

# MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD

## Study Three

### THE GREATEST LOVE-SONG EVER WRITTEN

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#### SEXUAL ATTRACTION AND APPRECIATION

Built in to the way God has made human beings as male and female is the natural attraction and delight that exists between women and men. This can be purely at the physical level—the shapes of our bodies, the expressions on our faces, the sounds of our voices, the feel of touch and caress, even of taste and smell—and our physiological responses to these. It can extend to appreciation of personality, shared humour, intellectual stimulation, caring words and actions, and enjoyment of common occupations, activities and experiences. The ever-present reality that a person is male or female is a constant factor that deeply affects our relationships with each other across the human scene. When one such relationship between a man and a woman becomes close and intimate, issuing in marriage, this attraction and appreciation reaches profound levels.

Something of this is reflected in the Bible's account of the creation of man and woman:

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken' (Gen. 2:22–23).

The man and the woman are different, but they have affinity—they are made of the same stuff, they fit with one another, they are created from one to be one with each other—they belong together. And so they come together:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh (Gen. 2:24).

There is a freedom, an openness and a natural delight in one another's company:

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:25).

An older form of the Marriage Service has the man saying these words to the woman as he puts a ring on the woman's finger:

... with my body I thee worship.<sup>1</sup>

‘Worship’ there means to ‘honour’, and he does it in no abstract way, but in a practical way—with his body.<sup>2</sup>

## THE SONG OF SONGS

This attraction and appreciation between women and men has been the subject of countless love songs. Some songs are little more than coarse and lustful, many are sweet, simple and homely, some soar to heights of passion—all of them draw forth from us some resonating emotional response.

The greatest of all love songs is found in the Bible. Known as *The Song of Songs* or *The Song of Solomon*, written nearly 3,000 years ago, it is an ancient Hebrew marriage song, that was probably used at weddings.

It is a collection of a number of songs or poems.<sup>3</sup> As such, it uses the ‘picture-language’ of poetry. This may sound strange to many modern ears in this prosaic age but, once we get used to the impressions it conveys, we will not find it difficult to work out what it is saying. The songs are made up mostly of words spoken by a woman to a man, and by the man to the woman, with occasional other voices joining in.

The title is given as:

The most beautiful of songs, by Solomon (Song 1:1).

Solomon, son of king David and Bathsheba, was the wisest and wealthiest king in Israel’s history (970–930 BC; see 1 Kings 3 and 4). The title may mean that the Song of Songs is written by Solomon, or about him, or that it was dedicated to Solomon.<sup>4</sup> There are references to Solomon in the Song, but the position we take here is that the Song is not about Solomon himself. The woman in the Song is of peasant stock, and the man is a shepherd (see Song 1:6–8). They are also in an exclusive relationship with each other (see Song 8:6: ‘Close your heart to every love but mine; hold no one in your arms but me’), whereas Solomon among his wives had ‘seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines’, who also turned his heart away from a faithful relationship with God (see 1 Kings 11:3, NRSV). So we take it that the references to Solomon in the Song are by way of comparison rather than identification.

Any understanding of marriage based on the Bible must take into account the Song of Songs. We will read it right through, and see what comes to us from it.

### The First Song—1:2-2:7

#### *The Woman*

Your lips cover me with kisses;  
your love is better than wine.  
There is a fragrance about you;  
the sound of your name recalls it.  
No woman could keep from loving you.

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<sup>1</sup> The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

<sup>2</sup> Just as the apostle Paul tells us as to how we are to give ‘spiritual worship’ to God: ‘present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom. 12:1)—that is, through everything we do with our bodies.

<sup>3</sup> There is great variation among translators and commentators as to how many such songs or poems there are in this Song, and who says what in the course of them. We use here the text and layout of the *Good News Bible*, as a translation that is accessible, and makes good sense (Today’s English Version, Old Testament: © American Bible Society; used by permission).

<sup>4</sup> See footnote to Song 1:1 in the *Good News Bible*.

Take me with you, and we'll run away;  
be my king and take me to your room.  
We will be happy together,  
drink deep, and lose ourselves in love.  
No wonder all women love you! (Song 1:2–4).

The woman is clearly smitten with love for this man. He is very special to her. There is a 'chemistry' operating between them. She cannot imagine that all women do not feel the same way about him as she does. She wants to be special to him, exclusively: for him to be her 'king', and she his queen. His kisses please and satisfy her, and she is filled with pleasurable anticipation of their union in love.

As another person becomes important to us in our lives, so we become more aware of ourselves, and how we may appear to others. The woman's thoughts turn to herself and her looks:

Women of Jerusalem, I am dark but beautiful,  
dark as as the desert tents of Kedar,  
but beautiful as the draperies in Solomon's palace.  
Don't look down on me because of my colour,  
because the sun has tanned me.  
My brothers were angry with me  
and made me work in the vineyard.  
I had no time to care for myself (Song 1:5–6).

