

“As practical as it is profound, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God* may well be the best book on marriage I’ve ever read. Though it is little in size, it packs a huge spiritual punch. I was motivated to love my wife more and broadened in my understanding of how loving my wife brings glory to God. This book deserves to take its place among those special few known as classics, in which God reveals His truth in an uncommonly powerful way (and isn’t it time that a book on sex entered that esteemed list?). If I sound enthusiastic, I am—this book is truly a treasure.”

—GARY THOMAS, author of *Sacred Marriage* and  
*Sacred Parenting*

“There’s not a husband I know that won’t benefit from this book. This is more than a book for the bedroom. It will train you to romance your wife and set you on a lifelong pursuit of winning her heart. Wives, do yourself a favor and buy this book for your husband!”

—JOSHUA HARRIS, author of *Boy Meets Girl*

“C. J. Mahaney has become one of the voices I have come to depend on for wise, practical counsel on applying the Scriptures to the issues that confront us. Once again in this book, he shows how the message of the gospel is central to everything we do. When so many of us have lost our biblical moorings, C. J. shows that to ‘do all to the glory of God’ includes everything we do—eating, drinking, even romance and sex!

“Men, if you are looking for a book that will give you a few easy tips for spicing up your sex life, look somewhere else. This book invites you instead to completely revolutionize your romantic relationship with your wife. It calls all of us to a more profound and deeply satisfying kind of countercultural sex than most of us have ever experienced.”

—BOB LEPINE

Co-host *FamilyLife Today*  
Author of *The Christian Husband*

AIR MAIL  
PAR AVION

# SEX, ROMANCE, AND THE GLORY OF GOD

*What Every Christian Husband  
Needs to Know*



## C.J. MAHANEY

*With a Word to Wives from*

CAROLYN MAHANEY

CROSSWAY BOOKS

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## CHAPTER ONE

# GREAT SEX TO THE GLORY OF GOD

*Deeply Satisfying Intimacy Is the Inheritance of  
Every Christian Couple*

A smile crossed the king's face as he dipped his quill into the inkwell one last time. With firm, smooth strokes the final lines flowed freely onto the parchment.

Pushing back from his writing desk, he sighed with satisfaction. The project had gone very well. This was some fine work. Rising from the chair and lifting his hands to heaven, Solomon, the son of David, offered thanks to the Lord. Here, complete at last, was his greatest song, one of the most important pieces of writing he had ever done. With satisfaction he lowered his eyes to the finished work spread out before him. Today we call it the Song of Solomon (or the Song of Songs).

It's about sex.

In his lifetime Solomon would produce three thousand proverbs and more than a thousand songs and hymns. The son of a legendary king, and a great king himself, he would be esteemed in Scripture as the wisest man who had yet lived. And his Song of Songs is nothing less than an explicit and unblushing celebration of sex within marriage.

To Solomon, this may have been simply a deeply personal reflection on love. But really it was much more than that. Because one day, as we know, it would be counted among the perfect and infallible words of Scripture, inerrantly inspired by the Holy Spirit and intended by God as a primary source of guidance for mankind until the return of the Son.

That's right, gentlemen. Solomon's Song of Songs is an entire book of the Bible devoted to the promotion of sexual intimacy within the covenant of marriage. It's an eight-chapter feast of unbridled, uninhibited, joyous immersion in verbal and physical expressions of passion between a man and a woman.

Not a couple of verses. Not a chapter or two. God didn't consider that enough. He decided to give us a whole book!

But can the Song of Songs really be about sex? Isn't the Bible about, well, spiritual stuff?

It sure is. And sexual intimacy within marriage has profound spiritual significance. In fact, in the next chapter we're going to take a quick look at what the Bible says about marriage. We'll see that, above all else, marriage is spiritual.

For now, though, let's put ourselves back in King Solomon's study. As husbands, we need to be clear about what this book is telling us. And when you want to understand what the Bible really means, you have to start with what the original writer actually meant. So I want us to take a moment to try to see through Solomon's eyes.

