

*Conflict and Resolution: Song of Solomon 5:2 – 8:4*  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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Last week in Song of Solomon we saw the wedding and wedding night. This week, reality sets in and there is evidence of conflict between this couple. So this morning we're going to talk about conflict in marriage. This is a difficult thing. On the bright side, we'll also see the resolution of their conflict.

If you're married, it's inevitable that there's going to be conflict between you and your spouse. In any relationship you have with another human being, there can be conflict. But especially in the most intimate of relationships, you can count on it. When there's a man and a woman, who each have certain ideas and passions and interests in their lives, and then you add to the mix that each is a sinner, that's a recipe for conflict. When that man and woman come together as one flesh and are supposed to share everything with one another, and yet there's pride and selfishness on the part of each of them, there's going to be some clashes.

Some of the fiercest and most painful conflicts of our lives will happen with those whom we love the most. With family members, with close friends, conflict is all the more intense because we care so much about these individuals. We want them to agree with us and see things our way. We have expectations of how this person's life is going to meet my needs. So if that person doesn't live up to those expectations, if that person doesn't do what I want them to do, or think the way I want them to think, or if that person criticizes me rather than compliments me, then there's going to be some hurt feelings. And because of our pride and selfishness, those things can blow up into a fight that threatens to divide the relationship. These things apply in all kinds of relationships. But it's especially evident in marriage. A husband and wife have joined their lives together. They are one. Therefore the stakes are higher. There's a greater need to have agreement on all kinds of issues. And when there's serious disagreement, the effects can be devastating.

Now, there *are* couples who don't have conflict. Dead couples don't have any conflict. But there's also married couples who have basically separated their lives from one another to such a degree that they just kind of live parallel lives.<sup>1</sup> They may live in the same house, they may both be involved in the lives of their children to some extent, but they don't have much of a relationship with one another. She does her thing. He does his thing. And there's very little conflict, because they don't really care about

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<sup>1</sup> Tommy Nelson made these points in one of his sermons on Song of Solomon.

each other. He doesn't care what she does, as long as she knows not to interfere with him. And she doesn't care what he does, as long as he doesn't interfere with her. That can hardly be called a marriage, but there are certainly couples like that.

Another kind of marriage where there may be little conflict is in a marriage where one spouse is so dominant and has basically beat the other spouse into absolute submission. Maybe it's a husband who is verbally abusive, or physically abusive, and the wife is so scared of him that she will never question anything he says. It can go the other way, too. Maybe it's a wife who is so controlling and manipulative that she makes her husband feel like an imbecile and therefore can treat him like a child. He becomes so passive that he will do whatever she tells him to. He just wants to avoid the humiliating experience of being scolded by her.

So there may be marriages where there is very little conflict, but as you can see, just because there's not much conflict doesn't mean it's a good marriage. In the situations I just described, the lack of conflict is connected with lack of relational intimacy. What we should be striving for in our marriages is a deep level of relational intimacy along with the ability to work through conflicts in a constructive way. Deep relational intimacy will bring out all kinds of conflicts. Because you're sharing your lives with one another. You have committed yourselves to one another for life. You're making love to one another, which binds you together physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Your finances are shared. Your belongings are shared. You bear children together. You make decisions about time, money, childrearing, where to live, where to go to church. And so the togetherness of the marriage causes you to wrestle through all kinds of differences of opinion.

What car will we buy? What will we do this weekend? How often will we make love? When are we going to visit your family? When will we visit my family? What are we going to do for the kids' schooling? Where are we going to live? What color are we going to paint the walls? What movie are we going to watch? If a couple doesn't learn how to talk through these kinds of decisions, they'll be fighting absolutely all of the time.

I was thinking back to my college days and remembering that my roommate and I had very little conflict. We were really good friends (still are). Stacy and I even named our son after him. But the nature of my friendship with Noah is very different than my marriage to Stacy. Noah and I were roommates for all 4 years of college. We got to know each other pretty well. But, still, he did his thing. I did my thing. His schedule didn't revolve around me. My schedule didn't revolve around him. He had his money. I

had my money. He was making plans for his future. I was making plans for my future.

