

## Chapter 22 Song of Songs

### The Song of Songs

*“Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned.”* Song of Songs 8:6-7

The overriding theme of the biblical wisdom literature is the integration of our personal stories into God’s salvation history story. The Psalms lead us in worship, Proverbs guides us in ethics, and Ecclesiastes explores the cynical alternative to the life of faith. The extensive overlap between these three perspectives shows us just how closely connected God intends for worship, ethics and life to be. Two big areas remain to be explored, romantic love and personal suffering. The Song of Songs and Job complete the picture of wisdom.

True to the character of the Story, wisdom is lived out rather than lectured, and embodied rather than instructed. Instead of being told what to think, we get to see and feel what wisdom is all about. Wisdom is like good old-fashioned, hot-out-of-the-oven baked bread, everything gets lumped in together, including worship and work, spirituality and sexuality, suffering and success. All of it gets kneaded into one loaf and baked in an oven. Biblical wisdom literature is the poetry of life, describing what it means to live into God’s salvation history story. This is the way of life of those baptized in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christians have questioned how the Song of Songs fits into the Story, even as they have struggled with the relationship between romantic love and redemptive love. Some have gone to great lengths to re-interpret the Song of Songs as an allegory. In the Middle Ages, it was the most popular biblical book, but for all the wrong reasons. The Song became fashionable because it was interpreted as an allegory illustrating the love of Christ for his bride the church. One of the first proponents of this interpretation was Origen (185-254), who wrote a ten-volume commentary and a series of homilies on the Song. With painstaking analysis every description, every metaphor, was turned into a statement about God's love for us and our love for God. Instead of seeing the significance of romantic love as a gift from God, the Song’s love poetry was allegorized into devotional theology.

Bernard of Clairvaux’s interpretation (1090-1153) was typical for the age: "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth" (1:2). Who is it who speaks these words?" Bernard asked. "It is the bride. Who is the bride? It is the soul thirsting for God" (Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God* Portland: Multnomah Press, 1983, 172). The beloved's search for her lover is the believer's search for God (1:7). The beloved's dependence upon her lover (1:15-16) is the believer's dependence upon God. The beloved's longing for her lover is the church's longing for Christ. The bridegroom's embrace of his bride is God's embrace of us (239). Human love is but a booster rocket to be jettisoned after men and women grasp the true meaning of spiritual love. "For

having left behind in the body all earthly cares and bodily obstacles, the soul will forget everything except God and attend to nothing else but God. "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16). Ironically, all the *spiritualized* versions of the Song of Songs overshadow the true meaning of the Song.

### **A Love Song**

The preposition (lamed) may be translated "of", "about", "by", "pertains to." It may have been a song dedicated to Solomon. The phrase, *the Song of Songs*, is generally recognized to mean a song of superlative quality. Thus the Song of Songs is "the most beautiful of songs, the most musical of songs, the number one, the top of the charts" (Tom Gledhill, p.92). The Song of Songs is unabashed love poetry in praise of romantic love and sexual intimacy. This well-crafted collection of love songs describing the relationship between two lovers celebrates the beauty and energy of love between a man and woman. There is a haunting-beauty reflected in this poetry and a powerful energy expressed in this impressionistic word portrait. It is a song, not just about an ancient couple or an ode to lovers in the abstract, but about us. We are not eavesdropping on a private love affair, but participating in the love and passion of life. As in all good art, the medium serves the message well. Not all art is created equal, some poetry is better than other poetry; some art is truer than other art. Although the name of God is never mentioned in the Song it is a deeply theological book. If we ask "'Where is God in the Song?', the answer is 'Nowhere and everywhere.' He is nowhere explicitly mentioned, everywhere assumed" (Gledhill:37). The Song is an inspired canonical commentary on Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." To meditate on the Song of Songs is to follow the admonition of the Apostle Paul: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things" (4:8).

### **Labor of Love**

The poet carefully exegetes the heart by paying close attention to the ways of love. The Song begins with the deep yearnings of love, the longing for intimacy, feelings of insecurity, pressures from family, and the uncertainty of the whereabouts of her lover. Human emotions are worthy of deep thought, carefully explored meanings and loving expression. Feelings and emotions merit reflection and contemplation. Of all the biblical books perhaps this is one of the strongest in commending the importance of psychology.

