



# The Greatest Song

A Collection of Sermons from the Song of Songs series

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*September – November 2018*

## **THE GREATEST SONG**

### *Song of Songs 1:1*

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 two 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.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What were some of the love songs that were sung when you were young? Did you write any poetry?
- What's the value of the Bible using poetry, a love song, to speak to us about romance and love instead of theological definitions or rules?
- Do you think it's needed for the church to talk openly about relationships and romance to our young people, the community, each other? How is that best done?
- How can Christ's love for the church be a model for our relationships?

## Solomon's Song of Songs 1:1-2:7

**She**           <sup>2</sup>Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—  
for your love is more delightful than wine.  
<sup>3</sup>Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;  
your name is like perfume poured out.  
No wonder the young women love you!  
<sup>4</sup>Take me away with you—let us hurry!  
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

**Friends**       We rejoice and delight in you;  
we will praise your love more than wine.

**She**           How right they are to adore you!  
<sup>5</sup>Dark am I, yet lovely,  
daughters of Jerusalem,  
dark like the tents of Kedar,  
like the tent curtains of Solomon.  
<sup>6</sup>Do not stare at me because I am dark,  
because I am darkened by the sun.  
My mother's sons were angry with me  
and made me take care of the vineyards;  
my own vineyard I had to neglect.  
<sup>7</sup>Tell me, you whom I love,  
where you graze your flock  
and where you rest your sheep at midday.  
Why should I be like a veiled woman  
beside the flocks of your friends?

**Friends**       <sup>8</sup>If you do not know, most beautiful of women,  
follow the tracks of the sheep  
and graze your young goats  
by the tents of the shepherds.

**He**           <sup>9</sup>I liken you, my darling, to a mare  
among Pharaoh's chariot horses.  
<sup>10</sup>Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,  
your neck with strings of jewels.  
<sup>11</sup>We will make you earrings of gold,  
studded with silver.

She           <sup>12</sup> While the king was at his table,  
                  my perfume spread its fragrance.  
<sup>13</sup> My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh  
                  resting between my breasts.  
<sup>14</sup> My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms  
                  from the vineyards of En Gedi.

He           <sup>15</sup> How beautiful you are, my darling!  
                  Oh, how beautiful!  
                  Your eyes are doves.

She           <sup>16</sup> How handsome you are, my beloved!  
                  Oh, how charming!  
                  And our bed is verdant.

He           <sup>17</sup> The beams of our house are cedars;  
                  our rafters are firs.

She           <sup>2</sup> I am a rose of Sharon,  
                  a lily of the valleys.

He           <sup>2</sup> Like a lily among thorns  
                  is my darling among the young women.

She           <sup>3</sup> Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest  
                  is my beloved among the young men.  
                  I delight to sit in his shade,  
                  and his fruit is sweet to my taste.  
<sup>4</sup> Let him lead me to the banquet hall,  
                  and let his banner over me be love.  
<sup>5</sup> Strengthen me with raisins,  
                  refresh me with apples,  
                  for I am faint with love.  
<sup>6</sup> His left arm is under my head,  
                  and his right arm embraces me.  
<sup>7</sup> 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.

## **BEGINNING OF LOVE**

*Song of Songs 1:1-2:7*

Somewhere between grades six and nine we see a change occurring with boys and girls. They begin to be attracted to each other. Previously a boy wouldn't dare hang out with a girl. Now he sees the girl differently. For some reason he hasn't worked out, he likes her more than other girls and would like to spend time with her. That's the God-designed power of attraction. It has been defined as the 'natural feeling of being drawn to other individuals and desiring their company.' We can't always explain why it is. We can be in a room full of people yet find ourselves attracted to one particular person. It seems they have a certain something we can't always define. Often, we call it 'chemistry'. This concept of attraction is what we find here in our text.

We have here the words of a young woman very attracted to king Solomon. We don't know who she was. She is an unknown in the palace. She was a country girl who worked on her family's farm. (Song of Songs 1:6) *"Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyard"*. She felt out of place at the palace. *"I am dark, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon."* Kedar was in the desert and the reference is to the Bedouin tents made of black goat skin. The beautiful women of the place, the 'daughters of Jerusalem' had soft, pale skin. They carefully looked after themselves and were always sheltered from the sun. They had all their beauty aids and make up. The women who went into the harem of the kings in those days usually had twelve months of beauty treatment. But the woman in our song had not looked after herself. She says (Song of Songs 1:6) *"My own vineyard I have neglected."* She had a deeply tanned appearance because her brothers made her work out in the sun all day. She is under the authority of her brothers because it seems there is no father. In Middle East tradition a woman, before she was married, was always under the authority of a male, her father or brothers. Our young woman feels inferior. She comes on the scene with no name and no fame. She is not part of the in scene of the palace. She felt at a disadvantage to have Solomon notice her.

