

## **FREEDOM IN MARRIAGE**

**Song of Songs 3:6-5:1**

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Do you think this fish is making a good move? On impulse he wants to be free from the limitations of water. But the result will not be good. Think about this: who has the greatest freedom, someone who consciously tries to do things God's way or someone who just wants to eat, drink and be merry? Or to put it another way: who is free to live to the fullest? It is often suggested that Christians can't really enjoy life because they have all these rules. 'They always have to be good.' But Jesus said (John 8:32 &36) *"If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free...If the son sets you free will really be free."* Jesus made clear in his teachings that we are all slaves to sin, to our impulses until we are set free by Jesus. The truth of God will set us free because we can live in the way God designed life to be. That freedom comes through so strongly in this Song of Songs.

So far, we have seen this man and woman as they were attracted to each other. We have seen them meet, their courtship and their engagement. Their description of their relationship is very open and intimate. Yet without shame. They are free because their attraction and intimacy is in accord with the way God meant it to be. This is particularly so with their waiting to express their full sexual intimacy. The repeated refrain of the Song is very important to them. (Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5) *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field, do not arouse love until it so desires."* It is for the couple in the Song the way of freedom. Now that may seem a strange way of putting it. Our culture has been described as a sexually liberated society that has been 'set free from the old-fashioned Victorian attitudes and hang ups about sex'. So, people can do as they please if it feels good. And yet, when we are honest, and see the brokenness that so many feel in their love relationships, it begs the question about the sense of freedom that is experienced. But here, in this love Song of the Bible, we see real freedom in the marital relationship.

What we have in our text is the wedding day and honeymoon night of the two lovers in the Song. The first part shows us the 'official wedding ceremony'. (Song of Songs 3:6-10) *"Who is this coming up from the wilderness like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant? Look! It is Solomon's carriage,*

*escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel, all of them wearing the sword, all experienced in battle, each with his sword at his side, prepared for the terrors of the night. King Solomon made for himself the carriage; he made it of wood from Lebanon. Its posts he made of silver, its base of gold. Its seat was upholstered with purple, its interior inlaid with love".* We have here the description of the wedding procession. It is very oriental and royal. We see the royal palanquin, the reclining couch carried on poles as well as a large escort. The largest number of groomsmen I have been involved in with a wedding was about five. But Solomon shows his splendor with sixty.

What is significant is that this procession is very public. The people are called out to witness this wedding (Song of Songs 3:11). *"Daughters of Jerusalem, come out, and look, you daughters of Zion. Look on King Solomon wearing a crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced".* This public witnessing is an important aspect of marriage. Many of these 'daughters of Jerusalem' had their eye on Solomon. Remember how our leading character in the song, the woman said (Song of Songs 1:3,4) *"No wonder the maidens love you... How right they are to adore you."* But now they must realize that Solomon and the woman have become one. They 'belong' to each other. As she said (Song of Songs 2:16) *"My lover is mine and I am his..."* With the wedding ceremony the couple are declaring before God and all people that they are committed to each other. Therefore, they are off limits to others. They are now seen by God, and all, as one. In this public acknowledgement is the freedom of marriage. For here sexual intimacy is not only allowed, it is expected. The marriage must be consummated. In that framework the couple have the freedom to enjoy each other. They do so knowing what they do together is right and blessed by the community and God.

We see Solomon appreciating the beauty of his wife (Song of Songs 4:1-7) *"How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from the hills of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone. Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate. Your neck is like the tower of David, built with courses of stone; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense. You are altogether beautiful, my darling, there is no flaw in you."* I have seen it on numerous occasions when conducting a wedding that the bridegroom, on seeing his bride walk in, swallows hard to remove the lump in his throat and sheds a tear as he drinks in the

utter beauty of his bride. Take that deep sense of admiration as we see the couple in our song on their wedding night. We see Solomon drinks in the beauty of his wife.

Now, as we said at the start of the series, some of the imagery in this song will be foreign to us. This is the poetic praise language of the Hebrew culture of over 3000 years ago. But it is clear Solomon praises his wife for her beauty. He is looking at her in admiration starting with her hair and letting his eyes go down. She has dark flowing hair with beautiful white teeth that are perfectly matched. Her cheeks are a lovely rouge and her lips a very attractive red. Her neck shows a regal bearing. It is interesting to note that Solomon lists seven of her attributes, from her hair down to her breasts. The poet is deliberate in doing that because in the Hebrew culture seven was the number indicating perfection. So, Solomon is taking his time and savoring his wife's beauty. He is saying to her 'Wow, you are perfect'.