It appears that she has suffered from some kind of male chauvinism on the part of her brothers. No such thing is present, as we shall see, in her relationship with the man. She is keen to make arrangements to be with him. There is perhaps, however, at this stage a certain shyness and uncertainty on her part at their being seen together:

Tell me, my love,  
Where will you lead your flock to graze?  
Where will they rest from the noonday sun?  
Why should I need to look for you  
among the flocks of the other shepherds? (Song 1:7).

The man reassures and encourages her, and confirms the arrangements for their rendezvous:

*The Man*  
Don't you know the place, loveliest of women?  
Go and follow the flock;  
find pasture for your goats  
near the tents of the shepherds (Song 1:8).

We then hear from the man how he feels about the woman. Clearly the attraction is mutual, and the man can see no reason why all men would not be attracted by her beauty:

You, my love, excite men  
as a mare excites the stallions of Pharaoh's chariots (Song 1:9).

Anyone who has witnessed the distracted friskiness of a stallion in the presence of a mare will know what that is like. This, however, is not a case of seeking 'to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding', as one of the old marriage

services put it.<sup>5</sup> The man is deeply respectful. Such is her beauty to him that he desires to adorn and honour her:

Your hair is beautiful upon your cheeks  
and falls along your neck like jewels.  
But we will make for you a chain of gold  
with ornaments of silver (Song 1:10–11).

In the face of her shy and uncertain self-awareness, the man thus gives the woman gentle encouragement.

In her musings the woman now anticipates the pleasures of being with her man.<sup>6</sup> In her total devotion to him, he is her ‘king’—and she is his queen:

*The Woman*

My king was lying on his couch,  
and my perfume filled the air with fragrance.  
My lover has the scent of myrrh  
as he lies upon my breasts.  
My lover is like the wild flowers  
that bloom in the vineyards at Engedi (Song 1:12–14).

There is a pleasurable and restful contentment here in one another’s presence, with rich promise of greater fulfilment to come. The couple are full of admiration for each other, and have eyes only for each other. They are able to give free expression to this with each other:

*The Man*

How beautiful you are, my love;  
how your eyes shine with love!

*The Woman*

How handsome you are, my dearest;  
how you delight me! (Song 1:15–16a).

In reality, her ‘king’ is not yet ‘lying on his couch’ with her. They are meeting out-of-doors (see 1:7–8), catching some time together while they go about their daily work. Perhaps they have taken seclusion together in a forested area. The woman imagines the grass below as the bed and the branches above as the roof beams of the home they will share together:

The green grass will be our bed;  
the cedars will be the beams of our house,  
and the cypress-trees the ceiling (Song 1:16b–17).

(The cedar trees are tall and strong; the cypress trees are softer and lower.) Once again, in this intimate situation, she becomes self-conscious, and aware of her lack of sophistication as a country girl, albeit one with a coy and wild beauty of her own:

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<sup>5</sup> Solemnization of Matrimony, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

<sup>6</sup> We adopt here an interpretation of the Song of Songs that sees it as consistent with the law of Israel’s God, which upheld chastity and was against sexual union outside of marriage (see on fornication: Deut. 22:13–29; 2 Sam. 13:12: ‘such a thing is not done in Israel’; compare 1 Thess. 4:3; on adultery: Exod. 20:14; Gen. 39:7–10: ‘sin against God’; compare Matt. 5:27–28). This interpretation sees the songs as chronologically sequential, with the marriage occurring in the third song from 3:6, with its consummation in 5:1. Not all commentators take this position. There are those who take it that ‘These two people are simply in love with one another, and are planning to sleep together without anyone else’s permission, without benefit of marriage license or church ceremony’ (H. Gollwitzer, *Song of Love: A Biblical Understanding of Sex*, Fortress Press, 1979, p. 29; quoted in G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1984, p. 46)—no doubt advocating that it is all right to do the same today.

I am only a wild flower in Sharon,  
a lily in a mountain valley (Song 2:1).

Once again, he encourages her: as far as he is concerned, her beauty outshines that of all other women:

*The Man*

Like a lily among thorns  
is my darling among women (Song 2:2).

This emboldens her to express how, for her, he also is incomparable, and that she can't get enough of him:

*The Woman*

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,  
so is my dearest compared to other men.  
I love to sit in its shadow,  
and its fruit is sweet to my taste (Song 2:3).

So again, she anticipates their love-making in her imagination:

He brought me to his banqueting hall  
and raised the banner of love over me.  
Restore my strength with raisins and refresh me with apples!  
I am weak from passion.  
His left hand is under my head,  
and his right hand caresses me (Song 2:4–6).