She is also different in another way. For her love is not a game. She cares nothing for the intrigues at the royal court. She does not use clever flirtation. She has no refined manner to attract the attention of the king. She is very straightforward in her approach. She has her heart set on Solomon and openly admits it. (Song of Songs 1:2) *"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth- for your love is more delightful than wine"*. She dreams of what it would be like to be kissed by him. She already longs for the king to embrace her. But

notice something. She longs for Solomon, not just because he is good looking. Yes, he is handsome with a delightful aftershave (Song of Songs 1:3) *"Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfume."* Men wore a lot more 'perfume' or fragrance in those days. With a lack of water there was not a lot of opportunity for a good wash. She loves his smell, the fragrance of his perfume. But there is more than attracts her. (Song of songs 1:3b) *"...your name is like perfume poured out."* That's significant. In the Hebrew culture a name was not just a label. Rather it was an indication of the person's character and reputation. Solomon's reputation was outstanding. Even the Queens of Sheba came all the way to Jerusalem to hear his wisdom. It was God who had given Solomon his wisdom. So, his 'name' had much to do with God. He was a man 'blessed of God'. And in the eyes of this young woman this is very important. As she says, (Song of Songs 1:3) *"No wonder the maidens love you."* This is not like the TV adverts where the women chase a man because of the aftershave he wears. It's the fragrance of his name that makes the heads turn. He has character, wisdom and standing in the community. So, the woman's attraction to Solomon was due to his 'good looks'. Yes! But even more to his character. To his faith. This is important for our young people. We are aware that there is often a strong physical attraction. 'She gorgeous!' 'What a hunk!' But when looking for a life partner we should be looking at their character, their faith.

Often strong physical attraction can set off a real sense of desire. We see as the woman says (Song of Songs 1:4) *"Take me away with you-let us hurry. Let the king bring me into his chambers."* Her dreaming takes her way beyond what the relationship is. The fantasy fades away to reality. You can see the dilemma the woman has. She is a sunburnt farmgirl. He is a handsome, famous king. How is she ever going to get Solomon to notice her? As she says (Song of Songs 1:7) *"Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?"* The woman is talking to herself. She uses the imagery of shepherds. She wonders what she and Solomon have in common. Where can she meet him? One thing she will not do is flaunt herself. She will not cheapen herself and lure him like a 'veiled woman', a prostitute. She wants to be received for who she is as a person. Not just for her body. There is another good lesson in that.

But really, she doesn't have to worry. We see that she has already been noticed. Solomon says (Song of Songs 1:8), *"If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds."* Here we get the first hint as to how he feels about her. They have not met yet. But he has already noticed her. She is in his eyes 'the most beautiful of women.' She does not have to do anything to get his attention. She just has to go on being who she is. Just come as you

are 'and graze your young goats by the tens of the shepherds.' She has already got his attention. Solomon has already noticed how special she is and is attracted as well. (Song of Songs 1:9) *"I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh"*. That may not seem much of a compliment in our ears. But remember Solomon was very keen on horses. He had over twelve thousand of them. The Egyptian horses were beautiful horses. Especially when harnessed with all the colours of the harness and chariot. If there was a mare amongst these glorious war horses, those stallions, it would cause havoc. So, we could say that Solomon is saying, in his view, the woman is so beautiful that when she walks into a room, she causes all the heads to turn. She causes a stir. Especially when her beauty is enhanced with jewelry (Song of Songs 1:10-11) *"Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver."* She has caught his eye because she is different. She stands out. Not only her natural beauty but her open character.

But the woman doesn't know this yet. She is still pining for him. (Song of Songs 1:12-14) *"While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi"*. The 'sachet of myrrh' was the equivalent of our personal deodorant. It was a little sachet containing herbs and blossoms worn around the neck. She is describing the finest fragrance: 'myrrh' with 'henna blossoms from En Gedi'. That was an oasis in a small deep valley south of the Dead Sea. In a hot dry land, it was lush with growth. Wonderful plants grew there. So, the woman is saying just as this most wonderful fragrance is always with her, so her mind is always on this man. That is how it is. Those we truly love are always on our mind. Especially when we are first in love we can't get them off our minds.

And then it happens. These two who have been longing for each other meet up. Solomon comes and speaks to her heart. (Song of Songs 1:15) *"How beautiful you are my darling! Oh, how beautiful. Your eyes are like doves"*. Dove eyes are an iridescent pearl grey with speckled flecks. She responds (Song of Songs 1:16) *"How handsome you are my lover! Oh, how charming!"* They meet outdoors, because she says, *"And our bed is verdant"*. In other words, it's covered with grass. And he replies (Song of Songs 1:17) *"The beams of our house are cedars, our rafters are firs."* So, we can imagine they are strolling in the garden and in their feelings of love the world of nature has become their house. That is the effect of being in love. The world seems theirs, and the birds in the trees sing just for them. There are numerous references to spring in the song. Everything seems fresh and new. So it often is for those who find love. Our attitude to life changes when we experience acceptance and love.

Our attitude towards ourselves changes too. Notice how the woman sees herself. (2:1) *"I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."* The unconfident, shy country girl sees herself as nothing special. She is a common flower in the marsh area of the Sharon Valley. But her man turns that into a compliment. If she is a lily all the other women are thorns. (Song of Songs 2:2) *"Like a lily among the thorns is my darling among the maidens."* And because of Solomon's acceptance and compliments she accepts herself and sees her own beauty. That is the wonder of loving relationships. We find our own potential and grow. That's because we see the value in each other and give encouragement. Solomon sees the uniqueness of this woman and compliments her. And she sees his strength. (Song of Songs 2:3) *"Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men."* She sees him as being distinct. All the other men are but trees. But he is an apple tree, with such delicious fruit. Thinking of a tree reminds us of Psalm 1. There the 'godly man' is compared with a 'tree planted by the river'. The tree was symbolic of someone who is steady. The man has faith and character. He is sweet and delightful, like the delicious apples. She enjoys his company and personality. *"I delight to sit in his shade and his fruit is sweet to my taste."* Sitting in his shade means she longs for the man to be her security and strength.

