

# “HIS BANNER OVER ME IS LOVE”

Responsive Reading, “Song of Songs”<sup>1</sup>

As we make our way through Scripture, I’m generally taking the books in the order we find them in the Bible, but I occasionally change the order a bit, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Since next month our worship will be mostly around the theme of Black History, this morning we’re going to look at the love song known as the Song of Songs, sometimes called the Song of Solomon, as an early prelude to Valentine’s Day.

King Solomon has traditionally been considered to be the author of this book, but its Hebrew title, “Solomon’s Song of Songs,” (1:1) could mean a song by, for or about Solomon, so we’re not really sure that he actually wrote it himself. Although Solomon reigned from 970-930 B.C., and some of the poems may go back that far, many scholars believe that the book as we have it dates from about the third century B.C.<sup>2</sup>

The title “Song of Songs” is a superlative, meaning “The best of all songs.” But even so, this is probably the most difficult book in the Old Testament to interpret, right up there in difficulty with the book of Revelation in the New Testament.

The controversy about interpretation centers on the fact that the book is sensuous and rather explicitly sexual. Not a few have charged over the centuries that the Song is immoral, and its inclusion in the canon of Scripture was attended by significant controversy. I’ve told you before that my dear Mother objected to it all her life.

If you read the Song of Songs in a modern translation, so that you can tell what is really being said, I suspect that parts of the book will make you blush. But I also suspect that many of us have written similar things in letters to our beloveds, especially in the weeks and months just prior to our marriage!

As is the case with the book of Esther, God is not mentioned in the Song, and there is no apparent connection with the religion of Israel. While we may wonder why God would allow such a book to be included in the Bible, God has allowed it, and it falls to us to discover why.

While I’ve only dared to preach from this book a few times in more than forty years of preaching, the fact of the matter is that our sexuality is actually quite near the center of what it means to be human. God created us as sexual beings, and God is pleased with our maleness and femaleness.<sup>3</sup>

Being human is good; and being human *means* being sexual. One theologian pointed out that “Sexuality is not a separate compartment of human life; it is a radiance pervading every human relationship, but assuming a particular intensity at certain points.”<sup>4</sup>

Human sexuality is neither a peripheral matter nor a temporary inconvenience; and Christian faith ought to take our physical embodiment seriously, since we believe that “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the fact of the matter is that we have no other “antennae” with which to communicate with God except the cells of our physical bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 26, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Serendipity Bible for Groups*, fourth edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 932; also John T. Bunn, “Song of Solomon,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:27, 31a

<sup>4</sup> James Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1978), p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson, p. 8.

The “language” of sexuality is a language created by God; and it is a sacred language, to be employed only in certain circumstances, circumstances God has defined for us very carefully across the pages of the Bible. Let’s explore some of what the Song of Songs has to say about this language . . . .

Structurally, the Song of Songs is a series of seven poems that do not appear to be in chronological order.<sup>6</sup> The Song is unique in the Bible in that there is no narrative. The entirety of the text is in the mouths of speakers, as in a drama. Modern translations generally treat the text as a conversation between three characters: “the Beloved,” “the Lover,” and “the Friends,” with different translations making slightly different assignments of the text to each speaker.<sup>7</sup>

Across the centuries, the most common way of getting around the sensuous nature of the text has been to treat it as an allegory, ignoring the literal meaning of the words and looking for “deeper,” hidden meanings. For centuries, the book was read during the public services of Passover, with the part of the Lover being assigned to God and the part of the Beloved being assigned to the nation of Israel.<sup>8</sup> In the Christian Era, the part of the Lover has usually been assigned to our Lord Jesus, and the part of the Beloved to His Bride, the Church.<sup>9</sup>

Now the Bible does use the image of marriage to describe God’s relationship with Israel and Jesus’ relationship with the Church, as the texts that we read earlier demonstrate, though to imagine such a passionate love relationship with our Star-Breathing God may be a stretch for most of us. I’ll come back to that presently, but we also need to take quite seriously the explicit blessing the Song gives to the passions of sexual expression within committed marriage. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Life Application Study Bible*, New Living Translation (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), p. 1039. The seven poems are generally considered to be 1:1-2:7; 2:8-3:5; 3:6-5:1; 5:2-6:3; 6:4-7:9; 7:10-8:4; and 8:5-14.

<sup>7</sup> The scheme I find most helpful is as follows:

1. The Wedding Day (1:1-2:7)
  2. Memories of Courtship (2:8-3:5)
  3. Memories of Engagement (3:6-5:1)
  4. A Troubling Dream (5:2-6:3)
  5. Praising the Bride’s Beauty (6:4-7:9)
  6. The Bride’s Tender Appeal (7:10-8:4)
  7. The Power of Love (8:5-14)
- (Life Application Bible, p. 1038)

Within this schema, some believe that the wedding procession is described in 3:6-11, the wedding night in 4:1-5:1, and the consummation of the marriage in 4:16-5:1. Another way to understand the developing action is that Solomon meets the young woman in 2:8-3:5 and they fall in love. In 3:6-11, Solomon returns to the young woman in all his royal splendor, expresses his great love for her (4:1-5), and then proposes in 4:7-15. The young woman accepts (4:16), and Solomon responds to her acceptance (5:1).