A funny thing happened one time our senior year. Noah had been dating Becky, who is now his wife. And they had been spending a lot of time together, going out on different dates. And Noah had been doing a good job pursuing her, treating her like a queen, being courteous and opening doors for her. And then one evening Noah and I were going somewhere to get a bite to eat, and we walked out to the parking lot to Noah's car and without thinking about it Noah walked to the passenger side door and opened it for me. Then he walked around to the driver's side and got in. I sat down (a little confused), and then I looked at him and said, "Don't ever do that again!" Then he realized what he had done, and we both got a good laugh.

Noah and I hardly ever had serious conflicts. I'm sure we got on each others nerves sometimes. I'm sure we got a little short with each other from time to time. But even in a close friendship like that, it's worlds apart from the kind of relationship you have with your spouse. There's a lot more at stake. There's a lot more invested. The intimacy of a marriage relationship is far greater than any other relationship, and because of that intimacy the conflicts can be far more intense.

### **Conflict (Song of Solomon 5:2-8)**

Let's look at the conflict in Song of Solomon chapter 5. God's Word gives us a beautiful picture of marital love, but it's also a realistic picture. This is real marriage. If you're a single person, and you hope to be married at some point in the future, you need to have a realistic picture of what marriage is like. On the one hand, I hope you won't despise marriage just because you've seen so many horrible marriages. On the other hand, though, I also don't want you to think that if you get married it will fix all your problems and make you the happiest person on the planet and there will never be any difficulties. Marriage is hard. Marriage is sanctifying. Marriage will show you your selfishness and force you to deal with it. By God's grace, marriage will prompt you to repent of your selfishness and your pride and will cause you to be more kind and loving and humble.

The particular conflict that's described in chapter 5 is a conflict in the bedroom. It seems that this is a dream that she's having. There was a dream in chapter 3 as well, and there are some similarities with these verses. But whether some or all of this is describing actual events, or if some or parts of it are a dream or nightmare, the point that comes across in the song is that there is tension in the relationship. There is conflict between this newly married couple.

Assuming this is a dream, it's a very bad dream. It's far worse than the earlier dream, in which she lost her beloved. In this dream she is also beaten by the night watchmen. She associates very bad things with the conflict she is having with her husband. Notice the specifics of what prompts this conflict between them. In verse 2, he is knocking on the door, asking her to let him in. Now, I don't know why she is in the bedroom and he is locked out.

I certainly think it's good to have a lock on the bedroom door. But that's to keep the kids out, not to keep the husband out! There *are* double entendres going on here, so there are multiple levels of meaning. The point of contention is that she is refusing him in the bedroom. He is making sexual advances. She is shutting him down.

Do see how this is happening? The second part of verse 2 is the husband speaking. He's being very affectionate, very loving with his words. "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one." What do you think he wants? . . . Exactly! Now, why is his head wet with dew and his locks with the drops of the night? It's because it's the middle of the night. He's been out so late that the dew has drenched his hair. He has been away. Maybe he was at the office. Maybe he was at a ball game with his buddies. It doesn't say. But the point is, he was out very late without his wife. And now he comes home, wakes her up, and wants to be intimate. Maybe this had become a pattern for him. Maybe that's why she's having this bad dream about it.

This is the insensitivity of the husband. If a husband consistently neglects his wife, if he's away from her, if he doesn't make time for her, if he doesn't listen to her, if he doesn't do nice things for her or say nice things to her, and then all of a sudden in the middle of the night he says, "Hey baby, sweetie pie, beautiful, my love, my perfect one . . ." and wants to be intimate, that's probably not going to work very well. Even if the wife feels like she needs to be submissive and accommodate her husband in this way, it's not going to foster long-term romance.

In the situation being described here for us, she gives him the cold shoulder. And this sounds pretty cruel, too. She's basically saying, I'm undressed in bed, but I'm not going to let you in. "I had put off my garment; how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them?" In the Hebrew that means, "I have a headache," or "I'm exhausted." She's saying, I'm already comfortable in bed. I don't want to put on my bathrobe to come to the door. I don't want to get my feet dirty again. Sorry, buddy, you're out of luck tonight.