The first voice we hear in the Song is that of the girl (1:1-7). "Certainly the girl bares her emotions much more than the boy. She voices her yearnings, her anxieties, her fears and her delights in a much more colorfully expressive way, and more frequently than her lover does. She is the one who invites him to intimacy, she is the one who so often takes the initiative" (Gledhill, p.93). Human emotions are worthy of deep thought, carefully explored meanings and loving expression. Feelings and emotions merit reflection and contemplation. Of all the biblical books perhaps this is one of the strongest in commending the importance of psychology. Understanding the Song is especially difficult if we insist on a rigid literal rendering, a sequential chronological order, and tightly connected plot.

The Song does not share ancient hang-ups about the body, which disparaged the physical and

material qualities of God's good creation. There is no Platonic dualism anticipated in this Hebrew celebration of human love. Neither is there an exaltation or deification of physical passion. The Song is the antithesis of ancient fertility cults and modern hedonism. Pleasure is not divorced from commitment and love is not synonymous with lust.

Tom Gledhill offers this splendid description of the love song that tops all love songs:

"The capacity to delight in physical beauty, to be attracted by members of the opposite sex, the desire to form secure and intimate relationships, and to express love and affection in demonstrably physical ways --these are all a very fundamental part of our common humanity. The Song of Songs is an unabashed celebration of these deeply rooted urges. In beautiful poetic language, the Song explores the whole range of emotions experienced by the two lovers...So we have a strong biblical affirmation of love, loyalty, beauty and sexuality in all their variety"(13).

Couples in love have much to learn from the Song of Songs in how to express their affection for each other. They do well to reflect on the Song as an example of how to praise each other.

"How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!" (4:1)

"All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you." (4:7)

"Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?" (6:10)

The Song of Songs proves that the heart is worthy of exegesis! Affection creatively uses the power of metaphor to impact all five senses. The love of the beloved is more delightful than wine; a more pleasing fragrance than the choicest perfume; more picturesque than the most beautiful garden; sweeter than honey; better than money could possibly buy. The beloved likens her lover to a beautiful apple tree in the forest and he likens her to a wild flower among the thorns. She is a beautiful well-protected garden, an orchard of fruit trees, filled with all kinds of flowers and spices, resplendent with color, covered with fragrance, watered by a flowing stream. Her lover has taken her to the banquet hall and "his banner over me is love."

Adolescents and overly analytical types may struggle with the poetic medium and the modern reader may need help interpreting the metaphors. After all, a literal interpretation of hair like a flock of goats or teeth like a flock of sheep just shorn is hardly attractive and actually quite comical, but a poetic reading captures the essence of the metaphor: her hair reminds her lover of the graceful motion of a flock of mountain goats descending the distant mountain; her teeth are white and sparkling, perfectly matched and symmetrical, like sheep sheared to their smooth skins, glistening white.

Poetic language shuns the abstract. It is more pictorial, impressionistic, and emotional. Well chosen metaphors create a mood, encourage a feeling, and move the heart. The language of love, as we all know, except for those experts who would advise us on how to maximize the sexual experience, is neither explicitly vulgar nor technically clinical.

"Areas of our bodies associated with deep subjective warmth, self-consciousness

and self-identity need to be handled with more than clinical detachment. So we are left with the use of metaphor...Take, for example, the use of the word 'vineyard': it may be taken literally, the place where grapes are cultivated; it may refer to the girl as a whole, in all her femininity; or it may have more explicit sexual references. This easy fluidity of levels of meaning is part of the charm of the Song, which teases our imaginations" (Gledhill, p.31).

Couples in love have much to learn from the Song of Songs in how to think about the other. Husbands and wives do well to reflect on the Song as an encouragement to praise and build each other up.

"The psychological effects of praise and affirmation are beneficial to our well being. It makes us 'feel good'. We are made to feel important and valuable to others. Surely this is an important part of any relationship. It is the oil that makes the machinery of everyday life run smoothly...But to set out on a program of mutual affirmation can often be artificial and sterile in its basic self-serving mechanisms. Much of our ability or willingness to articulate emotion or praise is culturally or temperamentally conditioned. Many men would rather die than praise their wives. Perhaps we all need to break down the barriers of reserve and inhibitions in this respect. Of course, it can go to the other extreme, where all our relationships are at a very superficial level of mutual back scratching, at the sort of level of 'how to win friends and influence people', which is at worst self-serving manipulation" (Gledhill,p.121).