## REAL PEOPLE, REAL BODIES

When Solomon was writing his Song, what do you think he had in mind?

The question is important because some Christians see Solomon's Song as a book of symbolism. Men more godly than I—and a lot smarter—have believed that this book of the Bible, if it's

about marriage at all, is only about marriage in a secondary way. They understand the book primarily as an allegory or as typology. That is, they see all its talk of love and longing as symbolic of the relationship between Christ and the Church or between Christ and the soul of the individual believer.

Maybe that's how you see Solomon's Song. If so, please understand—while I don't share that view, I'm not attacking or ridiculing you or anyone else.

But I am going to take a few sentences to try to persuade you otherwise!

There are five reasons why I think the Song of Songs is exactly what it appears to be: a celebration of marital intimacy.

1) Solomon's topic was obviously sex. Just consider all the sensual and erotic language in this book! It certainly *looks* like it's about physical and emotional passions. It sure seems like this is the story of a real man and a real woman with real human bodies. When Solomon was at his desk writing the Song, do you think he had in mind some symbolic, spiritualized relationship between God and his chosen ones? I don't.

2) The Bible never suggests that this book isn't primarily about sex. No New Testament writer (or Old Testament writer, for that matter) suggests that this book, which seems so obviously to be about sex, ought to be understood primarily as an illustration of spiritual realities. This compels me to read Solomon's Song according to the plain meaning of the words.

3) God's relationship with man is not sexual. The Song is full of erotic phrases; yet our relationship with God is never portrayed in the Bible as erotic.

The Church certainly *is* the Bride of Christ. But although the marriage between Christ and his Bride will be many unimaginably wonderful things, it will not involve sexuality.

Will it be extraordinarily and supernaturally intimate? Yes.

Infinitely rewarding and fulfilling? Absolutely. But not physically erotic.

When describing our relationship with God, or when communicating our passion for him in prayer or worship, it's right to use a vocabulary of love. But this language should never include anything erotic. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

4) Spiritualizing the book doesn't work. When many of the passages from Solomon's Song are viewed as symbolic statements, the results can get very strange.

In chapter 1, verse 2, we read, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine." Now that sounds an awful lot like a particular woman saying she wants to be kissed by a particular man. But some commentators say that this verse is actually about a spiritual yearning for the Word of God.

Verse 13 of that chapter says, "My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts." Some commentators find in this passage a reference to Christ appearing between the Old and New Testaments.

Guys, I'm no scholar, but I don't think so!

Jumping ahead to chapter 7, verse 7, we find, "Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters." Again, one commentator—a godly and sincere person, I have no doubt—suggests that in this passage "breasts" refers to the nurturing effect that sound biblical teaching has upon the Church.

You know, that idea never occurred to me. When the man says to the woman that her breasts are like fruit on a palm tree, it seems to me he's talking about . . . her breasts!

Spiritualizing the Song of Solomon just doesn't make sense. What's worse, it denies to us the powerful impact that God intends for it to have on our marriages.

5) We need instruction on sexuality. If marriage is immensely important to God (and it is), and if sex is a marvelous gift from God to married couples (which it is), it's entirely appropriate for God to tell us in Scripture how to understand and enjoy it.

In fact, how could God leave us, his most beloved creatures, on our own when it comes to something as powerful and universal as sexuality? Would he give us such a gift without also giving us guidance? Where is a Christian couple supposed to look for a model of God-glorifying sexuality? If not to Scripture, where? To Hollywood? Pop culture? Pornography?

We must not, cannot take our sexual cues from the sinful impulses of ourselves or others. And we don't have to. God has not left us in the dark. Scripture illuminates the path of marital intimacy. The Song of Solomon shines brightly, showing us the way to the best sex we can possibly experience.

Guidance . . . on sex? From the God who made us? From he who established marriage as an institution and came up with the whole fantastic idea of sex? Now that is guidance we ought to receive eagerly.