Then comes an admonition, addressed to the 'women of Jerusalem'—perhaps those attending the wedding ceremony, where this poem is being recited. It is a refrain that is repeated through the book, and it rounds off this part of the Song:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem;  
swear by the swift deer and the gazelles  
that you will not interrupt our love (Song 2:7).

The interpretation 'that you will not interrupt our love' belongs to the *Good News Bible* translation. This suggests something that has already started, that is not to be stopped. The more literal translation is: 'do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready' (*New Revised Standard Version*). This applies to something that is yet to happen: 'first the act of awakening or *summoning* something, and then doing what is necessary to *sustain* the activity already begun'.<sup>7</sup> This awakening is not to happen until there is a willing readiness and desire for it. This suggests that there is an appropriate timeliness about love-making, that is not to be forced, hurried, or pressed in advance.<sup>8</sup> Restraint in the interests of deep respect and love for the other person lies at its heart.

***Question for discussion***

- *How are we going with this so far? How does it relate to some of our own experience?*

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<sup>7</sup> Carr, *Song of Solomon*, p. 94.

<sup>8</sup> While this has implications for pre-marital sexual relations and fondling—couples should not 'jump the gun', and 'petting' should stop short of foreplay that would normally lead to sexual union—it applies no less in the context of married love-making.

## The Second Song—2:8-3:5

The second song has to do with how the couple feel and think about each other while they are eagerly waiting. It also begins to anticipate some of the impediments that could get in the way of their relationship and cause damage.

First we hear what each one does for the other in terms of the feelings that are aroused for each other. The woman experiences the excitement of anticipating his approach:

### *The Woman*

I hear my lover's voice.  
He comes running over the mountains,  
racing across the hills to me.  
My lover is like a gazelle,  
like a young stag.  
There he stands beside the wall.  
He looks in through the window and glances  
through the lattice (Song 2:8–9).

He is obviously keen to get to her, and to catch a glimpse of her beauty. She thrills to hear his voice:

My lover speaks to me.

### *The Man*

Come then, my love;  
my darling, come with me.  
The winter is over; the rains have stopped;  
in the countryside the flowers are in bloom.  
This is the time for singing;  
the song of doves is heard in the fields.  
Figs are beginning to ripen;  
the air is fragrant with blossoming vines (Song 2:10–13a).

What time of year is this referring to? It is Spring, when the sap begins to flow again in the plants and growth is vibrant, all is fresh and new, the birds are sending out mating calls, and it is the season for love. This is a good example of how poetic picture-language is used to speak of the exciting early stages of their relationship, just as further on a later time of the year is spoken of to signify their love coming to maturity (see Song 7:12). So the man issues his ardent invitation:

Come then, my love;  
my darling, come with me (Song 2:13b).

With this, there is so much more to get to know of each other, and still a shy yet attractive reticence in sharing it openly. He says to her:

You are like a dove that hides  
in the crevice of a rock.  
Let me see your lovely face  
and hear your enchanting voice (Song 2:14).

Another note then intrudes:

Catch the foxes, the little foxes,  
before they ruin our vineyard in bloom (Song 2:15).

What are ‘the little foxes’, and what is ‘our vineyard’? The picture-language of poetry again: the ‘vineyard’ is their relationship, and ‘the little foxes’ are the things that can get in the way of their relationship and do it harm—the little annoyances, the pickiness, the unthinking selfishnesses. The man sees that these intrusions need to be identified and dispatched as they arise, before they do permanent damage. All this is part of coming to know each other, and of putting their relationship on a sound footing.

Reassured, the woman is glad to be in the place of fully belonging to each other, in enduring contentment and peace, eager for their next encounter:

*The Woman*

My lover is mine, and I am his.  
He feeds his flock among the lilies  
until the morning breezes blow  
and the darkness disappears.  
Return, my darling, like a gazelle,  
Like a stag on the mountains of Bether (Song 2:16–17).

But now to her also come anxious misgivings as to what might go wrong. When someone has become important to us, the thought of losing them is unbearable. The suggestion, and fear, of this possibility comes to her at night in a dream:

Asleep on my bed, night after night  
I dreamed of the one I love;  
I was looking for him, but couldn’t find him.  
I went wandering through the city,  
through its streets and alleys.  
I looked for the one I love.  
I looked, but couldn’t find him.  
The watchmen patrolling the city saw me.  
I asked them, ‘Have you found my lover?’ (Song 3:1–3).

Haven’t we all had dreams like that: when we are trying to get to a particular place or person or activity and never quite make it? This particular dream, on this occasion, much to her relief, has a happy ending:

As soon as I left them, I found him.  
I held him and wouldn’t let him go  
until I took him to my mother’s house,  
to the room where I was born (Song 3:4).