### **Heresy and Humiliation**

Sex has become our society's absolute, an idol to be worshiped and a goddess to be revered. Sex is a tidal wave flooding the soul, drowning the human spirit, and overwhelming life. Love and lust are equated. Fornication is standard fare. Pornography is pervasive. Adultery is common. Homosexual practice is promoted. The followers of Christ are resident aliens in a city called Sodom. They must choose between humility and humiliation daily and determine to grow in their sensitivity to shame and their practice of compassion. When "everyone does what is right in their own eyes" people will suffer. The ancient character of Samson vividly portrays the pleasure-seeking strategy of the modern person. Samson was in-genius in his ability not to know. The remedy for sexual idolatry and perversion however, is not by denigrating the gift of sexuality, but by embracing romantic love with integrity.

The Song of Songs revels in the physical and emotional side of love. It is a canonical warning to all those who would disparage the body and be unduly embarrassed with the physical side of love. John Chrysostom, the great preacher of Antioch in the fourth century, wrote to Theodore to dissuade him from leaving the ascetic brotherhood to marry the woman with whom he had fallen in love. "I know that you are now admiring the grace of Hermione, and that you judge that there is nothing in the world to be compared to her beauty; but if you choose, O friend, you shall yourself exceed her in beauty and grace, as much as golden statutes surpass those which are made of clay...For the groundwork of this physical beauty is nothing else by phlegm, and blood, and liquid, and bile, and digestive juices...So that if you consider what is stored up inside those

beautiful eyes, and that straight nose, and the mouth and the cheeks, you will affirm the well-shaped body to be nothing else than a whitened sepulcher; the parts within are full of so much uncleanness" (Peter Brown, 103-104).

Chrysostom would have us look at a beautiful woman and see a dead corpse. Author Mike Mason offers a decidedly different perspective when he speaks of his wife:

"I still haven't gotten used to seeing my wife naked. It's almost as if her body is shining with a bright light, too bright to look at for very long. I cannot take my eyes off her--and yet I must. To gaze too long or too curiously is, even with her, a breach of propriety, almost a crime. It is not like watching a flower or creeping up to spy on an animal in the wild. No, my wife's body is brighter and more fascinating than a flower, shier than any animal, and more breathtaking than a thousand sunsets. To me her body is the most awesome thing in creation. Trying to look at her, just trying to take in her wild, glorious beauty, so free and primal, so utterly unchanged since the beginning of time, I catch a small glimpse of what it means that men and women have been made in the image of God. If even the image is this dazzling, what must the Original be like?" (Mike Mason, 113).

The basic assumption that sexual intimacy is a gift from God is nowhere stated in the Song but everywhere implied. The Song challenges conventional wisdom on romantic love and sexuality. Love is compatible, not competitive. There is a uniting of the whole person; body, soul, and spirit. While masculinity and femininity are celebrated, it is the couple's mutuality that is foundational to their love. They are eye to eye, face to face, life to life.

Through the years I have focused much more on what the early church fathers said about Christ, than what they said about sex. Their insistence on refuting heresies against the nature of the Incarnate One impressed me. The Nicene and Chalcedonian Confessions are powerful statements defending the humanity and deity of Christ. These early theologians tenaciously taught that Jesus did not just appear to be human, he was human. It is ironic that those who fought so hard to preserve the biblical testimony about the real humanity of Jesus shied away from our full humanity. The physical side of being spiritual is precisely what the Incarnate One accomplished through his life, death and resurrection. All that we are, including our sexuality, is redeemed in Christ.

It is a sad fact that through the ages many sincere followers of the Lord have been humiliated by the very God-given gifts intended for their blessing. What was allegedly condemned for spiritual reasons hurt not only the body, but the soul. By equating love with lust they sought to make sexual intimacy between husband and wife impossible. By denying the physical and romantic dimensions of human love they turned the "spiritual life" against God's very own creation. And to this day their glory is their shame.

### **Love's Wisdom**

Insight into the meaning of the poetic metaphor and appreciation for the artist's creativity should lead us toward the purpose of the poetry and the reason for the creativity. It is not art for art's

sake, nor even love for love's sake. It is not love in the abstract that is being praised but love between the beloved and the lover. The medium is not the message. We were not intended to fall in love with poetry or to fall in love with the idea of being in love. There is a difference between love and infatuation. To be infatuated, is to be self-focused and self-absorbed. To be in love is to be focused on the other.

