

THE EXPRESSION OF REAL LOVE

Song of Songs 6:10-8:7

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I want to put it to you that 'Marriage is not a 50/50 proposition'. That would imply 'I'll do my bit and you do your bit. Then we will get along fine. If you don't do your bit I am free not to do my bit'. A good, long marriage needs much more than a 50/50 approach. As someone put it 'Marriage is not 50/50. Divorce is 50/50. Marriage has to be 100/100%. It is not dividing everything in half. But giving everything, you have got.' It's about giving ourselves, completely, working hard at the relationship, never giving up. As our love song says (Song of Songs 8:6) *"... love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave..."* That is powerful.

Previously, in this love song, we saw there was stress in the marriage which came out in the woman's dream. She couldn't be bothered to get out of bed and open the door for her husband. When she realized her wrong and went out to find him, she was beaten up by the watchmen. The dream reflected that the couple's focus had shifted from seeing each other as their number one. That can happen in a marriage when the busyness of life stops a married couple spending quality time with each other, seeing each other as the most important in their life. A remedy is what the Apostle Paul says (Ephesians 5:21): *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"*. If you love Jesus, you will put each other first. The idea of doing that seems terrible in the ears of a 'me first' culture. 'If you always let the other person go first, you will miss out!' That's true if you are selfish. But if both husband and wife see the other as first in their life they won't miss out.

We see that with the woman. She realized she had slipped up in seeing her husband as number one in her life. So, she decided to see her husband in his garden and apologized. And he reciprocated by showing she was first in his life. (Song of Songs 6:8&9) *"...my dove, my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her ..."* Because of the way Solomon received his wife, her submission to him did not belittle her at all. In fact, the opposite. The Song shows her as being held in high esteem (Song of Songs 6:10) *"Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?"* Solomon and his royal court acknowledge how wonderful she is. It is a respect and honour husband and wife share together. Notice how she is called 'Shulamite' (Song of Songs 6:13) *"Come*

back, come back, O Shulamite; ...!" The name is the feminine form of Solomon. So, we could call her 'Mrs. Solomon'. The wife is still a country girl at heart; a keeper of vineyards (1:6). We see her in the royal garden and her interest in the 'new growth' (Song of Songs 6:11) *"I went down to the grove of nut trees to look at the new growth in the valley, to see if the vines had budded or the pomegranates were in bloom."* But while she may see herself in her simple country terms, she realizes how highly she is praised by Solomon. (Song of Songs 6:12) *"Before I realized it, my desire (soul) set me among the royal chariots of my people"*. The word for 'desire' in the Hebrew is 'soul'. Her 'soul', her being, is held high with royalty.

But the woman is praised not only because shares honour with her husband the king. There is high praise for her on her own terms. And since this is a love song that is expressed in terms of her beauty. Notice the intensity of the praise (Song of Songs 6:13) *"Come back, come back, O Shulamite; come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!"* She asks modestly (Song of Songs 7:13) *"Why would you gaze on the Shulamite as on the dance of Mahanaim?"* It's not clear what Mahanaim is. We can say it seems to have been a village nearby where there was a festival dance. Solomon tells her why he would 'gaze' at her: because to him she is gorgeous. He is entranced as he watches her gracious movements as she dances (Song of Songs 7:1-5) *"How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince's daughter! Your graceful legs are like jewels, the work of an artist's hands. Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies. Your breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel. Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses."* Since she is dancing, his praise starts at her feet and travels up to her hair. On two previous occasions Solomon listed seven items which implied she was perfect. Now he lists ten, which was the Hebrew way of saying she is, in his eyes, wow, perfect plus! That means there has been growth in their love. Yes, they have been through conflict. But the effort they have put into the relationship, has deepened their resolve and desire for each other. They have grown to appreciate each other even more. Love often grows stronger like our muscles. When we exercise hard we create little tears in the muscle fiber. When the fibers heal they thicken and create stronger muscle. The stuff we go through as a married couple, can heal to a stronger love. Especially when we reach for each other with grace and care.

That care and devotion draws a response. Solomon says (Song of Songs 7:6-9) *"How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights! Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take*

hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine. May the wine go straight to my beloved, flowing gently over lips and teeth." We have to admit the language is very sensual here. It is even more so than anything before their marriage or even on their honeymoon. This sexual expression is an indication that their marriage is growing ever deeper in love. Their desire for each other continues to grow and is deeply pleasing and enriching.