The two of them are very attracted and desire intimacy. She says (Song of Songs 2:4) *"He has taken me to the banquet hall and his banner over me is love."* A banner is a way of saying 'Here is what we stand for'. It was a rallying point for soldiers in battle reminding them to make a stand for their country. So, the man is making clear his intent. He is declaring his love for the woman. And what he stands for is love, selfless, sacrificial, spiritual love. The other way of translating the word is 'his glance towards me was intent on love' which brings out a similar idea. The two of them are strongly attracted to each other, even passionately. The woman says (Song of Songs 2:5-7) *"Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me"*. The woman is head over heels for Solomon. She is faint with love. She has a strong desire for sexually intimacy. But, she holds back. Because she knows there is a proper place for these things. And that is in marriage. That's what it means when she says, (Song of Songs 2:7) *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and does of the field, do not arouse or waken love until it so desires."* The reference to the 'gazelles' and 'does' is a tough one. Why make an oath by them? The best we can say is that the Hebrew word for 'gazelle' sounds like the Hebrew for 'LORD of Hosts'. And the Hebrew for 'does of the field' sounds like the Hebrew for 'God Almighty'. So, we can translate what she says as 'Before God do not start love making until it is appropriate'. In other words, do it God's way at the time and place he has set for it. The woman openly admits she has very

strong desires for her man. And that desire is legitimate. Sexual intimacy is a God given expression of love. But its place is in marriage.

Marriage in the Bible is a constant theme to express God's love for his people. It expresses Christ's devotion to the church. As we think through the Gospel story we think again: what was the church that Christ, the king of kings should be attracted to her. We were not only dark, but ugly with sin. And what are we ugly sinners in comparison to the glory of the angels. Yet, to what angels did God ever say (Isaiah 62:5) *"As the bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you"*. By Jesus' loving sacrifice we have been made (Ephesians 5:27) *"a radiant Church without...blemish"*. Christ by his love helps us find our true selves, forgiven, loved, with true joy in life. Having Jesus, we say with the psalmist (Psalm 73:25) *"Whom have I in heaven but you. And earth has nothing I desire besides you"*. Being attracted deeply to another is part of God's way. The question is, is the way we are relating an example of the love between Jesus and the church. Then we know we are doing it right.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What should we (did you) look for in a person to marry? (If going out, engaged, married) What first attracted you to your partner?
- What are the best places to meet a Christian partner? Where did you first meet your partner? How did you notice each other?
- Can you identify with the two in the Song of Songs, that 'spring was in the air'? Did you give compliments? Do you still?
- Do you think in our culture there is a tendency to get physical too quickly and not spend enough time getting to know each other?

Solomon's Song of Songs 1:1-2:7

She

<sup>8</sup> Listen! My beloved!

Look! Here he comes,  
leaping across the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.

<sup>9</sup> My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look! There he stands behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
peering through the lattice.

<sup>10</sup> My beloved spoke and said to me,

“Arise, my darling,  
my beautiful one, come with me.

<sup>11</sup> See! The winter is past;

the rains are over and gone.

<sup>12</sup> Flowers appear on the earth;

the season of singing has come,  
the cooing of doves  
is heard in our land.

<sup>13</sup> The fig tree forms its early fruit;

the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling;

my beautiful one, come with me.”

He

<sup>14</sup> My dove in the clefts of the rock,

in the hiding places on the mountainside,  
show me your face,

let me hear your voice;

for your voice is sweet,

and your face is lovely.

<sup>15</sup> Catch for us the foxes,

the little foxes

that ruin the vineyards,

our vineyards that are in bloom.

She

<sup>16</sup> My beloved is mine and I am his;

he browses among the lilies.

<sup>17</sup> Until the day breaks

and the shadows flee,

turn, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle  
or like a young stag  
on the rugged hills.

<sup>3</sup> All night long on my bed  
I looked for the one my heart loves;  
I looked for him but did not find him.  
<sup>2</sup> I will get up now and go about the city,  
through its streets and squares;  
I will search for the one my heart loves.  
So I looked for him but did not find him.  
<sup>3</sup> The watchmen found me  
as they made their rounds in the city.  
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”  
<sup>4</sup> Scarcely had I passed them  
when I found the one my heart loves.  
I held him and would not let him go  
till I had brought him to my mother’s house,  
to the room of the one who conceived me.  
<sup>5</sup> 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.

## **GETTING TO KNOW YOU**

*Song of Songs 2:8-3:5*

A good expensive wine takes time to mature. Cheap wines don't need that much time. It's the same with a good loving relationship. It takes time to mature. Sometimes movies give the impression that falling in love and getting married happens overnight. Girl meets her dream man. They instantly click in their adventure together. And so, they ride in the sunset and live happily ever after. But real life is not like that. Think of a teenage girl. She comes home with a strange look on her face. Her mother asks, 'What's with you?' 'Oh, nothing'. So mum probes a bit more. Her daughter bursts out with excitement 'I've met him, mum. The man of my life! I'm in love!' But a few weeks later the mother asks about the 'man in her life'. The daughter replies 'Who? On him. Alright I guess. I don't really care.' What happened? Well, they got to know each other a bit better. And realized what the other was really like after the initial physical attraction. They really were not suited to each other. The time of going out together is a very important time for a couple. It's a time to lay a foundation for a possible life together.

That is what we have here in this section of the Song of Songs. In the first part we met the farm girl who was so attracted to king Solomon. She was attracted not only by his good looks but also to his character and faith. As she said (Song of Songs 1:3) "*...your name is like perfume poured out.*". She was wondering how she could get Solomon to notice her. She was so different to all the beautiful women in the palace. Yet he had noticed her, precisely because she was different. She was so natural and open. At the end of the first part of the song we see the two have met. Now the song goes on in its poetic way to describe how their relationship developed.

The first thing we notice is the growing intensity of their wanting to be together. You can see it with the way the woman says (Song of Songs 2:8) "*Listen! My lover! Look, here he comes...*" She is constantly attuned, eager for her man to arrive. You will notice this with a teenage daughter who has met someone. As soon as the phone rings she is the first to grab it. 'I'll get it! It might be him!'. Before she wouldn't think of moving a muscle. Not for the phone. Not for the door. She would just veg playing with her iPhone. But now, when there is a knock on the door she is up and the first there. 'It might be him!' Or as our poet expresses it, "*Listen! My lover! Here he comes ...*" We notice the man is feeling the same way. The woman says (Song of Songs 2:8) "*Here he comes leaping cross the mountains, bounding over the hills.*" He is also very eager to see her. And it does not matter how far or how difficult the road. He has boundless energy. (Song of Songs 2:9) "*My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag...*" He just leaps over the mountains. If you ask a teenage

boy to get some milk from the shop, it's too much of a bother. But if he has met a girl and wants to see her he will hitchhike 50 kilometers or drive 200 kilometers just to see her for an hour or two and drive home again. Of course, all that eagerness to see his girl can be a bit embarrassing. (Song of Songs 2:9) *"There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice."* Why is he out there? Well, young men can be like that. They can get embarrassed, tongue tied in the presence of the girl they are attracted to.

What the man in our song really wants is to be alone with his girl. They want to be by themselves, so they can talk and be open with each other. They want to express their affection without being embarrassed by family or friends. (Song of Songs 2:10) *"My lover spoke to me and said 'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me."* When they are alone together they spend hours talking. They share their stories, who they are, what they like, their ideas and dreams. At that time the world seems to be the most wonderful place to be in. It might be winter, wet and miserable, but it is springtime in their hearts. (Song of Songs 2:11-13) *"See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth, the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in the land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise my darling, my beautiful one, come with me."* Whenever a couple are in love there is a freshness to life. It's like being back in paradise. Spring is in the air and everything is going for them.

Now the man and woman really want to know more about each other. (Song of Songs 2:14) *"My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely."* In Israel there were doves who would hide themselves in amongst the crevices of the canyons. They were hard to see, and it was difficult to observe their lifestyle. Think of a birdwatcher taking their field glasses to get a closer look. What the man is saying in this poetic description is that he wants to know the woman better. He wants her to reveal herself. Reveal her character, her joys and struggles, her thoughts on life. That is the main purpose of courting. It is a process of gradually revealing who you are to each other. It takes time and it comes awkwardly at first. But as a couple's relationship and trust grows they will tell each other more. It is very important that all those going out take this aspect of courtship seriously. Marriage is a total giving of self to our spouse. A complete sharing of ourselves. It involves all our thinking and faith. And that requires time for preparing. We need to make sure we are suited to each other. In lifestyle, character and above all in faith. In premarital counselling I call this: 'getting to know each other 'warts and all'. It is a tragedy that too many people rush into a physical relationship. God's gift of sexual intercourse is there to deeply bond a couple. When a couple rush

into it they are bonding with someone they don't really know yet. Too many end up living with someone they don't really know. They discover too late they don't get on.

Also involved in this 'getting to know you' time is learning how to cope together with tension and problems. That's the issues when the man says (Song of Songs 2:15) "*Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.*" The vineyards are a reference to the couple themselves. Previously the woman had said (Song of Songs 1:6) "*My own vineyard I have neglected*". There she was referring to herself. She had neglected her own appearance. Now we read their 'vineyards are in bloom'. Things are going well for them in their relationship. But they need to be aware of the 'little foxes that ruin the vineyards.' In other words, they must be careful of the little things that can mar their relationship. Quirky habits, issues from the past, different approaches to spending money, family of origin differences. These things come in at this point in a relationship. When you get to know another person well you will see their good. But also, their not so good. You will see a person like yourself who has a sinful nature. Who has a certain amount of brokenness. Someone who needs the 'body and blood' of Jesus for forgiveness. The person you love has weaknesses and faults. Together with yours these will create tension. All relationships need time for adjustment. You have to watch out for these little foxes in the vineyard' that they do not 'ruin' the relationship. A couple must learn to deal early on with these things.

Now it seems the man and woman were able to handle their problems. And so, their love developed to a higher level (Song of Songs 2:16). "*My lover is mine and I am his ...*" What we read there is a commitment to each other, a possession of one another. 'My love is mine and I am his'. They do not want a relationship with no strings attached. They want to be totally committed to each other for all of life. And deep down that is what everyone really wants and needs, Christian or not. How can you really open up and be with someone who might leave you and break your heart? To protect yourself from heartbreak you hold back, you don't really give yourself fully. Just in case they leave you. Trouble is that reluctance to be fully committed to the other, often generates the very thing its afraid of. True love desires to make the other your own. It's like we confess towards Jesus (Heidelberg Catechism LD1) "I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ." As the Apostle Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 7:4) "*The wife's body does not belong to her alone, but also to her husband. In the same way the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.*" It is the 'leave and cleave' principle. So here we see the love of the two have grown to such an extent they desire to belong to each other. They want to be one together. And they long to do that physically as well. (Song of Songs 2:16-17) "*My beloved is mine and I am his; he*

*browses among the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills."*

But they are not married yet. They do not fully possess each other. And that can produce an element of anxiety. We see the woman is struggling with some doubt that she might lose her man. She says (Song of Songs 3:1) *"All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves. I looked for him but did not find him."* The woman is having a dream in which she can't find her man. You can tell how she really feels about him because she keeps repeating, three times, *"I looked for the one my heart loves"*. In her dream she walks down all the streets of the town, constantly asking (Song of Songs 3:3) *"Have you seen the one whom my heart loves?"* Her dream is revealing her subconscious. She so longs to be one with him that her biggest fear is she might lose him. Her imagination goes into overdrive, worrying what could happen to him. Or that perhaps another woman would attract his attention. The thought of living without her man is unbearable. In a sense this anxiety is a measure of the depth of her love. So, what does the woman do about her anxiety? She goes out and finds him and holds him even tighter (Song of Songs 3:4) *"... when I found the one my heart loves, I held him and would not let him go till I brought him to my mother's house, to the room of the one who conceived me."* To the ancient Jewish person, to bring your man home, was not just to meet the family. It was saying you were engaged to be married. By this act they declare their promise to be married. They are saying they belong to each other.

So now it is only a matter of time before they get married. But still the woman recites the refrain of the song (Song of Songs 3:5): *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you, by the gazelles and by the does of the field do not arouse or waken love until it so desires."* Here again, as when their passions were aroused the first time they met, she makes her companions swear. They must not tempt her to go further in the relationship than what is appropriate. God's set place for the full expression of love and intimacy is in marriage. That is the way she wants to keep it.

What this part of the song provides is also an imagery of the developing love between Jesus and the church. Through our preaching and Bible studies, the Spirit is leading us to come to know Jesus. The Spirit doesn't just want us to pass on some knowledge about Jesus, or good doctrine. He wants us to know Jesus personally. The more we read the Bible the more we get to know the wonder of who he is and what he is like. When we do our profession of faith (or Jesus declaration) we are saying 'I am really committed to him'. Again (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1) "I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life

and in death, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ.” Through the Lord’s Supper we are assured of the wedding feast, of the Lamb and his Bride. That will happen when Jesus returns. In the meantime, we are, in a sense courting. We should be like the woman in the song, or the teenager in love, constantly at the door to see if he is coming. Our true devotion to Jesus can be seen by how much we long to spend time with him in devotion. How we long to see him face to face. Sometimes as the church we may get anxious and think he is taking too long to return. We should be thankful for this time of preparing, to get to know him better as we are today through the Word and Sacrament. What we are doing is getting ready for the wedding day. We are getting ready to live with him forever on the new earth. On that glorious day all the world will know that he is king. And it will know that we belong to him. We are his chosen, his royal bride.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- After the first flush of excitement as the couple meet in the Song, then comes the time to get to know each other. What should a couple talk about when courting? What might be some of the *‘little foxes’*?
- What is meant when the woman in the Song says, *“My beloved is mine and I am his...”*? How does that reflect/compare with *“I am not my own but belong bod and soul...to my faithful saviour”*?
- As the couple in the Song ‘get engaged’ and prepare for a wedding, how does that imagery relate to us getting to know Jesus better and preparing for the *‘wedding of the Lamb’*?

## Solomon's Song of Songs 3:6 – 5:1

She

<sup>6</sup>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?

<sup>7</sup>Look! It is Solomon's carriage,

escorted by sixty warriors,

the noblest of Israel,

<sup>8</sup>all of them wearing the sword,

all experienced in battle,

each with his sword at his side,

prepared for the terrors of the night.

<sup>9</sup>King Solomon made for himself the carriage;

he made it of wood from Lebanon.

<sup>10</sup>Its posts he made of silver,

its base of gold.

Its seat was upholstered with purple,

its interior inlaid with love.

Daughters of Jerusalem, <sup>11</sup>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.

He

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;

your mouth is lovely.

Your temples behind your veil  
 are like the halves of a pomegranate.  
 4 Your neck is like the tower of David,  
 built with courses of stone<sup>(a)</sup>;  
 on it hang a thousand shields,  
 all of them shields of warriors.  
 5 Your breasts are like two fawns,  
 like twin fawns of a gazelle  
 that browse among the lilies.  
 6 Until the day breaks  
 and the shadows flee,  
 I will go to the mountain of myrrh  
 and to the hill of incense.  
 7 You are altogether beautiful, my darling;  
 there is no flaw in you.  
 8 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.  
 9 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.  
 10 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!  
 11 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.  
 12 You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;  
 you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.  
 13 Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates  
 with choice fruits,

with henna and nard,  
14 nard and saffron,  
calamus and cinnamon,  
with every kind of incense tree,  
with myrrh and aloes  
and all the finest spices.  
15 You are <sup>15</sup> a garden fountain,  
a well of flowing water  
streaming down from Lebanon.

**She** 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.

**He** 5 I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;  
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.  
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;  
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

**Friends** Eat, friends, and drink;  
drink your fill of love.

## **FREEDOM IN MARRIAGE**

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

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 Amana, 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.'

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- How do you react to the idea that a Christian has greater freedom? In what way is that true? Why does it often appear the opposite in our communities? Why is that?
- What is the importance of a public ceremony for marriage? Why the vows and witnesses?
- How does marriage create freedom for the wedded couple in the Song? What things occur that demonstrate that?
- How has this part of the Song shown that our intimacy in marriage is part of our worship of God?

## Solomon's Song of Songs 5:2-6:9

She

2 I slept but my heart was awake.  
Listen! My beloved is knocking:  
"Open to me, my sister, my darling,  
my dove, my flawless one.  
My head is drenched with dew,  
my hair with the dampness of the night."  
3 I have taken off my robe—  
must I put it on again?  
I have washed my feet—  
must I soil them again?  
4 My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening;  
my heart began to pound for him.  
5 I arose to open for my beloved,  
and my hands dripped with myrrh,  
my fingers with flowing myrrh,  
on the handles of the bolt.  
6 I opened for my beloved,  
but my beloved had left; he was gone.  
My heart sank at his departure.<sup>(a)</sup>  
I looked for him but did not find him.  
I called him but he did not answer.  
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!  
8 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—  
if you find my beloved,  
what will you tell him?  
Tell him I am faint with love.

Friends

9 How is your beloved better than others,  
most beautiful of women?  
How is your beloved better than others,  
that you so charge us?

**She**           <sup>10</sup> My beloved is radiant and ruddy,  
                  outstanding among ten thousand.  
<sup>11</sup> His head is purest gold;  
                  his hair is wavy  
                  and black as a raven.  
<sup>12</sup> His eyes are like doves  
                  by the water streams,  
                  washed in milk,  
                  mounted like jewels.  
<sup>13</sup> His cheeks are like beds of spice  
                  yielding perfume.  
                  His lips are like lilies  
                  dripping with myrrh.  
<sup>14</sup> His arms are rods of gold  
                  set with topaz.  
                  His body is like polished ivory  
                  decorated with lapis lazuli.  
<sup>15</sup> His legs are pillars of marble  
                  set on bases of pure gold.  
                  His appearance is like Lebanon,  
                  choice as its cedars.  
<sup>16</sup> His mouth is sweetness itself;  
                  he is altogether lovely.  
                  This is my beloved, this is my friend,  
                  daughters of Jerusalem.

**Friends**       **6** Where has your beloved gone,  
                  most beautiful of women?  
                  Which way did your beloved turn,  
                  that we may look for him with you?

**She**           <sup>2</sup> My beloved has gone down to his garden,  
                  to the beds of spices,  
                  to browse in the gardens  
                  and to gather lilies.  
<sup>3</sup> I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;  
                  he browses among the lilies.

He

<sup>4</sup>You are as beautiful as Tīrzah, my darling,  
as lovely as Jerusalem,  
as majestic as troops with banners.

<sup>5</sup>Turn your eyes from me;  
they overwhelm me.

Your hair is like a flock of goats  
descending from Gilead.

<sup>6</sup>Your teeth are like a flock of sheep  
coming up from the washing.

Each has its twin,  
not one of them is missing.

<sup>7</sup>Your temples behind your veil  
are like the halves of a pomegranate.

<sup>8</sup>Sixty queens there may be,  
and eighty concubines,  
and virgins beyond number;

<sup>9</sup>but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,  
the only daughter of her mother,  
the favorite of the one who bore her.

The young women saw her and called her blessed;  
the queens and concubines praised her.

## **THE STRAINS ON LOVE**

*Song of Songs 5:2-6:9*

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.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- In her dream the woman couldn't be bothered to get up for her husband. What might cause such a response? What are some things that can draw married couples away from each other? What are some things that draw us away from Jesus?
- What is the difference between responding and reacting to a conflict in marriage? How did the husband in the Song respond? How did he create space for grace? How is Jesus an example for us?
- How did the woman respond and how did that help resolve their conflict? Why did the husband praise her as being unique?
- How can family and friends best help a relationship that is strained?
- What is the value of compliments and praise (remembering what attracted you to each other), or other love languages, spending time together, talking together?

## Solomon's Song of Songs 6:10-8:7

- Friends** <sup>10</sup>Who is this that appears like the dawn,  
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,  
majestic as the stars in procession?
- He** <sup>11</sup>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.  
<sup>12</sup>Before I realized it,  
my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people.
- Friends** <sup>13</sup>Come back, come back, O Shulammitte;  
come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!
- He** Why would you gaze on the Shulammitte  
as on the dance of Mahanaim?
- 7** How beautiful your sandaled feet,  
O prince's daughter!  
Your graceful legs are like jewels,  
the work of an artist's hands.  
<sup>2</sup>Your navel is a rounded goblet  
that never lacks blended wine.  
Your waist is a mound of wheat  
encircled by lilies.  
<sup>3</sup>Your breasts are like two fawns,  
like twin fawns of a gazelle.  
<sup>4</sup>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.  
<sup>5</sup>Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel.  
Your hair is like royal tapestry;  
the king is held captive by its tresses.  
<sup>6</sup>How beautiful you are and how pleasing,  
my love, with your delights!

<sup>7</sup>Your stature is like that of the palm,  
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.  
<sup>8</sup>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,  
<sup>9</sup> and your mouth like the best wine.

She

May the wine go straight to my beloved,  
flowing gently over lips and teeth.  
<sup>10</sup>I belong to my beloved,  
and his desire is for me.  
<sup>11</sup>Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside,  
let us spend the night in the villages.  
<sup>12</sup>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.  
<sup>13</sup>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.

**8** 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.  
<sup>2</sup>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.  
<sup>3</sup>His left arm is under my head  
and his right arm embraces me.  
<sup>4</sup>Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:

Do not arouse or awaken love  
until it so desires.

**Friends**      <sup>5</sup>Who is this coming up from the wilderness  
leaning on her beloved?

**She**            Under the apple tree I roused you;  
                      there your mother conceived you,  
                      there she who was in labor gave you birth.  
<sup>6</sup>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.  
<sup>7</sup>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.

## **THE EXPRESSION OF REAL LOVE**

*Song of Songs 6:10-8:7*

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 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 to 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".

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Why is a marriage not 50/50? What is meant by 'submitting to one another'? How does it benefit a marriage, or even make the marriage?
- How can love deepen and grow after a married couple have dealt with problems in their marriage? How is it like muscle growth?
- How important is it to have time alone together as a married couple? What can you do to ensure regular romance time?
- Define love in terms of 'strong as death', 'agape', 'many waters cannot quench love'?
- How does our relationship with Jesus help the love in our marriages be 'unquenchable'?

