

Alliance Theological Seminary

Sermon based on Song of Solomon chapter 1

[All Scriptures quoted herein are rendered in the *New International Version* (NIV), unless otherwise noted]

Submitted to Professor Russel Mack in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the completion of the course

OT645

Song of Solomon

by

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April 30, 2020

Topic: “His Love, My Delight”

Context of Presentation: Married Women’s Conference

The book of Solomon, which was written by, for or about King Solomon, presents a love story. It celebrates the love shared between a man and a woman and draws our attention back to what God has always intended for the male/female love relationship. This intention is first presented in the book of beginnings, Genesis, in which we find the details of how God provided Adam, the first man, with a suitable companion whom Adam named Eve. We gain some insight into the first marriage as Adam declares to Eve: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). Following Adam’s statement, we are told that this first ‘marriage ceremony’ is the basis of what we practice today as marriage. We read: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). This refers to more than sexual union. “When they unite in marriage, the man and woman bring into being a new family unit.”ⁱ The verse ends with, “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame,” and it is reasonable to assume that this was the case in all aspects of their relationship, including the sexual interaction between the two.

We also note that in the first creation account “God created mankind [male and female] in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). And even without a deep study of this verse, we understand that both were equally valuable and equally needed to carry out the mandate that follows: “Be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28). The man and woman seemed to know instinctively how to do that. In the context of marriage, Adam and Eve produced offspring and humanity has been reproducing in the model they set for us, ever since. We note, however, that procreation is only one level of humanity’s created purpose. On another level, Bible scholar G. Lloyd Carr observes, males and females are created to experience “fellowship, mutual support

and dependence (Gen. 2:18), and physical as well as spiritual unity (Gen. 2:22–24), [all of which] should be clear evidence that God’s action of creating us as sexual beings was no accident or compromise. It was the divine intention from the beginning, and is, in fact, ‘good’ (Gen. 1:31).”ⁱⁱ

Thus, what Eden presents is a kind of partnership, even as Adam and Eve are both created equally, in the image of God. As such, women are deserving of and have as much dignity and value as their male counterpart. Any other portrayal in the male/female relationship strays from God’s intention for us. We should frown upon any suggestion women should suppress their sexuality and not seek or desire sexual pleasure.

This theme of sexual desire/passion runs throughout the Song of Solomon, hereafter referred to as the Song of Songs. It carries forward Edenic themes of healthy sexuality and the celebration of love and value of both sexes. Against the rest of Old Testament Scripture, which depicts human sexuality in ways that highlight the abuse and misuse of sex—a definite consequence of humanity sin—the Song of Songs is a breath of fresh air. It is a kind of return to Eden where a man and his lover are not afraid to express their desire for each other. There is a sense that they can be naked with each other and not ashamed.

Not only this, but considering that the work is set against the backdrop of a patriarchal culture—i.e. a culture in which men rule and have all rights over women—it is rather surprising to find that the main speaker and actor in the drama that plays out before us is an outspoken female who is unafraid to express her sexual desire for a man. What was considered appropriate to the culture were narratives told from a male perspective, but here we find the opposite. It is reasonable to say that the words and deeds of the woman we meet in this first chapter appear as

an affront to what is traditionally correct. She defies norms and leaves us to ponder the reason such a character is put on display in the cannon of Scripture. There must be lessons to be learned.

As soon as the chapter opens, we first hear the woman's voice and her words are dripping with longing and desire for the one she loves. Listen to her declare: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out" (vv. 2-3a). This woman says these words at a time when women were the property of men and female sexual pleasure was not a priority. Yet, she is driven by something greater than tradition and dares to speak openly of her desire for the one she loves. She uses sexually charged language that does not leave it to anyone to decipher what she wants. She wants to feel her lover's kisses which does something to her that not even wine does. These kisses leave her in a strange kind of intoxication – and is a state she relishes! She does not want a kiss shared between friends or acquaintances. No. She wants "the kisses of his mouth." She wants intimacy.

Unfortunately, in some marriages women have been made to feel 'dirty' for having sexual desires and even for being expressive of that desire. Yet, here in Scripture we find a woman unashamed to express her desire and she is not reprimanded for it. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he wrote concerning celibacy and marriage and directed this instruction to married couples: "Do not deprive each other [of sexual intimacy] except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer" (1 Corinthians 7:5a). The idea that they were mutually responsible is significant. The mutuality to be exercised in this instance can be applied otherwise and means that women have as much prerogative as their spouses to have and show affection and sexual desire.