## PREPARE TO CELEBRATE

So I trust my point is clear. I don't believe the Song of Solomon is primarily allegory or typology. I don't believe it is drama. I do not believe it is an elaborate diary entry. I agree with this perspective offered by the biblical commentator Lloyd Carr: "The lover and the beloved are just ordinary people."<sup>1</sup>

Tom Gledhill, in his commentary, puts it this way: "The two lovers are Everyman and Everywoman."<sup>2</sup> That's encouraging. The Song's about your marriage and mine. These eight chapters of Scripture can speak to us and, in doing so, make a dramatic difference in our lives, for the glory of God.

**PASSION UNDEFILED**

There are a few experiences in this life that seem to me to have been undiminished by that first sin in the Garden of Eden. Lobster with melted butter comes to mind. So does chocolate. But at the top of the list is having sex with my wife. When I am making love to Carolyn, it's difficult for me to imagine that Adam and Eve, prior to the Fall, ever had a better time than we can have right here in the twenty-first century.

Maybe they did have a better time; I'm not sure. But I *am* sure that sex itself, in the context of marriage, is not sinful. Because sex outside of marriage is so clearly sinful, it's easy to imagine that the purity of sex within marriage must also have been tarnished—at least a little—by the Fall. But it hasn't. Not in the slightest. Man in his sinfulness may distort it, but in the context of marriage, sex itself remains an unblemished, untainted gift from God.

When we are told that “the marriage bed,” an obvious reference to sexuality, is to be “undefiled” (Hebrews 13:4), we're reminded that sex in marriage is intended by God to be a pure and good thing. Even though it's intensely physical, it is not the least bit unspiritual. When a married couple is in the midst of enjoying sexual relations, they may not be experiencing holiness in the same way they experience it when praying or worshiping God, but make no mistake—that is a very holy moment.

It is God's desire that every Christian couple, including you and your wife, regularly enjoy the best, most intimate, most satisfying sexual relations of which humans are capable. We're talking really, really good sex. Marital intimacy is God's gift to those who enter his holy covenant of marriage. And what a gift it is! With the obvious exception of the gospel itself, this strikes me as some of the best news man (and woman) could ever receive!

The purpose of the book you hold in your hands is to lead us

back into God's ideal of joyful, unashamed, indulgent, loving sexuality in the context of marriage. If your marriage is lacking in the passion department, God—ever-loving, ever-merciful—is eager to unfold for you and your wife new levels of intimate joy and satisfaction. If that area of your marriage is already cooking along quite nicely, don't think for a minute that you've "arrived." No matter how romantic you and your wife are, there is more. Much more.

## **MEN, WE MUST LEAD**

As husbands, it all starts with us.

Obviously, this book is directed primarily to men. As a man, it's not ideal for me to teach women on this subject. Even when Carolyn and I present this material in a marriage seminar, 90 percent of my teaching is directed to the husbands. That's because it is your role, not mine, to lead your wife into a fuller understanding of what Scripture teaches about your sexual relationship.

However, your wife is obviously a key player in all this! Clearly, she must be actively involved if this book is to make much of a difference in your marriage. So at the end of this book Carolyn has some vitally important things to say to your wife. When you've finished reading these chapters, ask your wife to read Carolyn's "A Word to Wives" at the end of this book. You may also wish to review other portions of this book with your wife.

And, guys, the hard truth is that growth is only possible as we humble ourselves. One absolutely necessary path to humility is to ask your wife to evaluate you. So let me recommend that you invite her to help you in this area. Say to her something like, "If you knew that I would not react with sinful anger, how would you evaluate me as a husband and a lover? Please be completely honest."

In my pride, I'm usually all too confident that in most areas—including my marriage—I'm probably doing a fine job. Typically,

reality only dawns when I bring my wife into the evaluation process. Throughout our almost thirty years of marriage, very little growth in godliness has occurred in my life without Carolyn's encouragement, correction, and involvement.

