

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Song of Solomon

March 9, 2014

The Message of Song of Songs: Wisdom for the Married

Responding to the sexual revolution

If the world lasts long enough for the history books to be written, one of the most important revolutions of the twentieth century will not be considered to have been a revolution that was fought with tanks and torpedoes or bullets and bombs. The sexual revolution.

Contraception replaced conception, and the “price” of sexual activity seemingly dropped dramatically. Pleasure was separated from responsibility. Contraceptive devices and abortion clinics replaced schools and orphanages. Divorce, remarriage, abortion, pre-and extramarital sex, and even homosexuality have been accepted by increasing percentages of the public. The boundaries that once seemed fixed now appear vanished.

As Christians, how should we respond to the sexual revolution? Some say that we should simply follow our culture and surrender to our desires; that we should be hedonists; that we should not be so uptight; that we should discover the good that comes with freedom and end our self-repression. Others, following more of a stoical impulse, suggest that we should deny those desires altogether; that we should subdue the flesh; that we are not merely animals. Yet neither of these two responses really fits with what God built us to be as humans, and, therefore, neither response is appropriate for us as Christians.

Song of Songs is the last of the five books of Wisdom from the Old Testament. No part of the Bible speaks more clearly to the topic of erotic love and the divided impulses we Christians feel to surrender unquestioningly to our urges and our culture on the one hand or to completely deny our sexuality on the other hand. Yet neither path is right for a Christian.

The NIV entitles the book Song of Songs, which is the Hebrew way to construct a superlative. This is the greatest of all songs, just like the King of kings is the greatest of all kings, and the Lord of lords is the greatest of all lords. Sometimes the book is known as the Song of Solomon since, as you can see in verse 1, this is “Solomon’s Song of Songs.” We don’t know if Solomon really wrote the book.

When you read the book, it can sometimes feel as if it's *about* him rather than by him. At the very least, it does seem that either he collected these songs or they were presented to him.

Warning: Attempts to fit the love and loyalty expressed here into Solomon's pattern of political marriage and excessive number of wives and concubines have not been successful.

Let's begin by reading the opening:

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.
No wonder the maidens love you! (1:2-3)

This is not the kind of Scripture we normally read in a sermon! These days, few of us would be shocked to encounter this kind of language in a magazine or even a newspaper. But to read something like this in the Bible? That's a little different for us!

We are not the only ones to sense some discomfort with the explicit nature of this book. One scholar says it was traditional among the ancient Israelites not to allow young men to read the book until age 30.

No doubt this very discomfort with the plain meaning of the words is what has led Christians in the past to devise so many different ways of reading this book. A first group has taken an *allegorical* approach to understanding Song of Songs. They deny that the lover and the beloved represent two humans. The metaphor of the lovers is just a literary device for displaying some other meaning, usually the love of God for his people.

A second group, not wishing to be so dismissive of the book's historicity, has adopted the *typological* approach. They accept the historicity of the lovers as two real people but, like the allegorical approach, they shift the emphasis to what the couple represents. So the figures are real, but we should pay greater heed to the greater reality they point toward.

A third group has suggested that the Song of Songs is to be understood as a *drama* or *story*, complete with well-developed characters and the movement of a

structured plot through the stages of an introduction, the onset of a crisis, a climax, and a resolution. Many different suggestions have been made for who the characters are and what the plot is. Yet that points to the very difficulty of this approach: so many suggestions have been made about what the story line is, one cannot help but wonder why it isn't plain enough for everyone to see. Clearly the book as an introduction, but are the stages of a plot really that clear, as we would expect in a story?

It is best to understand Song of Songs as a *song* or *collection of songs* that are, well, basically human love poems. This seems like the natural and literal meaning of the text, doesn't it? Whereas other ways of reading this book turn it into something like a puzzle, with the true meaning hidden until someone gives us the key, much of the difficulty clears up when we simply read it as love poems.

In this way, lovers are lovers and desire is desire. It doesn't stand for something else. We might be embarrassed – at least in a sermon (I Know I am tonight) – by all the talk about kisses and embracing arms, but we understand it.