Evidently, the man's love for this woman is unlike any other and she delights in it. From her words we gather that he makes her feel things that surpass the tingling and heightened sensitivity that wine produces. She is so enthralled by him that she praises the very scent of him. She only needs to hear his name to remember his scent, his embrace. According to her, his "name is like perfume poured out" and carries a sweet fragrance (v. 3b). In this, there are a few things to note. First, the man involved loves his beloved so much that the mention of his name captivates her. Not only this, but the idea of a name invoking such emotion should not be taken lightly. It is well documented in the Scriptures that names carry significance. According to Esau, Jacob's twin brother, Jacob was rightly named since he lived up to the meaning of his name by being one who takes advantage of or deceives others.ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob had tricked his brother out of his birthright as the firstborn (See Genesis 25:29-34; 27:1-46). Later, his name was changed to Israel, signifying a change in character and mission (Genesis 32:28). Secondly, Abram's name was changed to Abraham to denote that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5).

Therefore, this woman's declaration that her lover's name is like perfume poured out points to the man's character. The sense is that he is good to her. It speaks to his charm, his loving character, his handsomeness and uniqueness—traits she praises later in the chapter. It is useful to pause here and reflect on these questions: *What thoughts do you have when you hear your husband's name? Does his name invoke thoughts of love or disappointment? Does it stir delight, longing or regret?* My observation is that it is easier for a woman to respond to and speak of her lover as this woman does when she is loved in the way here described. Thus, some women struggle to connect with their spouses if they are not loved as they ought to be. May the Lord help us to honestly answer these questions and acknowledge where interventions are needed to get things on the right track.

Continuing, the beloved compares her lover to “a sachet of myrrh resting between [her] breasts” (v. 3) and is a description that provides us with another important take-away. Myrrh is a very costly substance not produced in Israel. It was usually imported.^{iv} Like myrrh, she sees her lover as valuable and a rare find. Not only this, but she also likens him to “a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi” (v. 14). Note that “En-Gedi is a lush oasis in the midst of the desert wilderness on the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea. ...[It] is the only sign of greenery or life for miles around. It stands out as a surprising contrast to the bleak, dry desert wilderness around it.”^v Thus, this description of the lover presents him as one whom she sees as precious, one who brings refreshment to her thirsty heart. *Can you echo this sentiment regarding your spouse? Or does your lover leave you feeling parched, not wanting to be in his company? Do you still have the sense that he is a rare find? Precious?* Let us take a moment to pause and pray that we will find refreshment in our relationships.

So then, there must be something very special about the woman’s lover since she is not his only admirer. It is this sweetness about him that leads her to say, “No wonder the young women love you!” (verse 3b). In my late teen years, I was often told not to get involved with a man whom no other woman wants. The idea is that a good man will be desired by other women. By now the sense is clear. This man is desirable, and his lover knows it. She would do anything to be in his embrace. How do we know this? She makes this further appeal: “Take me away with you,” she says, “let us hurry!” (v. 4). The use of the verbs “take” and “hurry” carry a clear sense of urgency. There is no time to waste. The intense desire she feels for him is almost agonizing, giving new meaning to the phrase, “love hurts.” His love is indeed her delight and she wants nothing more than to be brought into her lover’s chambers. *O that we might feel this way about our husbands’ embrace!*

Oddly, while the woman is expressing anticipation of eventually being with her lover, the voices of some friends, the maidens/virgins she referenced earlier chime in, saying: “We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine” (v. 4b). Their praise echoes her own declaration that his love is more delightful than wine. They see value in this lover and are as jubilant as the woman is about him. We note that the beloved woman does not argue with their praise. Instead, she affirms the maidens’ words, exclaiming: “How right they are to adore you!” (v.4c). On the other hand, if King Solomon is the man in focus, we know that this woman is only one among his many wives and concubines so it is possible that these maidens are among the women desiring to be or are already part of Solomon’s harem—i.e. a group of women associated with one man.^{vi}

We know from Scripture that Solomon, though considered one of the wisest men who ever lived, made a very unwise decision when he chose to marry non-Israelite women. The book of 1 Kings provides details about this. One relevant passage reads:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray (1 Kings 11:1-3).

Of course, when we think of Solomon’s many women, we remember his father David who had also gained notoriety for his sexual prowess. Like father, like son. Thus, as great a lover as the woman has described so far, if the man is King Solomon, we find now a significant character flaw. As wise and wealthy as Solomon was, he had a terrible character flaw. Not only this, but it is fair to say that he learned some negative behaviors from his father. As wives, we should praise our husbands while being honest with them and ourselves about their flaws. We should also take

these concerns to God in prayer and seek intervention before those flaws become detrimental to our relationships.

