

THE GREATEST SONG

Song of Songs 1:1

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Most of us will be familiar with the 'Top 40 Songs' on radio. Each week there is the countdown to the number one song of the week. We all know that many of these songs are love songs. Songs of 'chemistry and attraction', of 'romance and desire' or broken hearts and feeling down. Every generation has its love songs. The music changes and the language changes but it comes down to the same thing. In every generation, as the young discover the exhilaration of being in love or the pain of being heartbroken, so many turn to poetry to express their feelings. This is nothing new. It has been happening for thousands of years. It is part of being human, of being men and women who are attracted to each other. What we have here with the Song of Songs is a love song. The name means it is the greatest of songs. The Hebrew way of saying something was the best, was to repeat the word. Like 'Lord of lords', 'King of kings', 'Holy of holies'. So, the 'Song of Songs' is the number one love song. When you read through it you will see it clearly is a love song.

It was a tradition in ancient times that the young men should not read this song until they were 30 years of age. It was felt that only then were they mature enough to handle it. Origen, the third century theologian wrote: 'I advise everyone who is not yet rid of the vexation of the flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passions of this bodily nature to refrain from reading this book.' Still today commentators worry about how to explain the sensuous poetry without giving offence or stirring up passionate thoughts. For this song is openly dealing with the love between a man and a woman. It is a love song that describes the attraction, the romance, the desires, struggles and marriage of two lovers. Perhaps that is why this book is seldom preached on. Some complain the church has not spoken enough about love and sex. We need to teach young people God's way on these things. But then many find it hard to talk about. We usually keep our talk of romance and intimacy to ourselves. And perhaps rightly so. But then how do we teach about this area of life as a church?

Another problem in dealing with this song in the Bible is finding the key to interpret it. In the past it was often seen as being too romantically explicit to be in the canon of the Scripture. There were questions as to whether it should be part of the Bible. What was

its religious value? It makes no reference to God. It doesn't teach any doctrine. It was Rabbi Akiba who defended it saying 'God forbid that anyone ever had doubts about the Song of Songs! For all the world is not equal to the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is Holy of Holies.' To get over the problem of the obviously sensual poetry this song was for a long time interpreted allegorically. It was seen as being only about Jesus and his love for the church. But many today see the song in its more natural sense. It provides us with a very real, poetic way, of telling us what God has to say about love, romance and marriage.

It is essential for us to look at this issue of love and intimacy because we live in a sex saturated society. We are bombarded on all sides with sexual messages. The internet provides easy access to all sorts of explicit materials and dating sites. But we need to know what God thinks about it all. His perspective is important because he knows how it is meant to be. After all, God created us. He made us whole persons, not just spirits. Marriage and intimacy are his idea. It was God who said that all he had made was 'very good'. In a sense this song celebrates the creation story. Much of the song is set in a garden and harks back to the garden of Eden. The song celebrates how God created us men and women for mutual support and enjoyment. As Genesis (2:24,25) says "*A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they shall become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame.*"

Today, as an introduction to the song we will concentrate on verse 1, "Solomon's Song of Songs" or as another version puts it "This is Solomon's song of songs, more wonderful than any other." As we said, this is a song, it is poetry. It is not a narrative that has a dramatic story line. It is not doctrine with precise theological definition, like reading the Apostle Paul. It is a song. It is written to touch our hearts. Like a good song it draws us in and touches our feelings with its imagery. It draws us in because we can identify with the characters and their feelings. It touches us at the point our own emotions. We can see it's a song not only by the poetry. But, like any song it also has a chorus which is the heart of its message. (Song of Songs 2:7) "*Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*" This chorus is repeated three times and is the controlling theme of the song. In the Bible when something is repeated it means listen up, this is important. When it recurs three times, it's the Hebrew way of saying this is super important! The Message translates this chorus as "*Don't excite love, don't stir it up until the time is ripe-and you are ready.*"

There is so much we can relate to in this song. But we may need help in culturally translating the poetry. Some things we will get straight away. For example, all generations know about being 'lovesick'. As chapter 5:8 says *"Young women of Jerusalem, I charge you: if you find my love, tell him that I am lovesick."* The NIV says *"...I am faint with love."* But today's woman would not be flattered if she got a Valentines card which said (Song of Songs 6:5-6) *"Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep coming up from the washing. Each has its twin, not one of them is missing."* Perhaps the Message makes it clearer *"Your hair flows and shimmers like a flock of goats in the distance streaming down a hillside in the sunshine. Your smile is generous and full - expressive and strong and clean."* We probably relate better to the old poetry such as 'Roses are red, violets are blue, but no flower is as beautiful as you'. So, we will need to do some translating to appreciate the poetry.

