted pregnancy to sexual sin to impaired professional performance. Have you seen the recent headlines about the jinx that came upon Tony Romo, Alex Rodriguez, and now Tom Brady after acquiring new lovers? People are saying that love has ruined the performance of these great athletes. Since love so easily leads to sin, the church has been skeptical or opposed to love for centuries. Saint Augustine was the most influential writer in this regard. He is famous for teaching that sex was permitted in marriage, but only for procreation – certainly not for pleasure. It is hard to deny that Augustine’s view was profoundly shaped by the first half of his life which he lived in sexual sin. For him Christianity provided a powerful liberation from enslavement to sex. Before Augustine, Origen found relief from sexual temptation by mutilating himself – a practice emphatically *not* endorsed by the church then or ever.

But the church and the world both have been terribly confused about love. Scripture presents love in the most positive light. Adam’s comment upon seeing Eve for the first time is an exclamation of delight. “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Genesis 2:23) God had brought all the animals to Adam to name, but none of them were a suitable helper for him. In woman Adam recognized a creature like him, but different – a person who produced romance in his heart. In the book of Proverbs marriage is viewed in more than utilitarian terms. Proverbs 12:4a says, “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband...” and Proverbs 18:22 says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.” Proverbs 31:10 reads “An excellent wife

who can find? She is far more precious than jewels,” and this chapter proceeds to extol the virtues of a good wife. Proverbs 5:18-19 views marriage in frankly romantic terms – “...rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.”

In the New Testament we find that “...woman is the glory of man.” (1 Corinthians 11:7b) In Ephesians 5:31-32 Paul quotes from Genesis and provides a new dimension to it. “‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” This concept of love between man and woman as a picture of the love between Jesus and the church finds its climax in Revelation 19.

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”– for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. (Revelation 19:6-8)

We could mention many other scriptures, but I will add only one more. Psalm 45 is a stunning celebration of romance.

- 1 My heart overflows with a pleasing theme;
I address my verses to the king; *
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.
- 2 You are the most handsome of the sons of men;
grace is poured upon your lips; *
therefore God has blessed you forever.
- 3 Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, *
in your splendor and majesty!
- 4 In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth
and meekness and righteousness; *
let your right hand teach you awesome deeds!
- 5 Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king’s enemies; *
the peoples fall under you.
- 6 Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. *
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
- 7 you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. *
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness
beyond your companions;
- 8 your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. *
From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;
- 9 daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; *
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.
- 10 Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: *
forget your people and your father’s house,
11 and the king will desire your beauty. *
Since he is your LORD, bow to him.
- 12 The people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts, *
the richest of the people.
- 13 All glorious is the princess in her chamber, *
with robes interwoven with gold.

- 14 In many-colored robes she is led to the king, *
with her virgin companions following behind her.
- 15 With joy and gladness they are led along *
as they enter the palace of the king.
- 16 In place of your fathers shall be your sons; *
you will make them princes in all the earth.
- 17 I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations; *
therefore nations will praise you forever and ever.

God views love as a wonderful thing that He wishes for all people. This is connected with God's purpose in creating man. In Genesis we find,

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:27-28)

God's will for us is that we fall in love, marry, have children, and be intoxicated with love all our lives. Marriage and love is the biblical norm for the human race. God expects this, and God delights in our love for each other.

Singleness is For a Few

Now there have always been those who object to this view. I already mentioned Saint Augustine, but he has had many disciples over the years. Every generation of college students has a chapter of the BTR Club (Bachelors til the Rapture), and Protestants as well as Catholics and Orthodox find reasons to exalt singleness. Scripture presents a positive view of the single life, but with only under three conditions. First, you should remain single until you are ready for marriage. That means you must be mature enough to handle the challenges of married life, ready to have children, and the man must be able to support a family. Most of you in this room do not meet these qualifications, so you are called to be single for the next few years of your life. Most of you *will* meet these criteria within a few years, so marriage is a strong possibility for you at that time.

The second reason to remain single is a calling to extraordinarily difficult or dangerous work. This is the situation Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 7, a badly misunderstood chapter of the Bible. People (guys mainly) are always quoting verse 38 to prove that singleness is the best condition in life. "So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better." (1 Corinthians 7:38) But this is to yank the verse out of context. The first half of 1 Corinthians 7 is about how husbands and wives should relate sexually to each other. The second half is about how a man treats his betrothed. That section begins in verse 26. There Paul says, "I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is." Paul is addressing a stressful situation. This is not normal life. Paul knew, either by observation or by prophetic insight, that severe persecution was coming upon the Corinthian church. In verses 29-30 he says, "This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short... For the present form of this world is passing away." (1 Corinthians 7:29a, 31b) In a short time life was going to become drastically different for believers.