This is the conflict between the newlyweds. He's insensitive. She turns him down. And then he leaves. In verse 5 she finally does get up, but in verse 6 she finds that he has already

left. This is the distance that conflict can create in a relationship. Now, in this sermon I'm generalizing this passage and applying it to all kinds of conflict in marriage. I'm not limiting the scope of this sermon to conflict in the bedroom. But I also want to say that whenever there's any kind of conflict in the marriage it will affect how things go in the bedroom. And it also seems to be true that if things are going well in the bedroom, then things are probably also going well in other areas of the marriage. The level of romance and intimacy in a marriage is therefore a pretty good indicator of how the marriage is doing as a whole. And that's a reason to work on romance in your marriage, and to save time and energy for regular times of intimacy. Stacy and I have heard it said that physical intimacy is like the lubricant in the gears of a marriage relationship. If the romance dies down, if lovemaking becomes infrequent, then there's going to be more and more friction. But as you pursue romance and intimacy, you're reminded that you're lovers, and that makes the conflicts easier to deal with. It doesn't mean conflicts go away, though.

It's interesting in the flow of this song, that the description of conflict comes immediately after such a wonderful description of their wedding night. It certainly seems kind of abrupt, but I think that's part of what makes it so real. This is what marriage is like. There can be tremendous enjoyment, and then tremendous pain. There can be passionate love expressed toward one another, and then hurtful words and actions that create barriers between you.

I was thinking back to our wedding and honeymoon and early years of marriage. As we planned our honeymoon we got some raised eyebrows about where we decided to go. We decided to go to New Orleans. Yeah, we had a really beautiful wedding, a Gospel-centered, worshipful wedding. And then the next day we got on a plane and flew to the city of sin. The reason we chose New Orleans was because we couldn't get tickets to Las Vegas (just kidding). The real reason was that we got married in Michigan in December, and we wanted to go somewhere a little warmer. And the cheapest place we could find was New Orleans. On our flight we were sitting next to a lady who was our age who was from New Orleans. And we struck up a conversation with her. I was sitting in the aisle seat, Stacy was in the middle, and then this woman was next to the window. And as we talked, Stacy began to share her testimony and share the Gospel with her. And then toward the end of the flight this lady said to us, "I don't understand it. If you guys are Christians and believe all this stuff, then why did you come to New Orleans for your honeymoon?"

We ended up having a great time. We ate a lot of really good food, and mainly just enjoyed being together. Unfortunately,

though, the honeymoon doesn't last forever. You get back to real life, with the pressures of various responsibilities, and conflicts present themselves.

Probably the toughest year of our marriage was the year that Milaina was born—our first child. Stacy had been a teacher in the public schools, and that's how we had been paying the bills while I was in my masters program at the seminary. When we found out that we were expecting a child, we started making plans for Stacy to quit work, and I started looking for a job that could pay the bills. I was also making plans to start a Ph.D. program, so we had a lot of transition in that one year. Milaina was born in March, I graduated with my masters in May. A couple weeks later I was hired as Minister of Students at a church about an hour away from the seminary. That summer we moved out of the seminary community and bought a house closer to that church. And then in August I started my Ph.D. classes. In the midst of all this, Stacy had left her full-time job, and had left her great network of friends at the seminary, and she was now all by herself at home with a baby. And I was gone a whole lot, because I was trying to juggle church activities and grad school requirements. It turned out the day I was supposed to have off from my church responsibilities was a day I had to spend a long day at the seminary. So I was basically never home to spend time with Stacy and Milaina.

Stacy and I both remember vividly the evening I was on my way out to yet another meeting, and as I was pulling the car out of the garage, she opened the door and yelled to me, "Our marriage stinks!"

Needless to say, that was a wakeup call for me. That was very clear communication. I'm sure she had said other things to me expressing her feelings about how things were going, but that particular comment really got my attention. I don't think I had realized the toll that all of this was taking on my wife. In the months that followed, I figured out ways to get my schedule under control. I had to realize that I couldn't meet everyone's expectations. As much as I wanted everyone at the church to like me, and as much as I wanted the professors at the seminary to think I was a great student, I had to realize that my marriage is much more important.

Conflict and communication in marriage are difficult. But it has to happen, and often a lot of good can come out of difficult conflicts. There will need to be some hard conversations, but it's worth it to pursue greater intimacy in your relationship.

I'm reminded again and again that I need the cross. I wish I could say that Stacy and I only had conflicts early in our marriage, and now we have everything figured out. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Just a couple weeks ago, Stacy and I had a

little spat about something stupid. I don't even remember exactly what it was, it was so trivial. We were standing in the basement. Stacy was putting a load of laundry in. I was about to walk out into the garage for something. We were both feeling stressed by the events of the day, and there was a sharp exchange of words. And I abruptly turned my back while Stacy was in the middle of a sentence, and I walked out the door into the garage and slammed the door behind me. I immediately felt like an idiot. About 30 seconds later I walked back in, apologized, and we embraced.

