

# Solomon's Line on Premarital Sex

The first time I read the Song of Songs in the Bible I thought, *No. Way.* / by John C. Thomas

The first time I read the Song of Songs in the Bible I thought, *No. Way.* I immediately grabbed a friend's Bible to see if his featured the same book. "Dude, have you read this?! This is unbelievable!"

"What? What is it?"

"Clusters, man! They're talking about climbing palm trees and taking hold of clusters! IN THE BIBLE! It's right here!" I was a teen Christian with active hormones and my grandmother's prayers were finally being answered because I suddenly developed an intense hunger for the Word. Hallelujah!

Over time, of course, I realized that the relationship described in Solomon's Song, including those face-blushing palm tree and cluster verses, occurred within a specific context. In the midst of beautiful, poetic language about the stages of a relationship that start with a glance and eventually lead to the honeymoon, the author charges us three times, "Do not arouse or awaken love until it pleases," or, as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, "Don't excite love, don't stir it up, until the time is ripe — and you're ready."

I often point to this book when people, usually young singles, ask me about relationships and pre-marital sex. They want to know, where, exactly, does the Bible talk about pre- or extra-marital sex, when neither partner is married. They know about the adultery prohibitions, and they agree — you shouldn't have sex with someone who is someone else's spouse. But where does it talk about not having sex if there is no spouse involved? You have two consenting adults, and neither has made any vow to any other person, so it's not *technically* adultery. What's wrong with that? Does the Bible speak to those situations?

I like to start with Solomon's Song, because it celebrates the whole package of the relationship — initial attraction, exciting emotions, longing, and sexual intimacy — and it connects all of this to the proper context or timing, when "it pleases," a timing that is marked by public approval of the relationship, highlighted by a wedding (chapter 3). *The whole relationship, including the celebration of the sexual aspects, takes place within the context of community approval — no, more than approval — rejoicing.*

I ask these young, unmarried singles does the community — your friends, family, church — celebrate your private, sexual liaisons? When it appears that a pregnancy might result, is there rejoicing? No, of course not. Why not? The timing is wrong. The context is wrong. A private affair is being forced out into the public and is clouded by shame. You've "aroused love before its time." There will be pain, disappointment and sadness. Compare that to the tone of Solomon's Song. The couples' sexual life in the Song of Solomon takes place within the context of a lifelong commitment of marriage, and the community rejoices. It will produce grandbabies, nieces, nephews, more members of the little platoon of the family. The couples' sex life is ultimately a social benefit. That, I say to my young single friends, is a picture of sex in the proper context.

Keep in mind, I say, that in biblical times there just wasn't a whole lot of sex taking place *before* marriage, since people married at such young ages, and there just wasn't much time between reaching the age of sexual maturity and marriage. Most of the sex taking place was *after* marriage, either with your spouse, which was good, or not with your spouse, which was prohibited, and that's why there's more talk about adultery than pre-marital sex. We wrestle with this issue more now because the time span between reaching the age of sexual maturity and marriage has bumped up a decade or two since biblical times.

I also add that we probably wouldn't even be having this conversation were it not for birth control, especially the "pill," and if abortions were not so easy to obtain. Without birth control and abortion, sex would mean a greater likelihood of raising babies, and raising babies would mean commitment, and commitment would mean marriage. That's life in biblical times, so the question itself didn't get much discussion in a world where sex and babies went together much more than they do in our time.

Then I mention Hebrews 13:4, where the author distinguishes two types of sex that are prohibited. The first, *moichos*, refers to a married person having sex with someone other than his or her spouse and is generally translated *adultery*.

The second, *porneia*, in this case refers to any other unmarried sex, usually translated *fornication or sexual immorality*.

Anything else? They say.

How about Ephesians 5:1-3, where we are instructed to have not even a *hint* of sexual immorality (*porneia*), or any kind of impurity in or lives. Do you think pre-marital sex might be at least a hint of sexual immorality? I ask.

Maybe, they say. What else do you have?

Well, I say, there is 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, which, among other things, tells us to flee sexual immorality (*porneia*) because the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and we are to honor God with our body.

What else? They say.

Well, I say, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 says to avoid sexual immorality (*porneia*) and learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable to the Lord, not in passionate lust, like the heathen, who do not know God.

Sure, but what else? They say.

What you really want, I say, is a Scripture that goes something like, *if Jack and Jill are not married to anyone nor to each other, and not engaged to anyone nor to each other, and have sex with each other, that's wrong, and that they should either stop having sex or get married.*

Um, they say, that's in the Bible?

Well, that's my paraphrase, I say. Then I point them to Exodus 22:16-17, a very interesting "case law" scripture in the Old Testament. By "case law," I mean one of those "If ... then ..." commands that provides some underlying principles applicable beyond the example used. For instance, when Scripture says in Exodus 23:4, "if you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, then take it back to him" the application extends beyond oxen and donkeys, to dogs, children, bicycles, credit cards, etc.

Exodus 22:16-17 gives instruction on what to do if an unmarried, unengaged man has consensual sex with an unmarried, unengaged woman: "If a man seduces (implies consent) a virgin (or a woman of marriageable age) who is not pledged to be married, and sleeps with her, *he must pay the bride-price (or marriage present) and she shall be his wife.*" Most scholars believe the same prohibition is found in Deuteronomy 22:28-29, "If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered ... *he must marry the girl....*" Most scholars believe that "rape" is not being addressed here, but consensual pre-marital sex (albeit the man's strong initiation), especially given the phrase "and they are discovered."

These might be the clearest disapproval of sex for singles in Scripture. The message couldn't be more obvious: Whether you're engaged or not, don't have sex outside of marriage. Period. If you're unmarried and having sex, legitimize it and get married to the person with whom you are having sex — get the piece of paper and go public.

It's your choice, I say. *Public or private; Song of Solomon or hiding in the shadows. God's way or your way.*

These singles often come to me hoping to find a loophole, and a few leave frustrated and disappointed. Some, though, leave with strengthened resolve, and for the first time have a vision of love and sex in the right context — a vision of poetry and celebration.

I pray for the disappointed ones, for them to embrace God's vision for their sex lives. I rejoice over the ones with new vision, because I know they will soon discover what really good sex is all about.

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