The basic idea behind this passage is that the fundamental role of a man is to protect his wife. Adam was told to guard and cultivate the garden of Eden, and that included his wife. Paul picks up this idea in Ephesians 5.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might

sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. (Ephesians 5:25-28)

Just as Jesus died to save His bride, the church, so a man is to die to save his wife – if it comes to that. But there are some situations in which a man practically cannot protect his wife. I know that there are no guarantees in life and you could die of an accident going home tonight. But accidents are one thing and the line of fire is another. Today a man has no business taking his wife into Darfur or the villages of southern Afghanistan. People are killing each other all the time there. A man cannot hope to protect his wife in these places, and it would be sinful to take her there. But there is much work in these dangerous places, and someone must go. Doctors, engineers, missionaries, and others are desperately needed. These are jobs for single men. God will call some men to play a vital role in bringing peace to these places. These are the sort of distressing situations Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 7.

The third reason you might remain single is a special calling. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew's gospel.

But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." (Matthew 19:11-12)

A eunuch is a sexually impotent man. Jesus is saying some men are born sexually impotent (a small number). Other men were castrated to serve in a harem or some other sensitive royal position. Other men are physically normal, but voluntarily forego sexual relations for the sake of God's Kingdom. Notice that Jesus began by stating that these are not roles you choose for yourself. The person who remains celibate for life has a special gift from God that enables him to live that way. This is something that will become evident as you go through life. It is not at all a commitment you can make as a young man or woman. This means that although monasteries have many virtues, a vow of celibacy is absolutely wrong.

Keys to Ravishing Love

Now that we have cleared away the underbrush of false ideas and established that God really does want us to experience intense love, how can we find this wonderful thing? How can you get past frustrating relationships to find the ravishing love spoken of in the Bible? There are any number of secrets to better love, but five are central.

First, you must be married. Now I know that millions of people love each other even though they are not married. I know that most people, at least in this culture, fall in love before they get married. And I know that marriage is not a guarantee of real love. True, you can fall in love, you can have sex, you can enjoy another person outside of marriage. But you cannot experience that deep, amazing, enduring love that Solomon wrote of unless you are married. The issue here is not that you are breaking God's law by having sex outside of marriage (although you are, and that is a big problem in its own right). The issue is that ravishing love cannot survive in such an environment. People are complex and this world is complex. We go through a tangle of thoughts and emotions as life tosses us about. Love cannot survive such tumult unless it is anchored to something firm, a commitment that never changes. Your job may change, your health may change, your friends may change. The things that shape your life now may be gone ten years from now. In many ways you will be a different person in a decade. Love will not survive unscathed unless it is tethered to something that will never change – and that is a marriage vow. Marriage does not guarantee a wonderful love life, but it is the necessary condition for true love to flourish and endure.

Are you in love now? Does he or she set your heart spinning? Is life impossible to imagine without him or her? Whatever feelings you have now are only the beginning of a deep love that awaits you when you are married. But if you jump the gun and start to act married now, you will ruin your love. Love cannot flourish outside the protection of marriage. If you begin to live as though you are married, by spending all your free time together, by opening up to each other emotionally, by sharing your stuff, by having sex, your love will eventually wither. After a while you will get frustrated with the person you cannot now live without. Frustration will lead to boredom or anger or both. And one day you will realize you do not really love this person anymore. Love outside of marriage eventually dies. The way to experience exciting love is to wait until you are ready for marriage before getting close to someone of the opposite sex.

The second key to fantastic love is character. It does not take anything more than normal hormones to fall in love with a charming member of the opposite sex. God made us that way. This will happen to all of you because you are fully functional human beings. But ravishing love only arises over time in marriage, and that exposes you to all the difficulties of life. As we said, you will eventually get frustrated or bored or angry with the one you love. If you are immature, you will respond by lashing out in anger, or withdrawing, or manipulating, or any number of destructive behaviors. Only if you have developed strong Christian character can your love grow deeper. Patience is required. Your lover will be irritable at times because of a problem she is facing. You can blame her, or you can be patient until the problem passes. Understanding is necessary. He may annoy you by refusing to ask for directions when he is lost. Understand that finding his own way is a welcome challenge for him. We have looked briefly at Ephesians 5 which explains the relationship between husbands and wives. The preceding chapter is all about Christian character. It and similar passages in the New Testament are a goldmine of information about the sort of character that produces true love. Ephesians 4:31-32 is a good sample. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

The third key to amazing love is self-sacrifice. This really is a subset of character, but it is so important I am considering it separately. When character is fully formed it will be known by the other type of love spoken of in the Bible – agape love. This is the self-sacrificing love exhibited by Jesus, who is our example. In Philippians 2:5-8 we read

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus was the most marvelous man ever to walk the face of the earth. He was God. He deserved for all men to worship and serve Him. The only right way to treat Jesus was to leave everything and devote oneself to serving Him day and night. But Jesus did not exercise His divine rights. He came as a poor carpenter. And although we should have served Him, He served us instead. When a man humbly serves his wife and a woman humbly serves her husband, ravishing love flourishes in that home.