Later in the passage, this dark-skinned woman who is rightly proud of her dark hue undertakes an ardent search for her lover. After a bit of playful banter, and after they shower each other with praise, they end up in each other's embrace and are unconcerned that "the green grass will be [their] bed" (verse 16 GNT). In fact, it seems apt that it is. What better place to celebrate their natural love than in nature, in a bedchamber built by nature! On their grass bed where cedars are the beams of their house, and the cypress trees the ceiling, we can almost hear her exclaim, "how you delight me!" (verse 17 GNT). There is a clear sense of seclusion that the two experience and this level of privacy allows them to get lost in each other's love. In the hustle and bustle of the world we live in, it is often difficult for couples to get away and rekindle flames of love, but numerous studies show that this is vital for the upkeep of a healthy marriage. I encourage all of us to make time to be secluded and allow ourselves and our spouses the freedom to be naked and unashamed in a place where no interruptions are likely to occur.

Perhaps by now some of you feel terribly uncomfortable hearing about the escapades between the lovers of Song of Songs. Why? Because for centuries, and across cultures, human sexuality has been made to seem a sinful thing, an inappropriate thing, especially for women. We know that before humanity's fall "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." There was no sense of fear of exploitation or other form of evil. Unfortunately, all this changed after they sinned. They recognized that they were naked, and worse, that recognition made them afraid and shamed (Genesis 3:10). That fear has remained with humanity and has been manifested in different forms from the Garden era until now. We find that Adam blamed Eve for what had happened. Can you hear him say, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me

some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12)? No doubt, this was only the beginning of the things that would put a strain on their relationship and there is no reason to think that excluded their sexual interactions.

Despite these truths, those who are in Christ have accessed abundant life—life lived fully even in the here and now. Thus, even our love lives can be redeemed, and it is this return to being loved and vulnerable without fear of exploitation that this first chapter of Song of Songs presents. As we have seen, the woman seeks out her lover. She yearns to be in his presence, for them to share an embrace, and there is not a hint of guilt or shame between them, only expressions of praise, admiration, and desire. We can, therefore, view this encounter between the man and the woman of Song of Songs as a reminder that although humanity’s sin has brought much brokenness into our lives and relationships, God’s people are able to experience certain redemptive aspects of God’s kingdom. And why should that not include a restoration of our pre-Fall perception of self and our sexuality?

Our salvation allows us to experience a measure of restoration to God’s original plan. God’s people should not live without expectation that our lives can be whole again. Our lives, marriages, relationships should reflect the restorative power of Christ such that husbands are loving their wives as Christ loved the church and wives are willingly submitting to their loving husbands (see Ephesians 5:24-33). The salvation we have received is not just a ticket to heaven but also to experience fulfillment while we await our Lord’s return. Surely, romantic love is a gift from God to be expressed in the marriage context, and even the unmarried should know that the desire for sexual affection shared between a man and his wife is beautiful.

Unfortunately, women have been degraded in various cultures and by various means. They are often abused and made to feel insecure about their sexuality. Often, abuse is a tool used

to dominate women and that is certainly not a reflection of God's plan. In this passage, however, the woman breaks forth as a voice of freedom and confidence. She openly expresses her sexual desires and is also cherished and praised by the one her soul loves. The woman's actions and words reflect the idea that women have as much prerogative as men to pursue love. This is partly at the core of Adam's description of Eve as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. She is not made of a substance different from Adam, and as they come together in marriage they become "one flesh." As wives, let us be bold in expressing our sexual delight and passion in our husband's love!

Beyond a literal view of the couple in this text, we can examine aspects of their relationship as a representation of Christ's with his bride, the church. No matter the relationship we have with our spouses, the most critical relationship we have that should be nurtured is the one with our first 'husband.' This idea of God as our husband is made clear in the prophet Isaiah's consoling words to Zion:

For your Maker is your husband—
 the Lord Almighty is his name—
 the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
 he is called the God of all the earth. (Isaiah 54:5)

As we have seen, the man of Song of Songs offered a love that his beloved could delight in, to the extent that she yearned to be in his presence. It is their most intimate moments that she treasures. Likewise, Christ offers his bride a love like no other. In fact, even before we became his bride, he loved us. He loved us so much that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). As his bride, we should desire intimacy on a spiritual level with the one whom our soul loves. Like the woman of the Song we will find that Christ's love is far better than wine! It is a love that brings ultimate delight!

