

THE STRAINS ON LOVE

Song of Songs 5:2-6:9

Leo Douma

21st October 2018



I have a problem with fairytales, the way they end ‘...and they lived happily ever after.’ In a fairy tale there is a build up in the drama and then all the problems are solved. Prince Charming saves Sleeping Beauty and, of course, they live happily ever after. It is a nice ending. It is satisfying so that we feel good and children can go to sleep. But it can reflect false expectations: once a couple is married it will all be good. An engaged couple once said to me ‘When we get married it will be wonderful. Just the two of us, no one else to hassle us. Things are not the best now but then it will be all good.’ The Bible is more honest and realistic. It says (Job 5:7) *“Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards.”* It knows that into every life and every marriage there will be trouble.

Now in the Song of Songs we see this realism. In our text we see that the love of the couple is tested. This is seen in the dream of the woman. She says (Song of Songs 5:2) *“I slept but my heart was awake”*. That’s the Hebrew way of saying she is dreaming. This dream is very different to the one she had previously in chapter 3. In the lead up to that first dream the woman expressed her deep longing for Solomon. He was always on her mind. The one thing that mattered more than anything else was to be with him. She wanted to possess him (Song of Songs 2:16) *“My beloved is mine...”* Wanting him so much she feared life without him. That came out in that first dream. There we saw her going out at night into the city looking for him. The watchmen were helpful. And everything turned out good. Her dream ended that way because it was good with her and her man.

But now, here in this second dream, things go sour. It’s a reflection of a strain in their relationship. In this dream we see that her husband is knocking on the door and calling out with words of affection (Song of Songs 5:2) *“Listen! My lover is knocking: ‘Open to me my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one...”* In this dream her husband’s love is not in question. She hears him pile one compliment on another. But look at her reaction. Despite his obvious expressions of love, in her dream she can’t be bothered to get up. He has been out in the cold and damp (Song of Songs 5:2) *“Open to me... My*

head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night." Let's assume he has been at work all day and is tired. But she replies (Song of Songs 5:3) *"I have taken off my robe- must I put it on again? I have washed my feet- must I soil them again?"* In other words, he is late, and she is in bed already. She is tired and doesn't want to get up and open the door. What a change! Her previous attitude was reflected in her first dream. There she would run through the streets in her pajamas just to be with him. Now she can't be bothered to get out of bed, even though he speaks so affectionately. What has happened? She still loves him. We see that when she says (Song of Songs 5:4) *"My lover thrust his hand through the latch opening; my heart began to pound for him."* So, the problem is not lack of love. What is it then?

Here's something I tell couples in premarital counselling: 'Conflict is going to be part of your relationship. It will be part of the healthiest, most romantic of relationships. What is important is knowing how to deal with it'. Conflict will come because there are two sinners close together in a relationship. Also, things can change after a couple are married. It is a common in marriages for a subtle shift in the centre of your attention moving away from your spouse. That person who was everything to you, who was constantly on your mind, who you could not wait to see, is seen differently. When married you are with each other every day. You start to see each other's weaknesses and quirks. Other things begin to dominate in life. Children may come along. Both of you are tied up with work. They have a way of crowding out your attention towards your partner. You can begin to take each other for granted. It's no longer, like the song says: 'You are always on my mind'.

This song is also a picture of Christ and the church. We can be so busy with our church programs, and work, studies, sports, that our personal relationship with Jesus is no longer the central thing in our lives. We do love our Lord. We do trust Jesus. But we take him for granted. We find it difficult to find time for devotions. It is tragic if the church, Christ's bride, no longer sees the key to its existence is relating with Jesus. That's the complaint Jesus made towards the church of Ephesus in Revelation (2:4) *"Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first"*. The relationship between Jesus and the church is the model for our marriages. If we are to have good marriages, we must make our spouse our number one. As has been said 'Your spouse should not be second to your parents, friends, coworkers or even to your children.' We are to be thinking of each other. Setting aside regular time to go out and talk. Otherwise you could slowly start a slide of talking less and drifting apart.

That is the fear of the woman in this love song. In her dream she realizes her love for her man and gets up. But when she got to the door her husband was gone. We note

her despair (Song of Songs 5:6) *"I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him, but he did not answer."* As in her first dream she has a great fear she has lost him. But now she is married, and she has ignored him. The consequence of her action hits her. Her lover has gone. In desperation, as in her previous dream, she goes out into the city to find him. But this time it all goes wrong. This time the watchmen do not help her. (Song of Songs 5:7) *"The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls!"* In her dream things goes badly because in her subconscious she knows things are not well in the relationship. She feels guilty for not responding well to her husband.