In her dream she finds him, hangs on to him, and takes him home to her place. Once again comes the refrain of tender yet restrained passion:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem;  
Swear by the swift deer and the gazelles  
that you will not interrupt our love  
[Literally: do not stir up or awaken love  
until it is ready] (Song 3:5).

***Question for discussion***

- *What have we known of ‘the little foxes’, or of the fear of loss, in our relationships? How well, or poorly, have we coped with them?*

## The Third Song—3:6-5:1

In this song, the marriage ceremony takes place, and the couple consummate their union.  
For the bride, the coming of her bridegroom is strong and regal:

### *The Woman*

What is this coming from the desert  
like a column of smoke,  
fragrant with incense and myrrh,  
the incense sold by the traders?  
Solomon is coming, carried on his throne;  
sixty soldiers form the bodyguard,  
the finest soldiers in Israel.  
All of them are skilful with the sword;  
they are battle-hardened veterans.  
Each of them is armed with a sword,  
on guard against a night attack.  
King Solomon is carried on a throne  
made of the finest wood.  
Its posts are covered with silver;  
over it is cloth embroidered with gold.  
Its cushions are covered with purple cloth,  
lovingly woven by the women of Jerusalem.  
Women of Zion, come and see King Solomon.  
He is wearing the crown that his mother  
placed on his head on his wedding day,  
on the day of his gladness and joy (Song 3:6–11).

An entourage is pictured, approaching across the desert, kicking up a cloud of dust. As it comes near, a heady fragrance is discerned. The bridegroom is like a king on his wedding-day. His attendants are like the soldiers of a king's bodyguard. All the appurtenances and adornments of kingship honour the bridegroom, even to a special crown that he wears for the occasion. So taken is the bride with her bridegroom that she wants all the other women to see and admire him.

Is this really King Solomon coming to get married, or is this again the picture-language of poetry, that invests the wedding with something of the deep significance that it holds? We have already seen that this couple are in fact a shepherd and a peasant-girl, and that King Solomon, with his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, could never have known the intimate one-on-one relationship, to the exclusion of all others, that these two have. The truth is that every wedding, however humble, has a royal quality about it. For the bride, the bridegroom is her one-and-only—her 'king'—and she is his queen. What is so special about a royal wedding such as was witnessed by millions between Prince Charles and the Lady Diana? What attracted people to that occasion, and drew them to participate in it? Was it not, in some sense, everybody's wedding: every prospective bride and bridegroom, every parent's daughter or son? In an Orthodox wedding, there is an elaborate ceremony of placing crowns on the heads of the bridegroom and bride. And are they not regarded, in some sense, as indeed king and queen for a day? Such may well be the significance of what is being said here.

The bridegroom eyes his bride as, in a modern wedding, he might watch her coming towards him up the aisle:

### *The Man*

How beautiful you are, my love!  
How your eyes shine with love behind your veil (Song 4:1a).

His eyes begin at the top of her head, and move on downwards:

Your hair dances like a flock of goats  
bounding down the hills of Gilead.  
Your teeth are as white as sheep  
that have just been shorn and washed.  
Not one of them is missing;  
they are all perfectly matched (Song 4:1b–2).

This is not the comparison that others of us might make, but he is, after all, a shepherd, and these are the things that make his day. Her lips are what attract him next—not so much for kissing as for the words that come to him from them:

Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;  
how lovely they are when you speak.  
Your cheeks glow behind your veil (Song 4:3).

Her neck is adorned, it would seem, with a full necklace, possibly made up of the coins of her dowry. To him it makes her appear as an upright woman, a tower of strength:

Your neck is like the tower of David,  
round and smooth,  
with a necklace like a thousand shields  
hung round it (Song 4:4).

Moving down, beautifully:

Your breasts are like gazelles,  
twin deer feeding among lilies (Song 4:5).

There he stops. Her whole being and presence with him is like a mountain of fragrance—more than he can take in:

I will stay on the hill of myrrh,  
the hill of incense,  
until the morning breezes blow  
and the darkness disappears.  
How beautiful you are, my love;  
how perfect you are! (Song 4:6–7).

There is an eager wildness about her that evokes the names of far-off rugged heights frequented by untamed beasts. All he wants is to have her with him:

Come with me from the Lebanon Mountains, my bride;  
come with me from Lebanon.  
Come down from the top of Mount Amana,  
from Mount Senir and Mount Hermon,  
where the lions and leopards live.  
The look in your eyes, my sweetheart and bride,  
and the necklace you are wearing  
have stolen my heart.  
Your love delights me,  
my sweetheart and bride.  
Your love is better than wine;  
your perfume more fragrant than any spice.  
The taste of honey is on your lips, my darling;  
your tongue is milk and honey for me.  
Your clothing has all the fragrance of Lebanon (Song 4:8–11).