Song of Songs certainly is an important book about marital love. But just as certainly it is not an exhaustive book on love or marriage. We should not make more of this song or collection of songs than God means us to. It does not tell us how to respond to our spouse's aging, to a job loss that threatens family security, or to the discovery of cancer. It does not say exactly how to increase our spouse's interest in us. In short, it does not teach us everything we need to know about marriage.

Yet the book depicts several important aspects of longing and loving, and of how God has given us gifts in marriage that meet the very desires he made us to have. As a part of wisdom, then, we need to study this book.

Specifically, God has designed marriage to meet four different types of longing.

Enjoying Physical Intimacy.

First, God, within marriage, meets our needs and longing for physical intimacy.

The only references to physical intimacy most of us are accustomed to hearing in sermons are critical ones, as preachers warn against the sins of sex and the corrupting dangers of lust. Indeed, we know about the dangers of our pornographic society, our addiction to eroticism, and the cheapened value of men and women that follows. Such critical discussions are essential. Today's culture

constantly bombards us with images that blur the objects of our desires while heightening our experience of them. In the name of advertising and entertainment, human bodies become commodities and people become products. Ironically, true romance and intimacy vanish in an age when everything become sensual.

Yet setting the distortions and perversions aside, we do see in the Scriptures that the longing for physical intimacy is God-given and good. God made us as physical creatures with bodies. In Song of Songs, the author has specific physical affection in view: the sexual relationship between a husband and wife.

Of course, Song of Songs simply takes this message from the book of Genesis itself. In the story of Creation in Genesis, God told Adam that it was not good for man to be alone, and so God made the woman. God said that his creation was good. Adam and Eve were then joined together. They “knew” each other. And that knowledge was physical, intimate, and good.

We must understand that Christianity is not a religion that says the physical is bad and the spiritual is good. We are not Gnostics. We do not assume that everything having to do with our flesh is evil, and that good can be found only in the immaterial and invisible. Christians should be careful, therefore, not to give the impression that our main message about human sexual desires and longings is negative. We have a positive message!

Young people trade away a very special, privileged gift from God for something that might look like that gift at first but ends up being infinitely less. Yet in part, this might be the result of our failure as Christians to teach the positive message that God created us as male and female, that he actually calls us to have intimate relations with our spouses, and that such intimacy is good. (True Love Waits)

The Bible's celebration

The Song of Songs is primarily an unabashed celebration of the pleasure of physical intimacy. God intends that our longings for physical intimacy be met. God has given us this book to constantly remind us that what our culture has abused God still calls good. We are reminded that physical love is delightful:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth –
for your love is more delightful than wine (1:2).

How delightful is your love, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine,

and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice! (4:10).

We observe the appreciation, by both the male lover and the female beloved, of physical beauty:

How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

How handsome you are, my lover!
Oh, how charming!
And our bed is luxuriant. (1:15-16).

We read that physical love is satisfying:

Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, by bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon (4:11).

We may be modest about the love of physical intimacy – and we should be – but we need not be ashamed. So throughout this book, the writer portrays and celebrates the erotic affection two married lovers have toward each other.

Building Relational Intimacy

Our longing

There are more longings in this book worth observing. So the Song of Song's lovers share a clear longing to build relational intimacy. This may be more subtle, but it is nonetheless real.

These days, sadly, we have many ways to speak negatively of relationships, because we know they can be destructive. So we use words like “addictive,” “codependent,” or “enabling.” And surely, as complex and central to the human personality as relationships are, they are dangerous things. This longing for relational intimacy can beget all kinds of troubles.

We were made to know and to be known. And in Song of Songs, we should not merely see physical attraction. They possess not only the physical desire to have and be had, but the personal desire to know and be known. We do not need to maintain any false, superspiritual ideas about “going it alone” with Jesus, and we

must not regard the need for personal relationships as wrong or as a sign of weakness. This need is natural, healthy, and good. It is part of being human.

We long for human relationship. That is how God made us. Notice then how this book propels us forward as readers with call and response: the lover calls and the beloved responds; the beloved speaks and the lover answers. There is a two-way relationship. There is a mutuality to their love. Good physical intimacy can occur only within the context of a good relationship, which, not incidentally, is why sex must be reserved for marriage. To have sex without being married is like moving into a house you have not purchased. There is a tentative, insecure quality to it – like trespassing – that does not match what God intends for sex: a deeply satisfying experience of physical and relational love.