Stacy gives me a lot of grace, and I'm so thankful for her forgiveness. We've grown a lot over the years. We still have a lot of room for improvement, obviously. But we've come a long way, by God's grace. I feel so badly when I mess up—when I'm impatient, or unloving, or insensitive, or selfish, or when I don't communicate well. But I'm so glad that God has given me a wife who forgives me. And I forgive her. And we work through our problems. We confess our sin to one another and pray for each other. We are both looking to the cross, and therefore we have grace to give. We've received so much grace, and we recognized that, so we can also offer grace to one another. That's Christian marriage. Not 2 people who are sinless (that doesn't exist in this life)—but 2 sinners who are forgiven and who forgive.

And that's why conflict can always be redemptive and edifying in Christian marriage. It's inevitable that conflicts will arise. Like I said before, unless you're dead, or unless you're totally separated emotionally, or one spouse is so dominant as to make the other a doormat—unless you're in one of those situations, conflicts are going to come up, and probably regularly. When there are two people who are creative and ambitious and passionate, there's going to be some differences of opinion. And then you add to that the fact that both of these individuals are sinners, and there's the potential for those conflicts to be very destructive. But because of the Gospel, any and all marital conflict can be redemptive. It can actually strengthen and deepen your marriage.

So the next time you and your spouse disagree on something, and you see that the disagreement could get nasty, and you wish that you could have a spouse who never disagreed with you—remind yourself that conflict is redemptive, it's strengthening, it's actually a helpful means of growing your marriage in the Gospel. I like the way that Gary and Betsy Ricucci put it in their book *Love That Lasts*. They encourage us to think of conflicts as “spiritual pop quizzes from God.” “Because God is sovereign and ever at work for our good and our growth in godliness, conflict can always be redemptive. The storms of conflict actually test how we're building our marriages. . . .

Because of God’s particular love for us, conflict resolution is not just a means to a narrow, particular end. It is an opportunity to grow in sanctification, to glorify God more completely, and to build trust and deepen love at the heart of the marriage.” (pages 104-105)

So the next time you’re in a conflict with your spouse, think of it as an opportunity to grow in love for your spouse, an opportunity to examine your own heart. Observe that when the conflict explodes into a destructive fire, it’s your own selfishness and pride that’s fueling the flames. We may often pray for God to sanctify us, but then we often refuse to submit to His means of sanctification. View marital conflict as a means of sanctification, and humble yourself to learn the lessons God wants to teach you. Repent of sin, and look to the cross. Rejoice in the grace that Jesus purchased for us there, and then be one who extends that grace to your spouse and to others.

### **Resolution**

In the passages that follow, in chapters 5-7 (which we will not look at in any detail, due to time), we see that there is resolution to this conflict, and we see that their relationship deepens. The conflict caused division and separation. But then they come together again and speak at length about their admiration for each other.

Notice in chapter 5 that the woman quickly has a change of heart. She has refused her husband, but she then goes after him. He has gone, but she pursues him. And she even asks for others to help her find him, in verse 8. And then they ask her a question in verse 9, “What is your beloved more than another beloved . . .” And she answers them at length.

I want to make two very general observations—one about the wife, and one about the husband. And both of these will go a long way in resolving conflict and deepening your marriage. First of all, notice that this wife says some really nice things about her husband, and she says these things to other people. Of course, this is a song, so it’s not like this is an actual conversation that’s being recorded for us here. But I think the principle is still there. Others are saying, What’s so great about your man? Which, by the way, would be a good way for women to counsel a woman who is struggling in her marriage. You might say, Tell me some of the positive characteristics of your husband. And she does!

She launches into this list of very glowing things she wants to express about her husband. She mostly praises his physical attributes. This guy has quite the physique. He’s manly. He’s strong. He’s handsome. But she’s also appreciating his moral integrity and his leadership and his kindness. She says in verse 10



that he is distinguished among ten thousand, and I don't think she's merely saying that he's better looking than ten thousand. I think she's also saying that he rises above the rest in terms of his character. He is a man to be respected. She speaks of his head, his hair, his eyes, his cheeks, his lips, his arms and body and legs. And then in verse 15 she also compliments his mouth. And here it seems that she is thinking of his words. She has already spoken of his lips, and there she may be thinking of his kisses. But now she says that his mouth is most sweet, and it seems that she is referring to his sweet and kind words, which we'll see some more of in the next chapter. She appreciates him in a lot of different ways, and she's not afraid to articulate these things.