He is close enough to touch her clothing. We may take it that they now retire to the bridal chamber, and are alone there, in full appreciation and readiness for each other. The man is aware of treasured hidden depths within her that she is about to open to him:

My sweetheart, my bride, is a secret garden,  
a walled garden, a private spring; (Song 4:12).

This could be a way of saying that she is a virgin, and that she has kept herself just for him—a precious gift, lovely to see.<sup>9</sup> He senses some of the delights that are in store:

there the plants flourish.  
They grow like an orchard of pomegranate trees  
and bear the finest fruits.  
There is no lack of henna and nard,  
of saffron, calamus, and cinnamon,  
or incense of every kind.  
Myrrh and aloes grow there  
with all the most fragrant perfumes.  
Fountains water the garden,  
streams of flowing water,  
brooks gushing down from the Lebanon  
Mountains (Song 4:13–15).

These are not just sexual delights, but the rich delights of her whole personality, in the profound mystery of what it is to be a human being in the image of God. God speaks of Himself as ‘the fountain of living water’ (Jeremiah 2:13), and tells us: ‘Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life’ (Proverbs 4:23). All of this is now wafting towards him from her ‘secret garden’. She then issues a fresh and lovely invitation to him:

*The Woman*  
Wake up, North Wind.  
South Wind, blow on my garden;  
fill the air with fragrance.  
Let my lover come to his garden  
and eat the best of its fruits (Song 4:16).

This tender and open invitation the man gladly takes up:

*The Man*  
I have entered my garden, my sweetheart, my bride.  
I am gathering my spices and myrrh;  
I am eating my honey and honeycomb;  
I am drinking my wine and milk (Song 5:1a).

It is about sexual union, the consummation of two whole personalities in ‘one flesh’. It is spoken of very delicately and purely.<sup>10</sup> It is beautiful, and deeply satisfying.

Encouragement comes from those outside, still revelling in the marriage feast:

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<sup>9</sup> What of those who do not come to their marriages this way? In the next study we will see how it is possible to come even so as if it was this way.

<sup>10</sup> This is a world apart from the coarseness and impurity that defile God’s gift in pornography and R-rated movies, and could never be mistaken for it—unless, of course we come to it as those who are ‘corrupt and unbelieving’, for whom ‘nothing is pure’ (Titus 1:15).

*The Women*

Eat, lovers, and drink  
until you are drunk with love!

**Question for discussion**

- *What can we say? How does this affect our understanding and appreciation of marriage, and the importance of the wedding day?*

**The Fourth Song—5:2-6:3**

Once we are married, unlike the fairy tales, we do not necessarily live ‘happily ever after’. We find we are subject to the same temptations and distractions, and the same preoccupation with self, that we had before we were married. These things are now capable of doing even more damage than before, because so much more is now at stake. But they offer opportunities for even richer and deeper union than we would have thought possible.

The fourth song opens with another of the woman’s dreams, but this time much worse than it was before:

*The Woman*

While I slept, my heart was awake.  
I dreamed my lover knocked at the door.

*The Man*

Let me come in, my darling,  
my sweetheart, my dove.  
My head is wet with dew,  
and my hair is damp from the mist (Song 5:2).

It seems this time he has come, not from leaping across the mountains like a young stag, but from across the boggy moors.<sup>11</sup> The woman’s thoughts immediately fly to her own comfort and convenience:

*The Woman*

I have already undressed;  
why should I get dressed again?  
I have washed my feet;  
why should I get them dirty again? (Song 5:3).

Why should she put herself out for him? There is no denying that the old ‘chemistry’ is still there:

My lover put his hand to the door,  
and I was thrilled that he was near.  
I was ready to let him come in (Song 5:4–5a).

Yet even as she accedes to his request, she is still very conscious of herself and her perfume:

My hands were covered with myrrh,  
my fingers with liquid myrrh,  
as I grasped the handle of the door (Song 5:5b).

This is where the dream turns into a nightmare:

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps he’s come home late from work—or from the pub!

I opened the door for my lover,  
but he had already gone (Song 5:6a).

Gone! The old fears of loss (compare 3:1) come flooding back. Sometimes, in the early stages of a marriage, the relationship can be a bit tenuous and uncertain, and so more open to doubts and fears. Sometimes the threat of relationship breakdown arises much later.

In the dream, this makes her miss him badly, and long for him:

How I wanted to hear his voice!  
I looked for him, but couldn't find him;  
I called to him, but heard no answer (Song 5:6b).

This time, there is no quick resolution, as there was in the earlier dream. It gets worse before it gets better. Not only is she suffering loss, but she is also subjected to abuse:

The watchmen patrolling the city found me;  
they struck me and bruised me;  
the guards at the city wall tore off my cape (Song 5:7).