A second—and very different—outline might go like this: “The maiden was reared in a village household with several brothers (2:9, 1:6, 6:9). As she rapidly approached puberty she, as well as her brothers, protected her chastity (8:9). But when she achieved womanly maturity, she fell in love with a shepherd and gave herself to him (8:10; 7:2-12). Despite her brothers’ anger and community disapproval, she continued the relationship (1:6; 8:1). Clandestine meetings were effected (1:16, 17: 3:2-4; 5:2-7) despite efforts at separation.

“The exceeding beauty of the maiden came to the attention of Solomon, who desired her for his harem. An agreement was reached, one most profitable to the family, and the maiden went into the harem of Solomon (1:4; 3:6-11). Discounting lavish court inducements she scorned the position of harem favorite (8:11-12) and continued to have furtive meetings with her lover (1:12, 8:13). She longed for her shepherd lover knowing that she possessed an impossible love, one which could never be truly fulfilled (8:6-7). The maiden’s pitiful laments rend the heart (1:7; 2:6-7; 3:1, 5; 5:6a, 8; 8:1, 3-4). Her longing, despair, and destructive jealousy make this book a hauntingly tragic work” (Bunn, p. 130).

<sup>8</sup> L.D. Johnson, “Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon,” vol. 9 of *The Layman’s Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 21:2 et passim.

sexual dimension God has designed into our lives is a good gift indeed, so long as we enjoy it as God intends!

And as part of your Valentine's Day celebration, I invite you to read this brief Song in a modern translation in one sitting, allowing it to remind you of—and perhaps to encourage you to renew—romance in your own love. For the balance of our time this morning, though, I want to highlight just a few verses and principles, and then relate these to our relationship with God.

At least three hymns and Scripture songs have their roots in the Song of Songs. Hymn 626, "The Lily of the Valley," which we've already sung this morning, was inspired by 2:1, which is the only place in the Bible where a "lily of the valley" is mentioned. Hymn 748, "I Am His, and He Is Mine," was inspired by 2:16 and 6:3; and the title of this sermon is also the title of a Scripture song based on 2:4, where it is written that "*He has taken me to the banqueting hall, and his banner over me is love.*"<sup>10</sup>

In 4:12, when the Lover says of his Beloved, "*You are my private garden, my treasure, my bride, a secluded spring, a hidden fountain,*" he is both praising her virginity and identifying a principle that is mentioned three times in this short book. That principle is "*not to awaken love until the time is right*" (2:7, 3:5, 8:4). Eugene Peterson, who translated *The Message* version of the Bible, wrote of this principle that:

We don't read very far in the Song of Songs before we realize [that] it contains exquisite love lyrics, and [that] it is very explicit sexually. The Song, in other words, makes a [strong] connection between [married] love and sexuality—a very important and very biblical connection to make.

There are some who would eliminate sex when they speak of love, supposing that they are making it more holy. Others, when they think of sex, never think of love. The Song proclaims an integrated wholeness that is at the center of Christian teaching on committed, wedded love for a world that seems to specialize in loveless sex. . . . The Song of Songs elaborates on the Genesis story by celebrating the union of two personalities in love."<sup>11</sup>

Beyond this, when we consider the Song as it relates to our love relationship with God, recent research has uncovered some surprises. The huge Willow Creek Church in Chicago has just ten words as its Mission Statement: "Turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> And Willow Creek's definition of Spiritual Growth is similarly simple: "An increasing love for God and for other people" (2 Peter 1:5-8).<sup>13</sup>

In rather startling research published a few years ago, Willow Creek reported that, contrary to all expectations, being faithful in church attendance and active in congregational programs has almost no correlation with "turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ," or with increasing people's "love for God and for other people." In other words,

<sup>10</sup> Bunn has pointed out that "Their meeting place was a 'banqueting house,' better translated 'wine house.' It does not necessarily imply a place of public feasting and revelry. It could be the place of the wine press and vats, the wine house of the vineyards, where the two shared the intimacies of lovers.

"The translation of *digelu* ("banner") is most difficult. It would be well to follow the suggestion of Gordis and translate this word as 'glance' or 'look,' thus reading 'and his glance over me was loving'" (p. 135).

<sup>11</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1182.

<sup>12</sup> Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where are You?* (Chicago: Willow Creek Association, 2008), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Willow, p. 29.

how active a person is in church-related activities has virtually no predictive relationship with how spiritually mature that person is. It is possible to be very active in church life and to be quite immature spiritually; and it is possible to be spiritually mature while being minimally active in congregational activities.