Sadly, life sometimes demands so much of us that we do not make time to enter a private place with our lover and Lord. So often we rush in and out of God's presence and do not experience all that he desires to share with us. Many of us are depleted in our spirits because we have not experienced the joy of the Lord in a long time. But when we get into his presence, we will be able to join with the psalmist in declaring, "you will fill me with joy in your presence" (Psalm 16:11). Can you hear the woman's urgency as she makes the appeal, "Take me away with you—let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers" (v. 4)? Fellow believers in Christ, let us exhibit even more urgency to be in the intimate embrace of our King who cannot be compared with any other.

This lover of the Song of Songs has a name that is "like perfume poured out" and we see how his name precedes him. At the mention of his name the woman is reminded of his love, his charm, his character—all of which speak well of him. But who can be compared to the lover of our souls? He has a name like no other. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Salvation through Christ was our only way out of the mire of our sinful lives and just the thought of the goodness of Jesus in rescuing us should compel us to love him and delight in his love even more.

As believers in the saving name of Jesus Christ, we should boldly declare to all people that his name "is above every name, [and that] at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord..." (Philippians 2:9b-11a). The refrain of one of my favorite hymns sums up well just how precious the name of Jesus is, and it is here noted: "Sweetest note in seraph song; / Sweetest name on mortal tongue; / Sweetest carol ever sung; / Jesus, blessed Jesus!" We should long to declare our love of the one whose name is most beautiful.

There is yet something to be said of the woman's ardent pursuit of and intense longing to be with her lover which drives her to go in search of him. We hear her plead: "Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday" (v. 7). Then she asks a question that gives us a clue as to why she inquires of his exact location. She asks, "Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?" (v. 7b). A close look at the contextual background reveals that she wants to avoid being thought of as "a veiled woman" because such women typically were cult-prostitutes available for business among shepherds.^{vii} She was no such woman. Her love and body were reserved for one man. Though a bit vague, her lover provides her with directions to get to where he is, saying: "follow the tracks..." (v. 8).

There are times when it seems that we struggle to lay hold of our beloved Master and Savior. It is as though he is distant from us. But in those times, we are not left without a road map. We are not left to grope about and never find him. Through God's word we are assured that when we seek him with all our heart, we will find him (see Jeremiah 29:13). When our devotion is to him alone, surely we will find him. We know that Jesus relished intimacy through human display of devotion. The woman of Bethany is an apt example for us as she pours "an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume" upon Jesus's head (Matthew 26:7). It is certainly true that the perfume, valued at a year's pay, could have been sold at a high price and the proceeds go to many other causes, but the woman found Jesus worthy of this show of love and Jesus considered her action a "beautiful thing" (26:10).

Luke's Gospel provides another account of Jesus's encounter with a woman who shows great devotion. She bowed low, an unmistakable mark of humility, and she wept at his feet. She went further to "wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them" (Luke 7:38). Luke provides the backdrop that makes it clear she took a

great risk to approach Jesus. A woman of a known sinful lifestyle, she was the subject of the Pharisees' demeaning remarks. They spoke among themselves loudly enough to be heard: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner" (7:39). Yes, this kind of woman had no business being among a set apart sect such as the Pharisees or with Jesus whom they considered a prophet. But she needed to worship him. She needed to show her love and gratitude for all he had done for her. As Jesus said, "her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown" (7:47). Since our worship, our eagerness to show love to the lover of our soul, is directly correlated to what he has done for us, it is critical to pause and ask ourselves: *What do our actions show?* May we respond honestly and confess our shortcomings.

In closing, I invite us all to see in the yearning and passion of the woman of the Song of Songs, in her utter delight in her lover and in her constant search to be in his embrace, our own need of greater intimacy with the husbands that God has given us, and greater still, with our lover and Lord, Jesus Christ. Where our relationships with our spouses need mending, let us do whatever is necessary to seek help so that our unions will bring glory to God. And where our relationship with Christ is lacking, let us endeavor to pursue him to achieve restored intimacy.

- ⁱ *Net Bible New English Translation, Notes, SOS Genesis 2:24.*
- ⁱⁱ G. Lloyd Carr, *Song of Songs, TOTC*, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1984).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 27:26, NIV text footnotes.
- ^{iv} *Net Bible New English Translation, Notes, SOS 1:13.*
- ^v *Net Bible New English Translation, Notes, SOS 1:14.*
- ^{vi} Merriam Webster Dictionary.
- ^{vii} *Net Bible New English Translation, Notes, SOS 1:7.*