Now the fact that we have a love song says something about how God wants us to approach this subject of love, intimacy, marriage. Namely as poetry. Poetry asks the reader to feel something, not just think about it. It is something that comes from the heart. It is something that stirs the depths of our being. Too often intimacy is simply seen as a physical thing. Sex education can be too much about the technical 'how-to', and not enough about the context. Too little is said about the total reality of the way God intended it to be. Our sexuality is an expression of our total being. Yet too often the poetry is missing, the expression of the loving heart for the other person. Too often sex is seen as an act on its own, a fulfillment of our own need. It should rather be an expression of deep giving to our spouse to whom we are committed. True love is a song of the heart. In the biblical sense the 'heart' refers to the total person. It refers to our character, our faith, our personality, our physical being. It's about all of our personhood. When to people love each other, they long for each other, for the total person each one is. They are attracted to each other's character, their values, their faith, goals and dreams, as well as their looks. Together in life they want to share their faith and goals. That's why, as we see in the song, it's so important to be spending lots of time talking together. True love means we desire to make each other grow and be fulfilled in all aspects of our being.

The Song of Songs acknowledges the strong physical attraction that there can be between a man and a woman. (Song of Songs 1:15&16) The man says *"How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are like doves."* And the woman replies *"How handsome you are my lover. Oh, how charming"*. Note her longing for him (Song of Songs 1:2,4) *"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth... Take me away with you..."* But, you notice the context, the recurring refrain we mentioned before (Song of Songs 2:7) *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the doves of the field. Do not*

arouse or waken love until it so desires". All God's gifts and pleasures have a place, a time, a context. This song says love involves our whole being and finds fulfillment in marriage.

Now we note that our text says Solomon was the author of the song. It is "Solomon's Song of Songs". That raises a problem. For we know from 1 Kings 11 that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. You could argue that Solomon lost the poetry of this song. You wonder how he could be the author of this song where the true ideal of love and marriage are given. The song calls for the commitment of one woman for one man, a total giving to each other for life. The two lovers have eyes only for each other. So how does Solomon fit in here? There are those who wonder if Solomon wrote the song at all. Other commentators suggest he wrote it when he was young. As a young king he was granted much wisdom as 1 Kings 3 points out. He wrote many proverbs and thousands of songs (1 Kings 4:32). Maybe he wrote this love song before it all went wrong. You can imagine Solomon looking at his father David. He had his own disasters in this area with his numerous wives and his affair with Bathsheba. As a wise young man, Solomon might have said 'That is not the way to go!' But, on the other hand, there are commentators who say Solomon wrote the song after he had learned from his own mistakes. It's possible he realized how wrong he had been. David repented. We remember how he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Yet he turned back to God. And the poetry of the psalms that came from his heart after that was indeed the poetry of God. So, it is possible Solomon wrote this song later in life. There is no sure way of knowing.

The thing is that connecting Solomon to this song is a message in itself. Here is the perfect love song attributed to Solomon who had 700 wives. In other words, the Word of God is for sinners. It shows the way of redemption by forgiveness. And this is important for us to know. Because in this aspect of life, many have not followed God's way for love and intimacy. Many have messed up here. Perhaps we feel that we can never live up to the biblical ideal shown in this song. But this song does speak to all of us, even if we have failed God and others. As the song speaks of real love, it hints at the love of Christ for his church. Think of the words of Ephesians 5:25-27 *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."* When we confess our failures to God we are forgiven and given a fresh start. So, no matter what you have done in the past, God can still put this song in your heart. His ideal for love can be yours through his grace.

Now this looking at Jesus leads us to consider how we will interpret this song. As I said before this song has a long history of various interpretations. The Puritans saw the song as allegory and preached many sermons on it. But not a word was said about the practical realities of love and marriage. Everything was seen as a symbol that stood for the love between Jesus and the church. For example, in 1:2 *"the kisses of his mouth"* referred to being pardoned. In verse 3, the *"fragrance of his perfumes"* referred to the excellence of Christ's name. Much of the more recent interpretations see the song very much in the vein of a love song. I will be approaching it that way. The song deals with the way a couple can be attracted to each other, their intimacy, their love and commitment to each other. But the Bible does see love and marriage as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. That's clear from Ephesians 5. There Paul is dealing with husbands and wives. Then suddenly he says, *"This is a great mystery, but I am talking of Christ and the church."* So, this Song of Songs is beautiful poetry about the love between a man and a woman. Yet is also about a higher reality. The two are intertwined. We cannot really understand what true love is, unless we comprehend the sacrificial love of Jesus for the church. These two aspects will be seen as we go through this song. We will be very practical and real. Yet, always with an eye on Jesus. That's because Christ's love for the church is the key we need if we are to understand God's way for love. The Song of Songs can only be truly sung by those who know Jesus. For he shows us true love. He shows us the heart of the poetry.