Now notice the order of events here. The lovers first deal with how they are relating. They nourish their relationship. Their ongoing commitment to each other is steadfast. They resolve their conflicts. They submit to each other. And the sexual expression naturally follows on from that. Not only for the man who appreciates his wife's beauty. But also, for the wife who receives him. She says (Song of Songs 7:10) *"I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me."* Yes, she 'belongs' to him, she is his wife. She is committed to him. She is committed to give herself. And his 'desire' is for her. The Hebrew word can also mean to be 'affectionate' or even to be 'abundant'. In other words, his desire, his affection causes her to glow and grow abundantly.

His affection generates her response (Song of Songs 7:11-13) *"Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom— there I will give you my love. The mandrakes send out their fragrance, and at our door is every delicacy, both new and old, that I have stored up for you, my beloved."* As the country girl she wants to be alone with her man in her favourite places. She wants some privacy from the busyness of the royal court. It is something all married couples should do regularly. Get away alone together for a romantic weekend. (Song of Songs 8:1-4) *"If only you were to me like a brother, who was nursed at my mother's breasts! Then, if I found you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me. I would lead you and bring you to my mother's house—she who has taught me. I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates. His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me. Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires."* In the Middle East it is unacceptable for a man and woman to even embrace each other. Only a brother or sister could spontaneously express some affection. So, her desire is strong for her man. But she reminds herself there is a time and place (Song of Songs 8:4) *"Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires."* It reminds us that sexual intimacy is not only reserved for marriage but also in the privacy of marriage. Sexual intimacy is not for observers. It is not entertainment. It is the intimate giving of husband and wife to each other.

We see the couple coming to the woman's country house. In the song her 'friends' see them coming (Song of Songs 8:5) *"Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?"* We picture them coming arm in arm. And there they are under the apple tree of the woman's family home. (Song of Songs (8:5-7) *"Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth. 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 blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned"*. See the unshakable commitment they pledge to each other. 'Love is as strong as death, its jealousy as unyielding as the grave.' That is powerful. There is nothing as strong, as absolute, as final, as death. The grave never yields the dead. Only God, in Jesus Christ, has overcome death. That's why Christ's resurrection is such a staggering event. The couple here confirm their commitment of love. It's for all of life, giving everything. It is a love that 'burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away'. What a flame it must be if rivers cannot quench it. We in the Hills live in one of the worst bush fire regions of the world. But always, eventually, we can put out the fires. But the poet says this love is 'unquenchable'. There is no doubt that this song is sensual. It deals openly about the love between a man and woman. But it's not just physical passion. The sexual expressions in this song are built on a far deeper love. It is unfortunate that in the English language we have only one word for love. If we say a man loves a woman, do we mean sexual intimacy (eros) 'Wow, you are gorgeous'. Or companionship (philia) 'My wife is my best friend'. Or total commitment (agape) 'I am yours for life, till death do us part'. Feelings of passion or even mutual companionship can change. Eros as flame can flare up quickly. Philia may be more steady. But both can be 'quenched'. A fight, tension in the marriage can see that love fade. But agape is unquenchable. It does not rely on getting good vibes from our spouse. Agape is an unchanging attitude of total commitment. So that no matter what, it keeps giving, and forgiving.

Our song sees love being defined that way when it says love is *"...like a mighty flame"*. The Hebrew says it is the 'flame of Yah'. 'Yah' is a shortened form of 'Yahweh', the covenant name of God. He is 'I am', the ever present, never changing, faithful God who keeps his promises. That is why this love is so strong, so unquenchable. It is the love of God so deep he "gave his only son". At the cross of Jesus, we see a love so unyielding that even from the depths of hell Jesus cried out 'My God, my God'. Totally rejected, Jesus still clung to his Father. There Jesus, in his great love, gave himself for our forgiveness and hope. Christ's love does not depend on how good we are. It is a love that goes on and on. Despite our daily failure it is his love that holds us close in God's

grace. Now that love, that total commitment, is not without feelings. In fact, it draws from us the deepest heartfelt response: 'Oh God, your grace is amazing. That you should love me. That you should keep loving me, despite my failures towards you. My God, I thank you. I love you!' It is this love, this unyielding commitment that the lovers in our song pledge to each other. It is both private heart commitment and public (Song of Songs 8:6) *"Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal over your arm"*. It's like putting your wedding ring on your finger for all to see.

It is this love that is so needed in marriages. If we see love only as the passion, then with some conflict, or neglecting each other, it's easy doubt our love. It can be tempting to look elsewhere. Please hear the message in this song. Love requires work. It requires commitment. It requires giving and sacrifice. Yet when we give, then we will receive, powerfully, wonderfully. That has been seen so clearly in this song. The deep feelings, the joy and the sensual passion are so obvious. It may be you find it difficult to find a reason to love your partner. Then do it for Christ's sake. Start there and build with that. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ".