

# WHY SHOULD WE PREACH FROM THE SONG OF SONGS?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

I first started reading the Song of Songs in church. Not that the minister was preaching on the book at the time. But who could not approve of a young boy, maybe twelve years old, paying such close attention to the Bible! I have been fascinated with the book ever since.

In my preaching ministry as a pastor, in nineteen years, I only preached from one passage from this book, 8:6-7. Maybe that was the easy way out, or maybe it was wise. We'll see. Contrast that with Bernard of Clairvaux, who preached 86 sermons on this book to his fellow celibate monks, and did not finish Chapter 2. Or think of Origen, who wrote a twelve volume commentary on this book, full of allegorical interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

You read the Song, and you think, Mmm, maybe one sermon from this book. And I can get most of my material for that one sermon from a marriage manual. And I'd better preach it in an evening service, and I'd better warn people beforehand so that they can leave their kids at home.

What is the Song of Songs about? It is about the awakening and development of intimacy between a man and a woman. A very broad outline is useful.<sup>3</sup>

1. The awakening of intimacy leads up to the couple's marriage (1:1-3:11)
2. The couple celebrates intimacy on the wedding night (4:1-5:1)
3. The couple's intimacy matures within marriage (5:2-8:14)

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<sup>1</sup> This article is NOT peer reviewed.

<sup>2</sup> Sherwood E. Wirt, "Some New Thoughts about the Song of Solomon," *JETS* 33(1990): 434.

<sup>3</sup> See the useful comments by Daniel Estes in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16; Nottingham: IVP, 2010), 292.

The literature about the Song of Songs is immense, and over the last twenty years dozens of suggestions have been made about detailed literary structures in the Song. But many of the suggestions seem forced and mostly they involve pressing the Song into a preconceived mould. But bits and pieces of the Song constantly escape the mould. It seems best not to try to squeeze it all into a perfect shape. Rather, the Song is impressionistic.

If I went on a holiday and brought back a sequence of snapshots, I would be tempted to tell the story of my holiday by showing the snaps and filling in the narrative to explain the sequence. And then we did this, and then we did this... The reason why seeing other people's holiday albums is so boring is not so much the pictures but the narrative account. The Song of Songs is a sequence of connected snapshots that broadly tells a story but leaves out the boring bits.

So let's read the Song in overview, and I'll bore you just a little with some indications of sequence.

### **A quick overview reading of the Song**

The first three chapters of the Song describe the awakening of desire before the couple's marriage. The woman opens proceedings.

Song 1:2-4

<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 maidens love you!

<sup>4</sup> Take me away with you—let us hurry!  
Let the king bring me into his chambers.<sup>4</sup>

The woman calls her lover "the king," and she does that a few times. Moreover, the name of Solomon comes up a few times in the Song. That

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<sup>4</sup> All biblical quotations in this article are taken from the *New International Version*, 1984 edition (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society).

fact has led many people to see the Song as a poetic celebration of one of the Solomon's weddings – perhaps his first, with hundreds more to come!

But to tie the Song to such a concrete event goes against the non-specific language of much of the Song. Yes, the woman describes her lover as a king, but she also describes him as a “shepherd” (1:7), a “sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts” (1:13) “a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi” (1:14), an “apple tree” (2:3), and a “gazelle or a young stag” (2:9), and that's just Chapters 1 & 2.

The **woman** is described as living on the crest of Amarna, the summit of Hermon, in the lion's dens and the mountain haunts of the leopards (4:8) – she is some woman! In the pagan literature of the ancient Near East, she would be a goddess!

The point is that it's unlikely that in 1:4 the woman is speaking of her man as being literally a king. Rather, he is like a king to her. He is as glorious as Solomon to her!

And she is magnificent to him. He says (1:15):

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

He says (4:9):

<sup>9</sup> 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.

In the first three chapters of the Song then, the man and the woman express their intense desire for each other. The woman dominates this section. 35 of the verses are spoken by the female voice, only 8 verses by the male voice. Longing for sexual union is plainly expressed even if it done in highly picturesque and evocative language.

The next major section of the Song is 4:1-5:1, which describes the way the couple celebrates their intimacy on their wedding night. The woman shows her body to the man. The man praises her and she invites him in. He goes in to her. And the act of love is commended.

Now the man dominates the speech. He speaks 16 verses, she only speaks one. Look at the way he speaks.<sup>5</sup>

4:1-7 “How beautiful you are!” (He compliments her beauty).

4:8, 9 “Come away!” (He invites her to intimacy).

4:10-15 “How delightful is your love!” (He compliments her lovemaking).

4:16 “Come in!” (She invites him into her).

5:1 He goes in and eats it up.

The two verses 4:16 and 5:1 are the dramatic climax of this section. The woman says:

Awake, north wind,  
and come, south wind!  
Blow on my garden,  
that its fragrance may spread abroad.  
Let my lover come into his garden  
and taste its choice fruits.

The right time for sexual union has come. The man responds:

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.

These two verses are at the exact centre of the Song. There are 111 poetic lines from 1:2-4:15, and there are 111 poetic lines from 5:2-8:14.<sup>6</sup> Sexual union is at the centre of the Song of Songs, and the woman’s body is the Promised Land for the man – it is flowing with milk and honey.

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<sup>5</sup> The structure is slightly adapted from Douglas S. O'Donnell, *The Song of Solomon: An Invitation to Intimacy* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love* (Bible Speaks Today; Nottingham: IVP, 1994), 147.

The rest of the Song presents the maturing of intimacy within the marriage relationship. The couple explores the joys and challenges of continuing to grow together. This section builds up to the second great climax of the book in 8:6-7:

<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 wash it away.  
If one were to give  
all the wealth of his house for love,  
it would be utterly scorned.

These are the verses I preached from on the one occasion I preached from the Song. It is very useful to see the Song as having twin peaks, one at the very centre in 4:16 and 5:1, and one towards the end in 8:6-7. These verses bring the whole message of the Song to a fitting conclusion.

Even though this third section of the Song concludes on a wonderfully positive note, all is not well ***all the time*** in the marriage relationship between the two lovers. The section 5:2-8 appears to present a challenge to their love. The man comes home late and knocks, asking to be let in. The woman can't be bothered getting up. But then she changes her mind and rises to open to him, but by this time he's gone. She goes searching through the city for him and is beaten and bruised by the city watchmen.

Is it a dream? Is it an actual event? Given the overall symbolic nature of the Song I think it's unlikely to be a narrative of something that actually happened. But it does represent a challenge to the growing intimacy of the relationship. In the verses that follow that challenge is answered and well-met. How do we know the challenge has been well-met? Because that challenge section is followed by further ardent words of love and lovemaking from both the man and the woman. Their love has been restored, and the Song as a whole ends in 8:10-14 with relaxed and content mutual longing for further intimacy stretching into the future.

## Purpose of the Book

What kind of work is the Song of Songs? It is a celebration of intimacy within the bounds of marriage as God's good gift. So why was it included in the Bible?

Preliminary statement: It was included in the Bible to teach us to honour and celebrate intimacy within the bounds of marriage as God's good gift.

### 1. The Song is a celebration of intimacy

The Song is filled with the language of sensuality, intimate sexual experience, playfulness and human affection. It is a poetic fireworks display of a private world. The theme throughout is of pure, passionate, longing desire and consummation.

And yet, through much of the first nineteen centuries of the church, the Song received an allegorical interpretation. The word "allegory" comes from a Greek word meaning "an account in which people, things and happenings have a symbolic or hidden meaning."<sup>7</sup> Everything in the Song was interpreted as having a hidden meaning. Christians saw the Song as a picture of Christ's love for the church.

Let me give you a couple of examples of the allegorical approach so that you get the flavour of it. I'll take these examples from commentaries that are in print right now, and I'll focus on just one verse, Chapter 4:5, which says, "Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies."

George Burrowes argued that the picture here is "the general beauty of the pious soul in the eyes of Jesus." For Burrowes the picture is "but a faint representation of the beauty seen by Jesus in the humblest of his saints, and the pleasure had by him in dwelling on their beauties of holiness."<sup>8</sup>

James Durham said that the two breasts of the young woman stand for "the believer's fitness to edify others." The breast milk was the means by which

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy L. DeClaisé-Walford, "An Introduction to the Song of Songs," *Review & Expositor* 105, no. 3 (2008): 396.

<sup>8</sup> George Burrowes, *A Commentary on the Song of Solomon* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958 (1853)), 285-286.

we edify others. If breasts are too big it is a deformity; so too much private edification can be galling. He thought that the twin fawns of a gazelle grazing among the lilies stands for the fact that believers, if they are to be fit to edify others, must themselves graze on good material in Christ's presence.<sup>9</sup>

An allegorical approach to the Song was dominant for a long time, even down to the 1960s. It is reflected in the chapter headings in some KJV Bibles. Chapter 1 "The church's love unto Christ"; Chapter 2 "The mutual love of Christ and his church"; Chapter 5 "Christ awaketh the church with his calling." The allegorical approach is profoundly alienating. It replaces the content of the Song with a completely different content far removed from the intention of the author. It turns the veiled and subtle language of the Song into straightforward prose. What is wrong with an allegorical approach?

- a. It lacks any control. Allegorical interpretation is completely arbitrary. The imagination of the interpreter is the only limit, not the text. Any detail can come to mean anything the interpreter wishes. Two allegories are only alike when one plagiarizes the other.
- b. Allegories of the Song are based on a worldview that regards human sexuality as inherently evil. After all, the Bible cannot contain a book that is positive about the sexual relationship, because sex is not a good creation of God but sinful. Sex is an unavoidable necessity for the human race. OK, sex is **allowable** in the marriage relationship, but do not enjoy it, and do not imagine that God really approves. So an allegorical approach denies the goodness of God's creation.
- c. An allegorical approach **misplaces the enemy**. We are radically sinful, but not because the sexual relationship is sinful in itself. We cannot push down our sinfulness by suppressing our bodily appetites or by building a wall around our souls; we cannot achieve salvation by keeping the rules. Such legalism only separates us further from God by giving us a false hope that we can escape the yearnings of the heart (which are actually given by God).

The Song is a celebration of intimacy; it is not an allegory of Christ's love for the church.

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<sup>9</sup> James Durham, *An Exposition of the Song of Solomon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982 (1840)), 212-213.

## 2. It is a celebration of intimacy within the bounds of marriage

Many commentators accept that the centre of the Song involves a wedding, but they argue that the Song sees nothing wrong with sex before marriage. They regard certain passages in the opening three chapters as showing that the man and the woman are engaged in sexual activity from the beginning of the Song.<sup>10</sup> Passages like:

1:4 – the woman speaks

<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.

2:4-6 – again, the woman speaks

<sup>4</sup> He has taken me to the banquet hall,  
and his banner over me is 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.

But there are very good reasons for saying that in fact no sexual union happens until the wedding night. Consider some of the textual clues:

- a. In 2:17 the woman states her desire that the man stay with her through the night, but there is no response from the man. But in 4:6, the man echoes her words and says he will do exactly that: “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense.”

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Estes does not agree with this view, he argues that the man and the woman are virgins until their marriage. But he cites some of the passages some interpreters have pointed to in arguing that sexual activity is going on from the beginning. See Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 294-295.



- b. In 4:8, the Hebrew term “bride” (*kallâh*) is used for the first time. It’s used 6x in the Song, but only in 4:8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 5:1 and nowhere else in the Song. In Hebrew the word relates to the transition of a woman from a daughter to a wife. The use of this word here only in the Song suggests that the transition has come about.
- c. As they prepare to make love, the man describes the woman as a “garden locked up”, a “spring enclosed”, a “sealed fountain” (4:12), suggesting that she is a virgin when the time for love comes.
- d. Apart from these indications, scattered throughout the Song are statements of the exclusiveness of the relationship. The woman looks for the one her heart loves (3:2-4), she has stored up the fruits of her love only for him (7:13; cf. 4:16). The dove hidden in the clefts of the mountain is a symbol of purity (1:15; 2:14; 5:2). There may be many attractive and available women, but he loves only his “dove,” his “perfect one” (6:8-9). The climax of the Song in 8:6-7 expresses this exclusiveness most clearly. “The theme of sexual enjoyment and consummation runs throughout the Song, and the theme of commitment is central to that whole relationship. This is no passing encounter: this is total dedication and permanent obligation.”<sup>11</sup>
- e. Perhaps the strongest indication is the repeated refrain in 2:7; 3:5 and 8:4.

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.

In each case the woman speaks, each time after a physical embrace and after a sequence of reflections expressing desire for sexual love. These passages are warnings against exciting sexual passion before the appropriate human sexual relationship has been formed. In more familiar terms, they are warnings against sex before marriage. It is clearly right that a strong *desire* to express love sexually should be present before marriage, but the desire should not be fulfilled until marriage.

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<sup>11</sup> G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: IVP, 1984), 53.

Why is that the case? The reason bound up in the Song is not that it has a low view of sex but because it has such a high view of sex. In the Song, sex is for mutual complete self-giving, it is designed to enable the man and the woman to give themselves completely to each other. I belong entirely, exclusively and permanently to you.

The rest of the Bible teaches that sex before marriage is **morally wrong**. But the Song suggests that it is also **personally harmful**. To have sex outside marriage actually harms your ability to give yourself to your partner, because you are hardening yourself against the self-giving, uniting work that sex has been designed to do.

### **3. It is a celebration of intimacy within the bounds of marriage as God's good gift.**

The Song pictures a man and a woman alone, naked and unashamed, in the context of a beautiful enclosed garden. That certainly sounds familiar! The Song is full of garden imagery. The word "garden" (*gan*) is used 8x in the Song and at least another 21 verses have garden imagery. The word is also concentrated in Genesis 2-3, where it is used 14x. It is not frequent anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible.

Furthermore, consider another repeated refrain in the Song. This refrain points to a growing sense of mutual intimacy between the man and the woman. But the way the refrain is modified also points back to the Garden and what was lost there. Consider:

In 2:16, the woman says:

<sup>16</sup> My lover is mine and I am his;  
he browses among the lilies.

In 6:3 she says:

<sup>3</sup> I am my lover's and my lover is mine;  
he browses among the lilies.

And in 7:10 she says:

<sup>10</sup> I belong to my lover,  
and his desire is for me.

The Song is of course highly poetic, so it is reasonable to assume that the author of the Song varied the details of this refrain for a significant effect.

In 2:16 the focus is on longing for sexual union. The woman expresses her desire to have her lover, and perhaps in a slightly self-centred way. She mentions her “ownership” of her lover first.

In 6:3, their intimacy has been challenged, but it has been well-met, and now she thinks first of giving herself to her lover.

In 7:10, the man has spoken ardent loving words to his wife, such that she is secure in his love. The woman no longer focusses on her possession of him but on the love he has for her. The word for “desire” is תִּשְׁׁקָה (*t<sup>e</sup>šûqâ*), a rare word that only appears in two other places in the OT. The author of the Song probably uses this word very deliberately. Consider the other uses:

Genesis 3:16

<sup>16</sup>To the woman he said,  
“I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;  
with pain you will give birth to children.  
Your **desire** will be for your husband,  
and he will rule over you.”

Genesis 4:7

<sup>7</sup>If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it **desires** to have you, but you must master it.”

Song of Songs 7:10

<sup>10</sup>I belong to my lover,  
and his **desire** is for me.

In Song of Songs the big picture is of a man and a woman, naked and unashamed, alone together in a beautiful enclosed garden. In Genesis 1-2 the same picture is what God declares to be very good. In Genesis 3 and 4 the magnificent beauty is sullied by the curse of the fall. In Genesis 3 and 4 the word “desire” expresses an aspect of the curse, “desire” as contention for control.

But in the Song, the same word describes an aspect of the reversal of the curse that is achieved to some extent in the beauty of a holy marriage relationship in which intimacy is continuing to develop. “His *desire* is for me.” But now it’s all good. God’s perfect plan for married life, which was damaged by the fall, is restored to some extent in the relationship between the man and the woman of the Song.

But is God really present in the Song? In the NIV translation the word for God or the name of God never appears. Like Esther, it seems that God only works behind the scenes; he does not seem to be named in the book. But now, consider the ESV’s translation of 8:6.

NIV – Song 8:6

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.

ESV – Song 8:6

Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
the very flame of the LORD.

The word behind these two versions is שְׁלֵהֶבֶתִּיהָ, *šalhebet-Yâh* (“the flame of Yah”). All agree that the *Yâh* at the end of the word is a short form of the name “Yahweh,” but the question is: Is the name “Yahweh” being used to express a superlative, such that it means, not the “flame of Yahweh” but “a mighty flame” as the NIV suggests? That is very unlikely. Allan Harman writes. “It is true that *’elohim* may be used in this way but not the covenant name *yah* which occurs here... Thus the passage which is recognised as

being the climactic affirmation of the Song points to the origin of this love as being with God himself.”<sup>12</sup>

The love that unites the man and the woman in the Song is called the “flame of Yahweh.” The pure sexual love that the man and the woman in the Song enjoy is affirmed in the strongest possible terms. It is a gift from Yahweh; from the God who is in a covenant relationship with his people.

Here then is our conclusion about the purpose of the Song: it is a celebration of God’s good gift of sexual intimacy within the bounds of marriage.

### **Why should we preach the Song of Songs?**

At creation, God made the man, in his image, with a yearning for loving someone who would be like him.<sup>13</sup> The yearning for a partner was good – part of God making the man like himself. It was not good that he should be alone. The woman was the greatest gift that God could give the man. Here was another one, like him but different, made in God’s image! The woman was made from the man. God made the two out of one, so that he could make the two into one.

The man received the gift with great joy. The kind of fellowship the man and the woman enjoyed was possible only between two, between a man and a woman. From the very beginning this was God’s design for his image-bearers – monogamous marriage, an essential bond between one man and one woman, a lifelong covenant. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). To quote from the Song, “such love is as strong as death...it burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned” (Song of Songs 8:6-7).

And yet, such love for each other only retained its character in its proper context. That context was the man’s and the woman’s love for God.

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<sup>12</sup> Allan M. Harman, “Modern Discussion on the Song of Songs,” *Reformed Theological Review* 37, no. 3 (1978): 71.

<sup>13</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family* (trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, et al.; Grand Rapids, Mich: Christian’s Library Press, 2012), Kindle Location 235. In the following few paragraphs I reflect on Bavinck’s work.

The woman was tempted to take the fruit and to eat it because in that moment she loved herself more than God. The man received the fruit from the woman and ate it because in that moment he loved himself and loved his wife more than God. Loving anyone or anything more than God destroys that love.

Adam and Eve sinned as individuals, but they also sinned as husband and wife. Only when they loved God more than anything else could their love for each other properly flourish. This has always been the case ever since.

Adam and Eve sinned as individuals in their relationship with God. They sinned as husband and wife in their relationship with each other. They also sinned as father and mother, plunging the whole human race into the consequences of the curse.

Right through history, the effects of the curse have been felt in the areas of family, husband-wife relationships and sexuality. All the rich and glorious relationships that God originally designed between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters and so on have been attacked and disrupted by sin. What is true throughout the Bible and throughout its ancient Near-Eastern context is true for all of human history.

Life together is besieged by a whole army of sins: infidelity of husbands and wives, stubbornness on the part of both, disobedience of children, the worship of women, the denigration of women, tyranny, sexual slavery, seduction, idolizing children, killing children, sexual immorality, human trafficking, polygamy, polyandry, adultery, divorce, incest, men inflamed with lust for other men, women with women, adults with children, people with animals, the stimulation of lust by impure thoughts, words and literature, glorifying nudity and using the passions of the flesh in the service of (small-g) gods.

As an aspect of its utter realism, all these things are addressed in Scripture. They were all found in the context in which God's people lived in biblical times. They are all found in the context in which **we** live. They all put the sword through God's original design for human relationships. They are all constantly calling forth God's wrath. They characterise the world in which we live.

I said before that the Song is like a slide show that leaves out the boring bits. It is a slide show of the growth of intimacy between a man and a woman.

But when seen in the wider context of the OT, the slide show has a deeper theme. The Song suggests that the perfect love between a man and a woman happens in a perfect garden.

The OT prophets spoke about a renewal of Eden; they told Israel that one day things would be perfect again. The Song of Songs is a slide show depicting the same theme. One day God will restore all things to himself, one day the garden will again be perfect, one day the love between human beings will be perfect again.

We live in a fallen world. But the Song helps us to long for more. Jesus came into *this world*. He never married. There are circumstances in which a person may be called to abstain from marriage for the sake of the kingdom (Matthew 19:12). Singleness is a spiritual gift that some people have been given. There is no doubt from 1 Corinthians 7 that for some people singleness is better than marriage, and Jesus is the prime example. But look at Jesus, the single man, relating to women.

Women were among his most beloved disciples. They followed him in Galilee and Judea, they ministered to him from their possessions, they were witnesses of his crucifixion and burial and they were the first witnesses to his resurrection. The disciples were surprised to find him talking to a woman in Samaria, but Jesus had come to do the will of the Father (John 4:27, 34). When a sinful woman wet his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair in Simon's house, he forgave her many sins (Luke 7:36-50). He allowed an adulterous woman to go uncondemned, telling her to go and leave her life of sin (John 8:11). He said that prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven before those who felt entitled to it (Matthew 21:31). In all these ways, Jesus scandalised his contemporaries, but he was simply honouring the woman according to her rightful place. For Jesus had come to do the will of his Father. He had come to reverse the effects of the fall.

Observe how Jesus, the single man, upheld marriage. When asked about divorce, Jesus traced the significance of marriage back to God's original ordinance in the garden. When explaining the seventh commandment, Jesus said that it not only forbids physical adultery, but that even lusting after a woman in your heart was committing adultery with her. Jesus' words are strong and provocative, but they point to the way of greatest blessing, and they point to his mission.

This example from Matthew 5 is highly illuminating. Desire for the opposite sex is a gift from God. But we must consider both the gift from God itself, and also the **purpose** for the gift that God has designed. We must do that with all of God's gifts – food, friends, material possessions, being able to use your tongue to persuade others – **anything** that God gives you. Consider the gift, **and** consider the God-designed **purpose** for the gift. The gift is good, but if you use it wrongly, you can pervert and destroy the gift.

Looking with desire upon your marriage partner is the design of creation and is good and right. Sex is for whole-life self-giving. The man and the woman in the Song rightly desire each other. They rightly desire to give themselves to each other. The Song gives us the holiday snaps without the boring bits. But the picture is the redemption of the man-woman relationship in the context of a garden made perfect once again.

Desiring your marriage partner and desiring God are compatible. That much is plain from the Song of Songs. Lusting after another person is the result of the fall, and is a perversion and distortion of God's good gift. Jesus comes to save us from a perverse use of God's gifts and to set us free for a God-ordained use of God's gifts. His way is the way of greatest blessing.

*Here is why we should preach from the Song of Songs!* The Song of Songs is about human love between a man and a woman; what such human love can look like, how such human love can be properly practiced. It is the only book of the Bible wholly devoted to that topic.

*We should preach from the Song because of creation.* The Song pictures a man and a woman who experience what it means to be naked and unashamed within the limits of a magnificent enclosed garden. So familiar! The Song is homesick for the perfection of the original creation, and it longs for the new creation when God's design for his image-bearers will be fully realised.

*We should preach from the Song because of the fall.* So much of our agony as human beings after the fall revolves around human love, especially the love between a man and a woman, and especially around the sexual relationship. And in the twenty-first century West the evidence and the



results of that agony saturate our society. Are we going to ignore the one book in the Bible that is wholly devoted to this topic?

When the interpretation of the Song was allegorical, it was the most popular preaching text in the Bible. How ironic it is that now that we have rediscovered its true meaning, it's largely ignored, or seen as too hard.

*We should preach from the Song because of redemption.* Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost. He came to save us from our own sin. He also came to set us free in preliminary but real ways from the effects of sin in ourselves and in our world. Through his work, the garden will one day be restored. The Song of Songs testifies to the kind of transformation that Jesus can give. Are we going to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ but ignore the healing of husband-wife relationships through the work of Jesus that the Song ultimately testifies to? And so what was a preliminary statement earlier now needs to be extended.

### **Why was the Song included in the Bible?**

It was included in the Bible to teach us to honour and celebrate intimacy within the bounds of marriage as God's good gift, and to teach us to long for the eternal perfect intimacy in a renewed creation that will be ours because of Christ's work.

### **Conclusion**

To finish reading the Song is to be left with a sense of longing. In the final verse of the Song, the woman longs once again to be close to her man. Nancy Guthrie puts it like this: "Sexual love between husband and wife is a glorious cycle of desire, anticipation, consummation and satisfaction that gives way to longing once again. Human sexual love, no matter how satisfying in the moment, provides no final, lasting satisfaction."<sup>14</sup>

Even the very best, stable, sexually satisfying marriage relationship does not meet all our needs. It points us to the great Lover of our soul who satisfies all our needs, and can satisfy the needs of those who have never in their lives had a sexual relationship.

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy Guthrie, *The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 253.

The allegorical interpretation of the Song is not **all wrong** after all. It is right in its conclusion that the Song reveals God's love for his people. It is **certainly wrong** in the way it reaches that conclusion. As Richard Davidson concludes, the human love relationship between the man and the woman is "not the worthless 'husk' to be stripped away allegorically to find the kernel, the 'true' meaning, the love between God and his covenant community."<sup>15</sup> No, the human married love relationship is a precious gift from God to be affirmed. But in the end it points beyond itself to something greater.

So the question: Why should we preach from the Song of Songs? *Because of creation, fall and redemption.* Because the Song gives us a picture of the magnificence of God's original plan and purpose. Because the Song addresses us at one of our points of deepest need as human beings made in God's image. And because the Song of Songs plays a vital part in testifying to the redeeming work that Christ came to do.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard M. Davidson, "Is God Present in the Song of Songs?," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 16, no. 1-2 (2005): 153.

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