But his love has remained constant for her. That comes through in her dream. When his wife failed to respond he didn't react negatively. Rather, he responded by letting her know he loved her. In her dream he leaves a token of love on the door handle. Perhaps her favourite perfume (Song of Songs 5:5) *"I arose to open for my lover and my hand dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock."* It's a loving gesture but we can imagine he is frustrated because he has gone for a while to let it ease off. Now we men might think this is not very real. Being calm and expressing love is not how we would respond. We would be more likely to react, and perhaps not pleasantly. But, as I will constantly remind you, this love song is also about Jesus and the church. In the song the husband models the way Jesus draws us back to himself. No matter how we respond to him, or how we fail him, Christ's love for us, his church, is constant. He does not react badly. He does not push us away. He will never leave us or forsake us, despite our sin. And it is that love, that grace, that constant gentleness that draws us back to him. It's his grace that gives us the safe opening to repent and receive his forgiveness. Jesus is the model for our marriages. Remember again Ephesians 5 *"Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church..."* We might say 'Get real we wouldn't act all loving like Solomon here in this song'. But the Bible says, 'You get real. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you will strive to be like him. And that includes in your marriage as well.'

The woman in this song responds to the love of her husband. She realizes again what a wonderful man he is. She realizes her failure to express love towards her husband. And so, she says to her friends (Song of Songs 5:8) *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—if you find my beloved, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love."* She wants him to know, despite her actions she does deeply love him. We see her friends encourage her to express the good points about her husband (Song of Songs 5:9) *"How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than others, that you so charge us?"* These are the 'daughters of Jerusalem' who

witnessed the wedding of the couple (3:11). And as witnesses and friends they encourage the woman to speak of her husband's good points, to praise her man. Such friends and family have a great responsibility towards our marriages. It's not for nothing they are often asked in the wedding vows to express their support for the couple. Too often when we are down and complain about our spouse, friends can add their litany of 'I always thought he was no good'. I have on occasion, when helping a couple with their marriage difficulty, told the family to stay out of it because they were making things worse. But these are good friends, here in the song. 'Tell us how your beloved is better than others.' In other words, remember the things about your man that attracted you to him. And the woman does. It is now her turn to praise her husband the way he had praised her beauty. (Song of Songs 5:10-16) *"My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels. His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. His arms are rods of gold set with topaz. His body is like polished ivory decorated with lapis lazuli. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars. His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem."* Here the woman is saying that her man is someone grand and handsome. She describes him from head to feet. The most valuable and majestic things of nature in her time are used to define him: the gold, ivory, marble, sapphire, jewels, spice, the cedar of Lebanon- the tree of trees in those days. For her he is special. A man among men. And in listing his good points she realizes even more how much she loves him. She knows he is a man of character and of standing before God. A man whose love has not stopped, despite her wrong. She knows he is committed to her, no matter what. He has made a covenant of love he will not break.

So, when her friends ask (Song of Songs 6:1) *"Where has your beloved gone, most beautiful of women? Which way did your beloved turn, that we may look for him with you?"*, she says 'It's OK'. She realizes she knows where he is. (Song of Songs 6:2) *"My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and to gather lilies."* How does she know that? They belong to each other. They know each other. She knows he has a favourite spot, 'his garden'. It's probably his favourite place he likes to go to have some time out. She knows he is not avoiding her or avoiding conflict. He responded to her with his love gesture at the door. And now he has been taking the time to think through what has occurred. It's important to realize the different way people can deal with stuff. Women are often more verbal and need to talk. Men often need space to sort things through before they can sit down and talk about things. It is a good time to pray and be reminded of how Jesus has been gracious to us, and to ask

him to help us do likewise. So, Solomon's time out is a gesture of grace. It helps him to respond gently rather than react unhelpfully.

Realizing this, the wife goes confidently to the garden. And we see her confidence is valid. As soon as Solomon sees her, he receives her in love. He immediately tells her how beautiful she is. (Song of Songs 6:4-9). What strikes us is that his description is that it's the same as the praise on their wedding night. So, his love for her has not diminished. In fact, he sees her as even more special. He says (Song of Songs (6:9) "*My dove, my perfect one, is unique.*") She is special to him because as they quietly talk things through, she demonstrates a willingness to show humility. Her response to him had not been helpful and she acknowledges that. It takes honesty and courage to do that. It is something unique in a world where people are prone to avoid responsibility and blame others. Her response is the fruit of his love. It gave her the safe space to be honest and still be loved and adored. So it is between Jesus and us. We are very special to him because we are the fruit of his love. Our perfection is by his suffering and death. It is as we are honest about our sin that we are embraced by his grace.

Life after the wedding is not happily ever after. Conflict is normal. What is important is how we handle it. If we imitate Jesus it will give us a better marriage. And we will demonstrate something of the wonder of Jesus.