It is surely possible to fall in love with music for music's sake, just as it is possible to fall in love with the idea of being in love. But I fear this falls far short of the purpose of music among Christians and the purpose of love among lovers. It would be pitiful for a husband to be so enthralled with how well he expressed his love for his wife, how caring he was, how romantic he was that he considered his own charm as his great achievement. When the object of delight is not the beloved, but the way the lover loves we've got a problem!

The Bible's wisdom literature counter's conventional wisdom, both ancient and modern. Ecclesiastes counters the conventional wisdom of success; Job overturns the conventional wisdom on suffering and the Song of Songs challenges the conventional understanding of romantic love and sexuality.

Love is compatible, not competitive. Mutuality is the key word. There is a deep-structure, soul uniting compatibility. A couple's interests may vary greatly, personalities may be polar opposites, in appearances they may look like a mix-match, but underneath it all there is a profound meeting of the mind and heart. There is a uniting of the whole person; body, soul, and spirit. "For the Song subtly undermines the common type-casting of roles as dominant/submissive, active/passive, leader/follower, protector/protected, and so on. In the Song we have complete mutuality of desire, boy towards girl, girl towards boy" (Gledhill, p.94). While masculinity and femininity are celebrated, it is the couple's mutuality that is foundational to their love.

Love is commitment, not consumption. Growth is the key word. There is something organic about love's development. The garden, the vineyard, the orchard are far better metaphors for marital love, committed love, than the factory or shopping mall (and they always will be). Love is like a good wine, it takes time. Obsolescence is built into many modern relationships. Sexual passion is expected to run its course and when it is used up the relationship is over. Permanency and exclusivity, however, are essential in the love described in the Song.

Love moves toward consummation, not partially, but wholistically. "...The physical aspect is only one side of many sided partnership. A growing physical intimacy has to be matched by a steadily increasing mutual self-knowledge; of intellect, temperament, goals, moods, maturity, emotions, and so on. Compatibility in these areas is of infinitely greater importance than the capacity to please one another to the highest degree in the physical realm" (Gledhill, p.100). Throughout the Song restraint is emphasized: "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Love should be allowed to take its natural course and not be rushed. "Do not force love-making or a love relationship; let it blossom naturally in due season, for the process cannot be hurried artificially" (Gledhill, p.128). The Song wisely depicts love's development as a

challenge. It is hard to wait, but the waiting is essential for love to grow. Insecurities need to be faced. Understanding between them must grow. Satisfaction with each other needs to mature. Love needs time to make up its mind.

"She wants their love to be consummated, but she is in great tension, because she knows that the time is not yet ripe. In speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem, she is speaking to herself. She is basically telling herself to cool it, to wait for the appropriate time. For the Christian, the appropriate time is always within marriage, ever outside it. We are all so clever at rationalizing our own desires, at excusing our own lack of self-discipline of our bodies and of our thought-lives. But we need to be ruthless in this matter, as Jesus himself taught" (Mt.5:29-30) (Gledhill, p.129).

Waiting involves yearning and longing; allowing anticipation and expectation to grow. The imagination becomes a tool in this process of deepening the relationship. There is an already, but not yet dimension to this relationship as it moves toward consummation. Consecrated love is never conventional. Contemplative love is always critical of spiritualizing, secularizing, psychologizing tendencies. Authenticity is always critical of artificiality and the Song of Songs makes the difference clear in three important areas: the meaning of beauty, nature, and pleasure.

As great as romantic love is, God's redemptive love is greater still. These two loves are inseparably linked by theology, not allegory. God's illustrations are always the best, and when describing God's love for us the Lord chooses an analogy that is bound to get our attention. In a biblical theology of marriage, logic moves from the greater to the lesser truth: God's love is the source for all human love. But often our hearts can better grasp the meaning of God's love through the power of metaphor. A picture is worth a thousand words, and one of the most effective pictures illustrating the love of God is that of the love between a husband and wife.

Divine love transcends all human love and is source for romantic love. The love between a man and a woman points to the even greater reality of God's love for us. Both marital love and divine love are real, but redemptive love—"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (Jn 3:16)—takes precedence over romantic love. These two loves, marital love and divine love, romantic love and redemptive love, are meant to support and illuminate each other. The lesser love, the love between husband and wife, is meant to help us grasp more completely the personal intimacy and earnestness of God's love for us. The greater love, God's sacrificial love, saving love, is meant to be the source, strength and standard for human love. The power and intensity of the oneness experienced between a man and a woman points to the greater mystery of our oneness with God in Christ.