Perhaps there is nowhere that requires more self-sacrifice than in fulfilling the roles specified for husband and wife. Nothing galls the contemporary mind more than the idea that men and women must play different roles in the home. But God is firm on this point, and it is the fourth key to the growth of wonderful love between a man and a woman. This is not the place to give a full treatment of this topic, but we will simply note that this passage in Ephesians makes clear that a man is the head of his home, and a woman must submit to him. This means all it appears to mean. The man is in charge. The woman does not have an equal vote. Her role is to follow her man. But Paul also makes clear that the purpose of man's leadership is the good of his wife. As a man makes decisions about spending his money, the use of his time, and all other

issues that face us – he must always place his wife’s good before his own. Now that does not mean that she will agree or enjoy his decisions, but it must be his motive. A woman then must respect her husband as the head of this house. He will make mistakes. Sometimes he will misjudge things, and other times he will sin. He should always listen to his wife and discuss things with her. But even when he fails, the woman’s role is to follow and respect him. The exception is if he abandons the faith, is unfaithful, or engages in physical abuse. When a man leads his household and a woman follows her husband, a rich love develops between them.

The fifth key to ravishing love between a man and a woman is making love the second priority in life. Your first priority in life is love for God. The third and following will be love for children and vocation and friends. We live at a time when love between husbands and wives is crippled by competing loves for children and vocations. Women are particularly susceptible to placing the needs of her children above her love for her husband. This is foolish and destructive. The best way to love her children is to make her husband her top priority. Both men and women have trouble keeping careers in proper priority. It is necessary, of course, to be faithful to your employer – if for no other reason than that God requires it. Scripture is also clear that a man must provide for his family. So a man must have a solid career and be faithful to it. But he must not pursue his career in such a way that it compromises his family. I faced such a decision when I was in seminary. I went to Westminster Seminary, which is more academically oriented than some. About halfway through the thought came to me that I, like some of my classmates, could pursue a Ph.D. after I got my masters degree. It would certainly enhance my career. It would be useful. But I realized that at that stage in life, with five children at home, it would have been wrong to take that route.

This is a difficult issue for you, because you are spending some of the best years of your life preparing for a career. It would seem a waste not to make the most of your education. Everything about Lehigh whispers in your ear that your value is determined by your career. And our culture tells you that you can have it all. You can have a great marriage, a loving family, and rocket up the career path. But you cannot. It is a lie. You have to choose. And if your career is your top choice, you will not have a great marriage or a loving family. That is why divorce is so rampant in our culture. And if there are two careers competing for first place, you will not have the ravishing love we read about.

Now: Prepare for Marriage

There is so much we could say, but we must conclude with a few immediate applications. Some of you may be in a position to pursue marriage now. To you I say, go for it! It is God’s will for you to seek a husband or wife, so do not hesitate to look. Remember to limit your looking to others who are faithful Christians. To all of you I offer three applications. First, seek to become a man or woman of godly character. Ask God to make you like Jesus. Seek opportunities to serve others. Practice humility. Learn patience with others. Look for opportunities to serve people who do not deserve to be served. Devote yourself to loving all sorts of people, not just your friends.

Second, learn about the opposite sex. Men and women are different in some ways. You need to know how we are different if you are going to love each other. Third, make friends of the opposite sex. Do this without seeking romance or a mate. This is the context in which you may learn about each other, and may find a mate when it comes time to do so. RUF is an ideal place to do this. Participate in a Bible study where you can have discussions with men and women. Help with the service projects. Go on our retreats and social events. Join these activities looking for opportunities to understand and serve others. But do not pursue romance until you are ready to be married.

It is possible to “rejoice in the wife of your youth,” to “let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; [and] be intoxicated always in her love.” Not only is it possible, this is God’s will for most of us. But it can happen only if we are in tune with God’s will and obey His commands. God’s command is to

believe in Jesus, for only by believing in Jesus can you live the life we described here tonight. If you are not trusting Jesus with your life, I call you to begin tonight. Give up your own plans and let Jesus rule your life. If you have believed in Jesus, faith is the key to all we have said. May God bless you with a rich and satisfying love – love like the love of Jesus for His church.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
February 12, 2008