She enlists her women friends to help find him, and take him a message from her:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem,  
that if you find my lover,  
you will tell him I am weak from passion (Song 5:8).

Earlier on, there had been no doubt in her mind that her man was quite outstanding compared with other men (see 2:3). Now she is called upon to recall what is so special about him:

*The Women*

Most beautiful of women,  
Is your lover different from everyone else?  
What is there so wonderful about him  
that we should give you our promise? (Song 5:9).

This evokes from her a deeper appreciation of him and his masculinity than she has given expression to before:

*The Woman*

My lover is handsome and strong;  
he is one in ten thousand.  
His face is bronzed and smooth;  
his hair is wavy,  
black as a raven.  
His eyes are as beautiful as doves by a flowing brook,  
doves washed in milk and standing by the stream.  
His cheeks are as lovely as a garden  
that is full of herbs and spices.  
His lips are like lilies,  
wet with liquid myrrh.  
His hands are well-formed,  
and he wears rings set with gems.  
His body is like smooth ivory,  
with sapphires set in it.  
His thighs are columns of alabaster  
set in sockets of gold.

He is majestic, like the Lebanon Mountains  
with their towering cedars.  
His mouth is sweet to kiss;  
everything about him enchants me.  
This is what my lover is like,  
women of Jerusalem (Song 5:10–16).

Informed of such a paragon, the women are keen to help look for him:

*The Women*

Most beautiful of women, where has your lover gone?  
Tell us which way your lover went,  
So that we can help you find him (Song 6:1).

Renewed and deepened in her appreciation and love of her man, the woman is reunited with him, now more surely than ever, and they embrace with freedom and openness:

*The Woman*

My lover has gone to his garden,  
where the balsam trees grow.  
He is feeding his flock in the garden  
and gathering lilies.  
My lover is mine, and I am his;  
he feeds his flock among the lilies (Song 6:2–3).

This time he is not just, as before, pasturing his flock among the lilies—a picture of peace and contentment in each other's presence. This time, he is actively 'gathering lilies': their enjoyment of one another in married love is full and unhindered.

***Questions for discussion***

- *What have we known of relationships damaged by entrenched selfishness?*
- *What opportunities does this give for richer and deeper union??*

**The Fifth Song—6:4-8:4**

Following the wedding, the man is increasingly impressed by the woman's beauty, and drawn back to her again and again.

He realises first that his wife is no wimp or doormat:

*The Man*

My love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah,  
as lovely as the city of Jerusalem,  
as breathtaking as these great cities (Song 6:4).

A city is a place of dynamism, strength and magnificence. This is woman in her proper glory!<sup>12</sup> He can't stop looking at her,<sup>13</sup> and is captivated by her:

Turn your eyes away from me;  
they are holding me captive (Song 6:5a).

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<sup>12</sup> Contrary to what some would have us believe of the Bible's view of women.

<sup>13</sup> Even though we were staying along the striking scenery of the Great Ocean Road, all the photos I took on our honeymoon were of my new bride.

He cannot help reverting to what attracted him to her earlier:

Your hair dances like a flock of goats  
bounding down the hills of Gilead.  
Your teeth are as white as a flock of sheep  
that have just been washed.  
Not one of them is missing;  
they are all perfectly matched.  
Your cheeks glow behind your veil (Song 6:5b–7).

He is, however, also capable of coming up with something new, that expresses his exclusive attachment to her above all others:

Let the king have sixty queens, eighty concubines,  
young women without number!  
But I love only one,  
and she is as lovely as a dove.  
She is her mother's only daughter,  
her mother's favourite child.  
All women look at her and praise her;  
queens and concubines sing her praises (Song 6:8–9).

There are times when he suddenly sees her in a whole new light, as if he has never seen her before:

Who is this whose glance is like the dawn?  
She is beautiful and bright,  
as dazzling as the sun or the moon (Song 6:10).

This is a time for checking out how their relationship is going, and taking it on to new levels of affection and trust:

I have come down among the almond-trees  
to see the young plants in the valley,  
to see the new leaves on the vines  
and the blossoms on the pomegranate-trees.  
I am trembling; you have made me as eager for love  
as a chariot driver is for battle (Song 6:11–12).

For the moment, however, that will have to wait. We are taken to the scene of a dance—perhaps the ancient Hebrew equivalent of the bridal waltz at a wedding reception:

*The Women*

Dance, dance, girl of Shulam.  
Let us watch you as you dance.

*The Woman*

Why do you want to watch me  
as I dance between the rows of  
onlookers? (Song 6:13).