Ladies, you may not know how much your words of respect mean to your husband. For you to compliment him, for you to build him up, for you to tell him you appreciate him and his hard work and his leadership, those kinds of things will have a tremendous impact on him. And you might say, Well, there's nothing to respect about my husband. My response would be, find something about him you do appreciate, and say something about it. Even if it seems like a small thing. Say something about it—to him, and to others. Tell him you're glad that he cares about the kids. Tell him you're happy for how he provides for the family. Thank him for taking out the trash. And look for opportunities to tell other people, too. If you're talking to your parents, or to friends, or to folks at church, find ways to mention how great it is that your husband takes out the trash, or spends time with the kids, or takes care of house projects.

In these ways, let your words guide your heart. Even if you don't feel a deep sense of respect for your husband right now, as you speak highly of him you will also begin to think highly of him. And as your husband feels that respect from you, it will be a huge encouragement to him to become more and more respectable. It will also give you, as a wife, the right context in which to share complaints you may have about him. If you're always negative, always critical, always nagging, he will eventually tune that out. But if you show him respect in whatever ways you can, and you are encouraging to him and kind to him, and then you come and say, "Honey, you know I wish you were a little more thoughtful and romantic," or, "I wish you were more of a spiritual leader in our home," well, then you might get somewhere.

Wives, don't underestimate the power you have to shape who your husband is and who he becomes. You can either tear him down with your words, which many wives do, and when they're talking to their parents or friends, they are constantly criticizing their husband. That will have a horrible effect on a man.

Or you can encourage him and compliment him in whatever ways you can (even if it's just small things at first). I can say personally that Stacy's respect for me means everything to me. It could seem like the world is crashing down around me, but if Stacy's on my side, if she's there in my corner rooting for me, encouraging me, then it's like wind in my sails. I may feel deflated, defeated, discouraged, but Stacy's words have amazing power to encourage me.

Notice also that the wife says in verse 16, "This is my beloved and this is my friend." Can you say that about your spouse? I hope so. Friendship is so important in marriage. You're not just sharing the same house. You're not just sharing the same bed. You're not just raising the same children. You're friends, and the best of friends.

This leads to the second observation, which will be brief. The second observation is about the husband, and it's simply this—we see here a man who is speaking deeply and tenderly to his wife. Most of chapters 6 and 7 are his words of admiration to his wife. We've seen this before, and so I won't belabor it. But I think it's good for us to be reminded again that a good husband will talk to his wife and compliment his wife. He will lavish praise upon her. This is so important in terms of resolving conflict and deepening your marriage. If you don't speak deeply and tenderly to your wife, then there will be an inevitable gravitational pull that will slowly but surely put distance between you. If you're not intentionally cultivating that relationship, then you will drift apart. Those loving words she desires from you, she'll look for elsewhere. Maybe from the kids, or from friends, or from other men. You, husband, need to be the one to speak words of affection to your wife, and that will pull you close together.

In closing, think of how the Gospel can be displayed in the relationship of a husband and a wife. Conflict is to be expected. There's no way, really, to avoid it. But the question is, how are you going to deal with conflict? What are you going to do when there's a difference of opinion? What are you going to do when the husband sins in some way against the wife? What are you going to do when the wife sins in some way against the husband? What are you going to do when expectations are not met? Earlier in the service a passage from Ephesians 4 was read. Let me read again a few of those verses that are so important to apply in the marriage relationship.

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. . . . Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. . . . 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." (Ephesians 4:26-32)

That last phrase is the key to the whole thing. Meditate on the great forgiveness you have received in Christ. To quote Gary and Betsy Ricucci one more time, (and this is applicable and helpful to all of us, whether you're married or not, this applies in any relationship, in any situation where you've been hurt or wronged by another person), they write, "The gospel reminds us that nothing done *to us*, no matter how wicked, will ever surpass the wickedness done *by us*, to the holy Son of God." (page 99)

That puts everything in the right perspective. That attitude puts you in the position of desperately seeking God's grace, and then it also makes you eager to extend that grace to others. May our marriages, and all our relationships, give evidence of God's abundant grace in our lives.