I'd be remiss at this point if I didn't add that the encouragement, correction, and involvement of many fellow pastors and friends over the years has also been invaluable for our marriage. You, too, will need the care and biblical counsel of your pastor and godly friends in order to benefit fully from what you read in this book. We all do. Growth in marriage, like growth in godliness, does not take place in isolation from the local church.<sup>3</sup> Your involvement and participation in a genuine local church will be a unique and necessary means of grace in your marriage.

But most importantly, as you read through this book, let it initiate many helpful discussions with your wife on many vital topics. And may your discussions be regularly followed by the pleasures of application.

Before we look in some detail at the Song of Solomon, however, we must examine the ultimate purpose of marriage, and we must learn to love and lead our wives in the cultivation of romance. Only then will we truly be prepared to benefit fully from Solomon's wisdom in this area. As the two of you allow that unique book of Scripture to affect how you pursue marital intimacy, Solomon's Song can become your song too, bringing much joy to your marriage and great glory to God.

The Scriptures aren't sour on sex, you know. They view marital relations as a source of legitimate, godly joy and satisfaction—a holy gift from God. Since our wedding day in May 1975, Carolyn and I have been happily verifying that with repeated personal experience. No, sex in marriage is not merely to be tolerated, but actively celebrated! And Solomon's Song does exactly that.

That's what we'll be doing in this book, guys. We're going to learn what Scripture teaches us on this subject—what God thought was most important for us to know about sex within marriage. As we learn, we're going to lead our wives into increasingly rich, erotic, holy, satisfying, God-glorifying encounters!

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE DIVINE PURPOSE FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

*A Profound Mystery, Revealed for All to See*

**W***hy am I here? What is the purpose of my existence?*  
We've all asked ourselves those questions in one way or another.

When we become Christians, the answer begins to take shape. The truly converted man knows he is here because of God and for God. But we can still wonder how to really nail it down—what is the purpose of the Christian's existence? Probably the best answer I've heard is hundreds of years old: "To glorify God and to enjoy him forever."<sup>4</sup>

That's an excellent, brief answer to a most important question. But if you're a Christian husband, there ought to be a related question occupying your thoughts.

*What is the purpose of my marriage?*

After all, God has given you a wife. You are now one flesh with her. The two of you are joined together at the deepest possible level.

So, do you know the answer to that question? Do you realize your marriage has a God-given purpose?

Maybe you have been drawn to this book because you feel your marriage could use more sexual spark. Thanks to the Bible's teaching on marriage, especially that which is found in Solomon's Song, I believe that spark is available for you to discover and experience.

But if this book discussed sex without first answering the critical question, *What is the purpose of my marriage?* it would only encourage our sinful tendency to relate to our wives selfishly rather than serving them for the glory of God. You see, sex is never supposed to be treated as simply a means of personal fulfillment. Sex is derived from marriage. It's intended to serve marriage, and never to be separated from marriage. It's about man and wife in loving, complementary, erotic relationship. It is this kind of sex—taking place within marriage and informed by a biblical understanding of sex and marriage—that brings maximum joy to the couple and genuine glory to God.

Of course, secular culture seeks sexual fulfillment in isolation from God's wisdom, promising men and women all the enduring enjoyment of sexuality without the context that God designed for it. But that worldly promise always falls short because the One who created sex won't let it be fulfilled!

The best sex and the deepest human intimacy are only possible when, first, sex takes place within the context of marriage, and, second, that couple is living in the light of God's purpose for marriage. That is simply how God designed it. And this is why we need to take part of this chapter to clarify that second point—God's purpose for marriage.

## ADAM, MOSES, AND PAUL

We've all sat in weddings and heard these words from Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

That's a very popular passage to read at weddings. But it's not the whole story.