The man joins in, and watches her intently. This time, he begins at her feet, and moves his eyes all the way upward, missing nothing:

*The Man*

What a wonderful girl you are!  
How beautiful are your feet in sandals.  
The curve of your thighs  
is like the work of an artist.  
A bowl is there,  
that never runs out of spiced wine.  
A sheaf of wheat is there,  
surrounded by lilies.  
Your breasts are like twin deer,  
like two gazelles.  
Your neck is like a tower of ivory.  
Your eyes are like the pools in the city of Heshbon,  
near the gate of that great city.  
Your nose is as lovely as the tower of Lebanon  
that stands guard at Damascus.  
Your head is held high like Mount Carmel.  
Your braided hair shines like the finest satin;  
its beauty could hold a king captive (Song 7:1–5).

Art and craft, agriculture, nature, architecture and the landscape are all called upon to provide comparisons to this strong and wonderful person. We are not sure what shape the ‘tower of Lebanon’ was, but no doubt the woman had a fine outstanding nose of the Semitic type. As he dwells on each of these endearing features, he looks on her now not from a distance, but as his own, known intimately to him, and even more delightfully attractive to him for that reason:

How pretty you are, how beautiful;  
how complete the delights of your love.  
You are as graceful as a palm tree,  
and your breasts are clusters of dates.  
I will climb the palm tree  
and pick its fruit.  
To me your breasts are like bunches of grapes,  
your breath like the fragrance of apples,  
and your mouth like the finest wine (Song 7:6–9a).

The respectful restraints that were proper before they were married no longer apply—they now belong wholly to each other. His devotion to her is now expressed completely: ‘With my body I worship you’.

The woman is no less inhibited in her receiving of his affection and desire, and in the giving of herself to him:

*The Woman*

Then let the wine flow straight to my lover,  
flowing over his lips and teeth.  
I belong to my lover, and he desires me (Song 7:9b–10).

Together they go off into the country, perhaps on what we would call their honeymoon, to give attention to their growing and maturing relationship, with its promise of such fruitfulness, as the woman says:

Come, darling, let’s go out to the countryside  
and spend the night in the villages.  
We will get up early and look at the vines  
to see whether they’ve started to grow,

whether the blossoms are opening  
and the pomegranate trees are in bloom.  
There I will give you my love.  
You can smell the scent of mandrakes,  
and all the pleasant fruits are near our door.  
Darling, I have kept for you  
the old delights and the new (Song 7:11–13).

Mandrakes are an aphrodisiac (compare Gen. 30:14–18), but these two have something going between them that needs no artificial aids or stimulants to last into the years.

Cultures vary as to how much expression of affection is appropriate before others. In this culture it appears that brother and sister were more free to show affection in public than was acceptable for husband and wife. This explains what the woman says next:

I wish that you were my brother,  
that my mother had nursed you at her breast.  
Then, if I met you in the street,  
I could kiss you and no one would mind (Song 8:1).

Earlier the woman had dreamed that she would bring the one she loved to her mother's house (see 3:4). No doubt it was her mother who first taught her the facts of life and prepared her for marriage by instructing her in how to love her husband (compare Titus 2:3–5). That connection is still strong in her thinking, and now she wants to take him there—perhaps to show how well she has learned her lessons (or, depending on how it is translated, to continue learning from him):

I would take you to my mother's house,  
where you could teach me love.  
I would give you spiced wine,  
my pomegranate wine to drink (Song 8:2).

Here, as now everywhere else, they are together:

Your left hand is under my head,  
and your right hand caresses me (Song 8:3).

Once more (as in 2:7 and 3:5) comes the refrain:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem,  
that you will not interrupt our love  
[Literally: do not stir up or awaken love  
until it is ready] (Song 8:4).

The *Good News Bible* translation may be correct at this point, now that their love for each other has been fully awakened. If we still take the literal translation, the woman may be wanting it made known that this full relationship that they now have is worth waiting and keeping yourself for. Also, as we said at 2:7, restraint in love-making, out of consideration for the other person, belongs just as much in the married relationship. True love is never forced, hurried, or pressed in advance.

### ***Question for discussion***

- *What can we learn from this about the growth and maturing of a marriage relationship in the long term?*

## The Sixth Song—8:5-14

Conclusions are now drawn from the lasting strength and durability of the relationship we have observed between these two. It begins with perhaps what we would call their return together from their honeymoon:

*The Women*

Who is this coming from the desert,  
arm in arm with her lover? (Song 8:5a).

The woman then reminds the man of the time she was first in love with him (compare 2:5):

*The Woman*

Under the apple tree I woke you,  
in the place where you were born (Song 8:5b).

Reference to ‘the place where you were born’ may be saying that this was when he first became fully alive; or it may be saying that they were destined for each other from birth.