That is how love is. Some say love is blind. Others say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We can also see here that love sees the beauty in the other. Love sees the good in the other. And on the wedding night it is all focused on the beauty. When we love one another, we admire one another. Not only in the character, but also the beauty God has given. There again we see the freedom in marriage. There is time to see beauty and give praise. Also, to God who has created it. We can sense Adam's joy when God presented Eve to him. The admiration of the wife reminds us of the words of Paul in Ephesians (Ephesians 5:25-27) *"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy... and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish..."* In other words, a wife perfect in her beauty. God has created us to be beautiful and attractive in each other's eyes and to desire each other as husband and wife. This beauty and desire are holy and good, set apart in marriage.

It is therefore sad that the church, especially in medieval times, regarded the highest form of holiness as abstaining from sex. It has given the idea that the attractions we have are dirty. That sex is somehow taboo. It is something you have to go through to have children. It may be that too much talk about sex in our society is degraded because the church has not taught its true joy and holiness and its appropriate place of freedom.

One of the aspects of the freedom we have in marriage is that there is time and security for the intimacy. We see the need for this in the Song. (Song of Songs 4:8-15) *"Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amanah, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions' dens and the mountain haunts of leopards. You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have*

*stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume more than any spice! Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon. You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain. Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices. You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon.”* We see here Solomon carefully helping his bride. She has ‘stolen his heart’. He has a strong desire for her. But he sees she is naturally hesitant. The poet describes beautifully the symbolism of the women’s situation (Song of Songs 4:12). *“You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride, you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.”* She said all along that she wanted to do it God’s way. She did not want to be tempted before time. And now, as that beautiful garden she can give herself to her husband.

But this giving of self to each other takes care and tenderness. Solomon speaks to his bride about her apprehension (Song of Songs 4:8) *“Come with me from Lebanon, my bride. Descend from the crest of Amanah, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, from the lions’ dens and the mountain haunts of leopards.”* This is understood to refer to her apprehension, her fear of giving herself. Solomon recognizes her anxiety. He is aware of the character of the person he has married. He is deeply aware of her feelings. So, he is not rushing. He gently helps her. There is grace and gentleness here. Sexual intimacy is not just an automatic bodily response. Sexual intimacy involves your whole being. It involves two people who have their distinctive personalities. And therefore, they have their own distinctive strengths and weaknesses, hang ups, fears, inhibitions. Which is why you must have the freedom in marriage if you are going to express real love. It takes time and care. Solomon here in the Song demonstrates that. He takes his time and is gentle. There is no hurry because they are not somewhere they should not be.

Then we see that the woman is ready. She invites him to take possession of her garden. (Song of Songs 4:16) *“Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere. Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.”* Note the change from ‘my garden’ to ‘his garden’. She is his now. She is giving herself. Real love is about giving and receiving not taking. And then we see the husband receiving his bride (Song of Songs 5:1) *“I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honey comb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk.”* The poetry here indicates the joy and

pleasure of giving and receiving in love. And in the context here of marriage this act of love is also a praise, a thanksgiving to God. In fact, God is present and gives his benediction. (Song of Songs 5:1) *"Eat, O friends and drink, drink your fill, O lovers"*. In other words, God is saying 'I am delighted for you. You enjoy yourselves. This is right and pleasing in my sight. This is my gift to you.'

Here we see the most important aspect of being free in Christ and of the freedom we have in marriage. It is the freedom we have in knowing we live 'Coram Deo', always in the presence of God. And that he approves of what we do. We are creatures of God. We cannot escape him or his laws, nor our own conscience. The only way to experience real freedom in any part of life is to follow Jesus, to see his Word as our guide. And the Song of Songs does that so beautifully as it guides us in the way of love between a man and a woman.

The Word of God also tells us that if our garden was not locked and has been trampled upon, that in Jesus there can be forgiveness and the opportunity for the garden to flower again. The Bible portrays that so beautifully as it speaks of the church as the bride of Christ. We are most certainly not pure and without sin. We are not perfectly beautiful but very blemished. But Christ our bridegroom draws us to himself. (Ephesians 5:25-27) *"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy... and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish..."* Through Jesus, he looks at us as perfect. In his love and gentleness, he teaches us to love him in return. And in the forgiveness and freedom he gives us, we as the church respond 'Lord we love you. We want to live all of life with you, and for you.'