Genesis 2:24 shows that God instituted marriage when Eve was presented to Adam. It tells us that in marriage a man and a woman begin a new life together—a life even closer than the relationship between parents and children. And it tells us that in marriage, physical intimacy is approved by God. But the verse doesn't present the whole picture about the purpose of marriage.

When Moses first wrote those words, his understanding was limited. God's saving purposes for man were still unfolding. Jesus had not yet come to give up his life on the cross for the sins of the world. The New Testament Church had not yet been established. But after all these things had taken place, God revealed to the apostle Paul the ultimate purpose for marriage that had been planned prior to the beginning of time.

In Ephesians 5:22-33 Paul explains that glorious purpose. He begins by instructing wives how to submit to their husbands ("as to the Lord") and husbands how to love their wives ("as Christ loved the church"). Finally, he caps it all off by quoting Genesis 2:24 and giving us its ultimate meaning.

*"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.*

EPHESIANS 5:31-32

As we consider these verses, we might not be immediately inspired. We might be thinking things like, *What exactly is Paul talking about? I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I don't really see what's so profound here. Plus, if it's a mystery, how can I understand it?*

It's important to realize what Paul means by "mystery." The word shows up several times in his New Testament letters, and

not once does it mean something incomprehensible or impossible to understand. Instead, Paul uses the word to refer to a particular kind of truth—a truth that, for a time, God kept hidden from man but that he has now revealed. For Paul, “mystery” is revealed truth, made plain and understandable.

So in Ephesians 5—the most significant and remarkable passage of Scripture about marriage—Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, and then he tells us there was a hidden truth in that verse. He tells us it’s a “profound” truth. And he tells us what that truth is. It’s what he has been explaining since verse 22.

*Marriage between a man and a woman is meant to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church.*

That relationship between Christ and the Church is certainly profound and amazing. Christ came to earth as a man, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross for our sins, taking the punishment we so richly deserved. He is now in heaven interceding for us and will one day return to take us as his own. In the meantime the Church depends on him, serves him, and seeks to glorify him in all of life.

In Ephesians 5 Paul is saying, in effect, “Guess what, your marriage is kind of like that!”

So, although this truth about your marriage is something you can understand, it still ought to be profoundly mysterious and amazing, for it makes your marriage as holy a human relationship as one can imagine.

At one time I did not see my marriage as profound, mysterious, or amazing. In my ignorance I saw Carolyn and myself simply as two married people who loved God and one another.

I had not yet grasped the bigger picture that God had revealed to Paul: By God’s grace and power, marriage can reflect, in some real yet imperfect way, the relationship between Christ and the Church. There are many profound implications to this truth. To

really understand it is to find your entire marriage beginning to change in rich and wonderful ways—including in the bedroom.

## LIVING THE MYSTERY

Paul reveals to us in Ephesians 5 the divine intention for marriage. It's to be an echo or reflection of the relationship that exists between Christ and the Church—always a very imperfect reflection, but a reflection nonetheless.

Please don't think of this as merely a helpful illustration or an interesting perspective. It's much more than that. This is the essence of marriage. This is the divine purpose for *your* marriage.

And don't get it backwards either. We don't look to marriage to understand the relationship between Christ and the Church. Instead, we seek a clear, biblical understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church so we can better understand the purpose of our marriage.

This means that your marriage is meant to be, by the grace of God, the best echo, the most faithful reflection, of that relationship that you can possibly be. It's not about impressing people or drawing attention to ourselves. It's about being genuinely united in a strong, godly, intimate relationship that echoes the one between Christ and the Church.

Has your marriage primarily been centered on you? On your wife? On your children? On your responsibilities? On your goals? On your comforts? On your stuff? If so, you've been trying to live in a way you were never intended to.

The biblical purpose for marriage, you see, is not man-centered or needs-centered. It's God-centered. It's profoundly mysterious and profoundly significant. Your marriage is meant to point to the truth of the crucified and risen Savior who will return for his Bride.

This understanding will help you immensely as you seek to

implement what you find in this book. There is a glorious purpose behind the practice.