## Solomon's Song of Songs 8:8 -14

Friends

<sup>8</sup>We have a little sister,  
and her breasts are not yet grown.  
What shall we do for our sister  
on the day she is spoken for?  
<sup>9</sup>If she is a wall,  
we will build towers of silver on her.  
If she is a door,  
we will enclose her with panels of cedar.

She

<sup>10</sup>I am a wall,  
and my breasts are like towers.  
Thus I have become in his eyes  
like one bringing contentment.  
<sup>11</sup>Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;  
he let out his vineyard to tenants.  
Each was to bring for its fruit  
a thousand shekels of silver.  
<sup>12</sup>But my own vineyard is mine to give;  
the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon,  
and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.

He

<sup>13</sup>You who dwell in the gardens  
with friends in attendance,  
let me hear your voice!

She

<sup>14</sup>Come away, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle  
or like a young stag  
on the spice-laden mountains.

## **IT STARTS YOUNG**

*Song of Songs 8:8-14*

In every generation there has been young people listening to music. It was by early model radios in the twenties, LP records in the fifties, and the apps on our smart phones today. Many of the songs they enjoyed were love songs. So, it has been and will continue to be so. It is my prayer that our young people will also enjoy the greatest of all love songs. The Bible's love song, the 'Song of Songs'. This beautiful song, very intimately and sensuously, but also with great honour to God, has shown the love between a man and a woman. Intertwined with that it has shown the amazing love of Jesus for his bride, the church. The song shows so wonderfully that our sexuality is a precious and deeply fulfilling gift from God. The song's refrain has reminded us that this delightful gift has a proper time and place for expression (Song of Songs 2:7) *"Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you... do not arouse or waken love until it so desires."* That proper place is in marriage.

The question for this morning is how will the young learn this biblical lesson? That's been one of the reasons for preaching this series. If we as the church and as parents don't openly and honestly teach the lessons of this song, our children will learn about these things from other songs and other places, like the internet. And what they hear in so many other songs can be quite different. In these final verses of the 'Song of Songs' is a message for us as parents and children. (Song of Songs 8:8) *"We have a little sister, and her breasts are not yet grown. What shall we do for our sister on the day she is spoken for?"* Here the woman thinks back to when she was a little girl at home. She remembers her brothers talking: 'we have a little sister'. They were concerned for her wedding day: 'what shall we do for the day she is spoken for?' It may be that her father had died, because the brothers speak as her guardians. It may also reflect the culture of the time where the brothers were involved in who married their sister. In a similar way Abraham's servant had to deal with Rebekah's brothers when he asked her to be Isaac's wife (Genesis 24). And when Jacob's daughter Dinah was taken by Shechem the Hivite (Genesis 34) the issue was handled by the brothers. So, the brothers are preparing their sister for marriage, even when she was young. How young? '... her breasts are not yet grown'. The Hebrew culture of the time was very earthy. It is saying she had not even reached puberty yet. She was still very young and immature. She was not even thinking of boys. But the brothers were already thinking of her wedding day. To have a successful marital relationship it starts young. It needs thoughtful nurturing by the parents of the attitudes and character of their children.

We see that the brothers studied their sister's character. They worked out their upbringing accordingly (Song of Songs 8:9) *"If she is a wall we will build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar"*. If she is a 'wall', it means she has a strong character. She can see what God wants. She can resist temptation. She can say 'No'. That needs to be encouraged. She will be rewarded, with trust. They do not want to exasperate her by being overly strict. If she is a 'door' it means she is not strong. Her character is too easily open to be misled or used by others. As a 'door' she wavers in her attitude. So, for her own protection the brothers would 'enclose her with panels of cedar.' In other words, they must set some boundaries. They must be strong for her. Otherwise she could ruin herself. The point here is not lost on us parents. We know that our children can be so different. They all come from the same nest, but their characters can be poles apart. So, we cannot use the same style of instruction and discipline on all the children. Yes, the final goals of our upbringing are the same. That they know the Lord. That they are aware of and develop their own God given potential. That they follow God's way for life and love. But how we get them to that point may take different paths. Whatever path is taken for a child, the key point is this: our children's attitudes, and how they go in their love relationships, depends on what we do now. My Master's degree research in psychology dealt with marriage relationships. It showed that our expectations have a significant impact on our marriage. Our family of origin determines a lot of those expectations: how we express love, how we deal with conflict, how we spend time together. So, the key lesson for today is that when we think about our marital relationships it's not just about us as a couple. It is also very much about our kids. How we relate now, and model love, will greatly determine how it is for the next generation. I can still see my father sitting at the head of the kitchen table. He always insisted mum sit close to him, because she was 'his 'princess' and he wanted her close. Dad was a 'diamond in the rough' but showed his five sons something beautiful in the way he adored mum. He admitted to me once that mum was God's greatest gift to him for which he was very thankful. And it showed.