The climax and summary of the whole Song comes in what the woman says next:

Close your heart to every love but mine;  
hold no one in your arms but me.  
Love is as powerful as death;  
passion is as strong as death itself.  
It bursts into flame  
and burns like a raging fire.  
Water cannot put it out;  
no flood can drown it.  
But if anyone tried to buy love with his wealth,  
contempt is all he would get (Song 8:6–7).

The depth and strength of their relationship has been that it is ‘the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’.<sup>14</sup> It is this one-on-one relationship, to the exclusion of all others, that enables a couple safely to explore and discover the height and depth and breadth and length of true love. Here they can know a love in life that is ‘for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death’.<sup>15</sup> The bond of love that is forged there cannot be undone. How could anyone ever pay enough for this priceless gift? The notion that it could be haggled over or bargained for in that way is a denial of its very nature as free and total gift—from God, and on the part of the participants.

There is a message in this for those who are yet to come to marriage:

*The Woman’s Brothers*

We have a young sister,  
and her breasts are still small.  
What will we do for her  
when a young man comes courting?  
If she is a wall,  
we will build her a silver tower.  
But if she is a gate,  
we will protect her with panels of cedar (Song 8:8–9).

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<sup>14</sup> *Marriage Act 1961–1966*, 46. (1), Commonwealth of Australia, *Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, Canberra, 1970 (?), p. 71. See study 1.

<sup>15</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, AIO Press, Sydney, 1978, p. 550.

Seeing the wholesomeness of the relationship between this woman and man, the woman's brothers are concerned that their younger sister not miss out on something so worthwhile. Her virginity is worth keeping for something as good as this. 'If she is a wall'—proof against all comers as she holds and prepares herself for her future husband—they will honour and uphold her in that. 'But if she is a gate'—likely to be open to anyone who comes—they will take steps to protect her from such folly, so that she not miss out on the real thing.

The woman, now free from all self-consciousness in her secure relationship with her husband, warmly affirms her status as his wife, and how she came to be that way:

*The Woman*

I am a wall,  
and my breasts are its towers.  
My lover knows that with him  
I find contentment and peace (Song 8:10).

The man no less rejoices in what has come to him, as surpassing in value all that a king could own:

*The Man*

Solomon has a vineyard  
in a place called Baal Hamon.  
There are farmers who rent it from him;  
each one pays a thousand silver coins.  
Solomon is welcome to his thousand coins,  
and the farmers to two hundred as their share;  
I have a vineyard of my own! (Song 8:11–12).

Their final exchange, in the hearing of others, recalls both their early encounter, and their wedding night, in the summation of all that they now enjoy. The man calls:

Let me hear your voice from the garden, my love;  
my companions are waiting to hear you speak (Song 8:13).

And she replies:

*The Woman*

Come to me, my lover, like a gazelle,  
like a young stag on the mountains where spices  
grow (Song 8:14).

***Question for discussion***

- *What is it that gives such a marriage its strength and durability?*

## **A GIFT FROM GOD**

The Preface in one of the marriage services includes this statement:

Marriage is a gift from God for the well-being of mankind, and for the proper expression of natural instincts and affections with which he has endowed us.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 560.

In traditional marriage services, before the vows are made, a preliminary question is asked requiring the free and willing consent of both parties, without which the marriage would not be a valid one. The bridegroom is asked:

. . . will you have [this person] as your wife,  
to live together, as God has ordained,  
in the holy state of matrimony?  
Will you love her, cherish her,  
honour and protect her,  
in sickness and in health;  
and, forsaking all others,  
be faithful to her,  
as long as you both shall live?<sup>17</sup>

The bride is asked a similar question. Each of them answer: ‘I will’—that is, ‘I am willing; that is my full intention; and I am doing this completely of my own free will’. True love is given freely. It cannot be forced.

These are the things to which the Song of Songs gives such rich and wonderful expression.

In preparation of couples for marriage, I have long had the practice of reading through with them the Song of Songs. Other marriage and sex manuals may have their place, but nothing comes near the Song of Songs for the range and tenderness of expression that it gives to the love of a woman and a man around marriage. One couple came in feeling a little ragged from exchanges with family and in-laws-to-be over the wedding arrangements. Once we had been through the Song of Songs they breathed a sigh of relief, saying: ‘Ah, yes! That’s the way it is!’ They found peace in this most beautiful, exciting, deeply settling and most satisfying collection of love poems. Married couples would do well from time to time to read it to each other in bed.<sup>18</sup>

A note in the Good News Bible adds this:

These songs have often been interpreted by Jews as a picture of the relationship between God and his people, and by Christians as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

That opens up a whole new dimension—which we will look at in our next study.

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<sup>17</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 549.

<sup>18</sup> This advice came from Geoffrey Bingham. One of my friends responded, ‘That’s all very well, but what if they never get past the end of the first song?’ Oh well, then they can pick it up next time from where they left off!