We're taking this time to review the biblical purpose of marriage because, let's face it, men can all too easily think that a book about sex is nothing more than a book about sex. Yes, this book is primarily about romance and sex, because that's the emphasis in Solomon's Song. But if this book merely recommended a set of techniques, it would be no more helpful than some secular sex manual. What will make the difference for you is an understanding of the purpose of marriage.

As Christians, we do indeed have the incredible privilege of knowing the ultimate purpose for marriage. But unless we grasp this—unless there's a conviction that marriage is ultimately meant to bring glory to God by echoing the relationship between Christ and the Church—any benefit you get from this book will be superficial and temporary.

So we see that there is a purpose in marriage that goes beyond personal fulfillment. Something of the selfless love, care, and sacrifice that Jesus shows toward the Church is supposed to be evident in you as you relate to your wife. Something of the respect, submission, and devotion that the Church shows toward Jesus is supposed to be evident in your wife as she relates to you. That's the purpose for your marriage. That is why God has given her to you, and you to her.

## AN EXCELLENT HOPE

All Christian marriages are intended ultimately to point to that greater reality. The final, glorious purpose of Christian marriage is to witness to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Maybe you don't feel your marriage is a very good reflection. Maybe it never has been, and you doubt it ever could be. If so, let me encourage you to exercise the gift of faith that God has given

to every Christian. These are the plans and promises of God we're discussing here, not the vain dreams of man.

God gives us the Scriptures so that we might have hope—a confident expectation of good—even when no other hope can be found. I believe God can impart new hope to you as you read this book. If sin has hindered your marriage, repentance and forgiveness are available to cover sin of any duration and any severity. By the grace of God, any Christian marriage, including yours, can be transformed into a genuine reflection of Christ and the Church.

How does one obtain such grace? It's not complicated, but it does require humility. For although God opposes the proud, he gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

As the one called by God to lead in your home, if you will humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, there is hope through the person and finished work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of any and all sin—yours and your wife's. God is eager to pour out his grace on those who humbly acknowledge their need for his help. That's why there is hope for the transformation of your marriage, regardless of its history.

So if you approach the rest of this book with a humble, teachable attitude, you can have hope and confidence that God is at work in your marriage. Any couple can "have sex." But the kind of unashamed openness and joyful, expressive intimacy that we see in the Song of Solomon only happens when a husband and wife are united at a far deeper level. And just as the strength of your marriage will be evident in the bedroom, an increase in marital intimacy will in turn strengthen the nonsexual aspects of your relationship. Thus the lessons provided in the Song promise fruitfulness not only for the bedroom but for your entire marriage. Great sex will help your marriage better reflect God and his glory to the world.

This chapter has been foundational. It can make all the difference as we begin a closer examination of romance and sex. Armed with this understanding of God's purpose for marriage, we are now equipped to move forward with our study of what makes for great, biblical sex to the glory of God.

Should be fun. Ready?

# NOTES

## NOTES FOR SEX, ROMANCE, AND THE GLORY OF GOD

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2. Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 23.
3. On the vital topic of the local church, I strongly recommend you read Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000; revised/expanded edition upcoming) as well as Donald Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1996).
4. From *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 1.
5. Quoted from Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1994).
6. Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993) p. 379.
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10. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), p. 44.
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12. Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1995) p. 83.
13. Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, p. 53.
14. Robert Davidson, quoted in Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, p. 219.
15. Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, p. 51.
16. John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995) p. 176.
17. William Frey, "Really Good Sex," *Christianity Today* (August 19, 1991), guest editorial.
18. In *The Cross Centered Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002), I have tried to make a clear, simple case for maintaining the centrality of the cross of Christ in all of life.

## NOTES FOR A WORD TO WIVES FROM CAROLYN MAHANAY

1. Daniel L. Akin, "Sermon: The Beauty and Blessings of the Christian Bedroom, Song of Solomon 4:1—5:1," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2002, p. 94.