That, of course, was not what Willow Creek hoped would be the case. Surprisingly, the variable that did predict both spiritual growth and maturity—at a high level of significance—was the closeness of a person’s *personal spiritual relationship of love* with God through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Willow Creek’s research discovered four stages of spiritual growth toward Christ-likeness:

1. **Exploring Christianity:** “I believe in God, but I’m not sure about Jesus. My faith is not a significant part of my life.”
  - Movement/Transition #1
2. **Growing in Christ:** “I believe in Jesus, and I’m working on what it means to get to know him.”
  - Movement/Transition #2
  - This is the most frequent stall point.
3. **Close to Christ:** “I feel really close to Jesus and depend on him daily for guidance.”
  - Movement/Transition #3
4. **Christ-Centered:** “God is all I need in my life. He is enough. Everything I do is a reflection of Christ.”<sup>15</sup>

Beyond these four stages, Willow Creek’s research demonstrated that **personal spiritual practices are the essential building blocks for a Christ-centered life**. They discovered that the most devoted Christ-followers spend markedly higher amounts of time strengthening their love relationship with God by engaging in personal spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible study and solitude.<sup>16</sup> Willow’s report concluded that “**Spiritual growth is all about increasing relational closeness to Christ.**”<sup>17</sup>

The research also discovered that there are many believers who have stalled between stages two and three, saying of themselves, “**I believe in Jesus, but I haven’t grown much lately.**” And by their own report, such stalled believers identified two primary short-circuits that had stifled their spiritual growth: *either they had gotten significantly off track in the practice of their personal spiritual disciplines, or they had begun to tolerate known sin in their lives in the form of addictive or other destructive behaviors.*<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Willow Creek noted that the most significant outcome of their research was the realization that **most of the responsibility for an individual’s spiritual growth belongs to that person herself or himself.**<sup>19</sup> “One of the first things we did [after concluding our research,] they wrote,] was to tell our congregation that we’ve been wrong for thinking it was [the church’s] responsibility to meet all of their spiritual growth needs. . . .

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<sup>14</sup> Willow, pp. 36, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Willow, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Willow, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Willow, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Willow, pp. 47-49.

<sup>19</sup> Willow, p. 54.

“We [discovered that we need] to move people from dependence on the church at a ‘diapers and baby food level’ to a growing interdependent partnership with the church. We have to let people know early on in their spiritual journey that they need to look beyond the church to grow.

“Getting a weekly dose or two of what the church has to offer (even if it is wonderful) will never be sufficient spiritual nutrition for survival, let alone growth. Our people need to learn to feed themselves through personal spiritual practices that allow them to deepen their relationship with Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

The results of this research might be surprising to some of us, too. If you’d like to apply Willow Creek’s research to your own spiritual journey, you have an insert in your order of worship that is a self-test based on this research.

Answer the questions on the front of the handout and then score yourself on the back of the handout to see where you might be in the journey toward a Christ-Centered Life. Plotting your scores will generate a curve sort of like a bell-curve, and the highest point is likely where you are at the moment.

All this is to say that The Song of Songs, wonderful as it is on the level of human romance, marriage, and sexual intimacy, really points beyond itself to THE SONG OF SONGS, the relationship of passionate love that God has intended to have with you since before the creation of the world. As we approach the season of Valentine’s, then, in what shape is your love for Jesus?

Can you truly and deeply say that “God is all I need in my life. He is enough. Everything I do is a reflection of Christ”? Or would it be more accurate for you to say that you are stalled in your relationship with God?

As you think about where you are, does your heart yearn for a closer walk with God? Wherever you are, don’t be discouraged. Remember that God’s invitation is always to “Come closer! Come in farther! Come up higher!”

Are you sufficiently dissatisfied to do something that will help you grow spiritually? And if so, what do you need to do next?

Indeed, what do you need to do NOW?

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<sup>20</sup> Willow, pp. 64-65.

# Song of Songs

- Leader: *18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."*
- People: ***23 "At last!" the man exclaimed. "This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken from 'man.'"***
- Leader: *24 This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. 25 Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame (Genesis 2:18, 23-25).*
- People: ***Long ago the Lord said to Israel: "I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself" (Jeremiah 31:3).***
- Leader: *19 I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. 20 I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as the Lord (Hosea 2:19-20).*
- People: ***"My lover is mine, and I am his (Song of Songs 2:16a).***
- Leader: *12 You are like a private garden, my treasure, my bride! You are like a spring that no one else can drink from, a fountain of my own. You are like a lovely orchard bearing precious fruit, with the rarest of perfumes . . . You are a garden fountain, a well of living water, as refreshing as the streams from the Lebanon mountains (Song of Songs 4:12-15).*
- People: ***1 I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley. 3 Like the finest apple tree in the orchard is my lover among other young men. I sit in his delightful shade and taste his delicious fruit. 4 He brings me to his banquet table, and his banner over me is love (Song of Songs 2:1, 3-4).***
- Leader: *For I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God himself. I promised you as a pure bride to one husband—Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2).*
- People: ***31 As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." 32 This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one (Ephesians 5:31-32).***
- Leader: *1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Revelation 21:1-2).*
- People: ***6 Then I heard again what sounded like the shout of a vast crowd or the roar of mighty ocean waves or the crash of loud thunder: "Praise the Lord! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.***
- Leader: *7 Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself."*
- People: ***9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he added, "These are true words that come from God" (Revelation 19:6-9).***
- Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.
- People: **Thanks be to God!**