I can look back now on this modelling of love by my parents with appreciation. But that doesn't mean I understood all the implications when I was young. Nor did I appreciate dad's discipline when he wanted to set boundaries for me going out as a teenager. That's often the way it goes. Our children will not always appreciate the intent of our parenting. There will be frustration. At times young people will want to rebel and reject what their parents say. At times parents may be inclined to give up on stubborn teenagers, especially those who are the door types. But hang in there. Good parenting will bear fruit. Even if it takes a long time to see it. We see that in the next few verses (Song of Songs 8:10-12) *"I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers. Thus, I have become in his eyes*

*like one bringing contentment. Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon; he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver. But my own vineyard is mine to give; the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.*" Here we see the woman expressing her thanks for her upbringing. As she says, 'I am a wall and my breasts are like towers.' There is that Hebrew earthiness again. She is now a mature woman. And she tells us that her character is that of a wall. She has been strong in herself. She knew what God required. And she stuck with it. We have seen that in this song. She repeatedly sang its refrain *"Daughters of Jerusalem...do not arouse or waken love until it so desires."* She is a beautiful woman. Not only in looks but in character and virtue, committed to God's ways. That is why she says, *'Thus I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment.'* The Hebrew has a bit of a play on words here. The word 'contentment' can also be translated 'peace'. It is the Hebrew word 'shalom'. The name 'Solomon' comes from the same Hebrew word. In Hebrew it is 'Shalomah'. When they married she gained 'Shalomah', that is Solomon. And he received 'shalom', that is peace, contentment. She brought him contentment because, using Paul's words in Ephesians 5, she was *"...pure and radiant, without spot or blemish."* As a woman of virtue and faith as well as beauty she brought joy and fulfillment to his life.

Now, because of the joy and contentment both of them received, the woman wants to say thank you to her brothers. And to do that she uses the illustration of a vineyard. She says (Song of Songs 8:11) *"Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon; he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver."* Now, this illustration comes very naturally to her. Remember she was herself a keeper of a vineyard. She knows how the system works. 'Tenants' would have kept the vineyard at Baal Hamon for Solomon. They would have given him a 'thousand shekels of silver' for its produce. In other words, they gave him the major portion because he owned the vineyard. They would have received what was left over as the wage for their labour. Now, the woman says she has a vineyard too. That's a reference to herself (Song of Songs 8:12) *"But my own vineyard is mine to give; the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit."* Notice she is giving the set thousand shekels to Solomon. He gets the owner's portion. The number one thousand in the Bible is symbolic of fulness. In Revelation one thousand symbolizes the millennium, the fulness of time when Jesus returns. So, the woman is saying she is giving herself fully to Solomon. As she said previously *"My beloved is mine and I am his"*. But, notice, she also says *"...two hundred are for those who tend its fruit."* She is referring to her brothers. She is saying that she will always be grateful and indebted to her brothers. She is giving thanks for her upbringing, for their care and discipline. She is most grateful now. But she had her complaints earlier. Remember how she complained (Song of Songs 1:6) *"My mother's sons were angry with*

*me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected.*" Because the brothers worked her hard, she had little opportunity to worry about her looks. There had been little chance to get involved with the young men around at the time. Yet, despite her complaints then, she is thankful now. Discipline is like that. You do not appreciate it when you are under it. But you do when you have grown up and have developed into a well matured person. You are someone who has been guided by the modelling and discipline of your parents. It is then that you look back and say 'Thanks mum, thanks dad. There were times when I thought I hated you. But now I realize you did it because you loved me. And I love you for it.' The rewards for a good upbringing and discipline come later. For both children and parents. As parents we may not get all that much thanks now. We need to be patient for the fruit of the vineyard. And as young people you may be irritated at the moment with the lectures from your parents. 'Be careful. Be on time. No, you can't go there.' In time you too will see the fruit of the vineyard. I have conducted numerous weddings. And a repeated theme occurs at the receptions as the bridegroom makes his speech. He thanks the parents of his bride for the wonderful person she is because of their love and nurture.

Now in the last two verses of this beautiful love song, we see it finishes with the ongoing longing that comes with true love. Solomon says (Song of Songs 8:13) *"You who dwell in the gardens with friends in attendance, let me hear your voice!"* And the woman replies (Song of Songs 8:14) *"Come away, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains."* The language is very much like that in chapter 2. That's the way they were speaking before they were married. It is the language of yearning and longing to be together. To be alone and intimate. 'Come away my beloved'. It is a beautiful way to finish this song. It shows us that love goes on. True love does not fade out or slowly die out. Those who truly love each other, God's way, will experience a constant renewing of their love. There will be that yearning again as husband and wife, to be by yourselves, to be together, with all your attention on each other. They are moments that will be a renewing of your romance. Moments that build up and strengthen your relationship. The closer our marriages approach the example of Christ and his church, the more it will be like that.

That reminds us that this song is also a picture of the love between the church and its Lord. As the church we are very much yearning for the day when we are fully with our Lord Jesus. It's the time when we will have reached our perfection. We are already the Lord's possession. We are united to him by faith. We have his righteousness. But our love has a yearning for the time when we are actually with him, not just by faith. It will be the time when we are no longer a sinful stumbling people. A time when Christ himself

will be with us on the new earth, where there will be no more pain or tears or sin. Yes, all of us yearn for something better. None of us, and none of our relationships are completely what they should be. But when Christ returns then we will be fulfilled. Then we will be the "... *unblemished, radiant, bride of Christ.*" The woman closes this Song of Songs with the words of yearning "*Come away my beloved*". So, we the church, say with deep yearning the last words of the Bible: "*Come Lord Jesus, come, come quickly*".

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- When it comes to having good marriages why does it 'start young'? How does family of origin impact a marriage?
- Do you recognise the character of your children? How would you deal with a 'wall' or 'door' type character?
- Like the woman in the song do we appreciate our upbringing, especially as we got older? Why is it that she brings 'contentment' to her man?
- How do we ensure that the love in our marriage continues to grow? Do we recognise that our deep inner yearning for things to be even better, perfect, is our yearning for Jesus?