Again going back to the first pages of the Bible, we learn that God meant for the physical union between a husband and his wife to provide part of the very foundation for their relationship: “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

(I Corinthians 6:15-20)

Establishing Identity

Our longing

There is another longing we can infer from the pages of Song of Songs. Part of our longing for physical and relational intimacy is a desire for establishing our identities. The desire to *know*, in other words, is matched by the desire to *be known* – to define and understand ourselves.

One of the dangers of our world, fraught as it is with discussions of insecurity, is becoming too “plastic.” Politicians re-create themselves into the image projected by their polling data. Marketers help devise the products their research shows people will buy. And most of us are tempted to copy in chameleon-like fashion the people with whom we spend time.

And yet the desire to understand ourselves in relation to other people is a natural and healthy desire. If you have ever lost a loved one either to death or a permanently broken relationship, you probably know how – surprisingly and confusingly at first – you lose something of who you are. When that person goes, something significant in you goes with them. Your very painful grief is not just for them and your loss of them, it is also for the loss of yourself. This happens

because we all know ourselves in our relationships with other people, particularly those we love.

The Bible's celebration

The Song of Songs celebrates the person that physical love helps us to be, and the identity that physical loves helps us to find.

Much of who the lover and the beloved are as individuals is tied up in their relationship. They know and define themselves according to their relationship with one another – as the lover and the beloved. “I am my lover’s and my lover is mine” (6:3). And, “I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me” (7:10).

Clearly this is why personal relationships can be so dangerous. If you enter one wrongly, outside the structures the Bible has put in place, you are playing with the deepest things about yourself and the other person. On the other hand, when you enter one correctly, inside the structures the Bible has put in place, you will find great personal fulfillment.

This book is not about just any relationship. It’s about exclusive married love. So the beloved promises she has “stored up” herself for her lover (7:13). And the book as a whole paints a picture not of lust and fantasy but of monogamous, satisfying love.

Notice that marriage provides this sense of completeness even, it appears, in the absence of children. The book never mentions children, which is particularly striking given the book’s ancient Near Eastern context.

Through physical love in marriage, God gives us a greater knowledge of ourselves.

Finding Meaning

There is one final longing we should observe in Song of Songs. As humans, we long to find meaning. All people, whether they have ever thought it or said it, long to know their reason for living.

Pastor Mark Dever was once speaking to a student who was struggling with whether or not to believe in Christianity. As he talked in circles and repeated himself continually, the pastor interrupted him and asked, “Do you want Christianity to be true?” The student said he did. The pastor asked him why. The student replied, “Because I want meaning and purpose in life. I want to understand why I am alive.”

A truly balanced, intimate, and honest personal relationship is one of the best pictures we can have of what the ultimate purpose of our lives is: having a relationship with God.

How can you know the love of God and have eternal peace with him? Repent of your sins and trust in Christ wholly for forgiveness. Do you need an illustration to understand what this looks like? Look to the man the woman of Song of Songs, who forsake all other lovers and commit to one another exclusively. Look to how the man is called to lay down his life for his wife, and how she is called to serve her husband. It's this very concrete picture that Song of Songs gives us. Like the lovers, we too must forsake our sin, our other lovers, our false gods, and look to Christ alone. He alone has laid down his life before the wrath of God for sin and has paid the penalty that we deserve, if only we will look to him as Savior and Lord.

Through our relationships with our spouses, we learn to relate to and deeply trust someone who is different than we are. And as we do that, we learn to trust God, who, in his holiness and beauty, is more different from us than our spouses.

Conclusion

Sex should not be taken casually, denigrated, or denied in marriage. Nor should it be worshiped and made out to be the point of life.

Sadly, young people fall for the same cheap trick again and again. In our present erotic age, we must not be beguiled into compromising or scared into surrendering God's very good gifts, and this a crucial part of our discipleship to Jesus. As churches, therefore, we must warn about the serious dangers of misusing physical love.

This also requires us to teach what the Bible says positively about sexual love as an important part of who God made us to be. In married love, God intends for us to enjoy pleasure, build relationships, establish our identities, and even find meaning in God's love. This is the message that we need to get out!

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)