

LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week One: Introduction to Song of Songs

Song Of Songs is often overlooked or misunderstood by Christians; yet it can be encouraging when we understand it. On the surface, we see a bride and bridegroom anticipating coming together, and showing their appreciation for one another. On this level, this couple's thoughts provide some helpful insights into the way that healthy human relationships are built. Yet beyond this, Song of Songs is a parallel to the relationship God wants with each of us.

Song Of Songs can at first seem difficult to interpret. Indeed, commentators have taken a wide range of fanciful approaches to it. Some have attempted to turn the entire book into an allegory about God and humanity, looking for hidden significance in every detail. Other commentators go to an opposite extreme, trying to force the book into a detailed, chronological story line, quickly becoming hopelessly tangled.

The book is not a detailed allegory, nor is it a mere human story without spiritual lessons. Rather, it uses the familiar example of a marriage relationship, to help us understand our own relationship with God; and as it does so, it may also be helpful in our relationships with one another. The language and imagery of Song of Songs may seem quite different from other books of the Bible, yet we don't need to be as uncomfortable with it once we learn what it means.

Even in its surface meaning, as a poetic description of a marriage relationship, Song Of Songs helps us learn to appreciate and give thanks not only for our spouses, but also for others we are close with. This in turn makes it more likely for us to see our families and our friends in the way that God intended, rather than approaching them with worldly thinking.

Yet human marriage is often used by Scripture as an analogy for our relationship with God, so this can help us see the deeper meaning of Song Of Songs, and can help us learn what it says to anyone about his or her relationship with God. The book of Revelation often tells us that we are the 'Bride of the Lamb (Jesus)', and it tells us about the 'wedding supper' God holds when we come to know him and Jesus (see, for example, Revelation 19:7-9).

Song of Songs gives few specific details about the bride and bridegroom themselves, since the interpretation and the themes of the book do not depend on their identities. Because of 1:1 and other references to Solomon, it is sometimes thought that Solomon was the bridegroom. But it is much more likely that Solomon is merely the author of the Song, not the bridegroom.

The book's overall theme can be summarized by the groom's view of the bride being "like a lily among thorns" (2:2). The closer we come to Jesus, we can see him in this same way, a light in the gloom and darkness, a spring of water in the parched desert. So too, we know that God's love for us is also incomparable in its depth and devotion, and the joy he takes when one of us turns our hearts to him.

Mark Garner, July 2004, revised February 2017

LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week One: Introduction to Song of Songs

Although Song of Songs is often overlooked or misunderstood by Christians, it is an encouraging and instructive book. On a literal level, it is a celebration of married love, as a prospective bride and bridegroom anticipate, experience, and appreciate coming together as one. On a practical level, the thoughts of the bridal couple provide numerous useful insights into the way that a healthy relationship is built. Finally, on a spiritual level, it portrays the marriage relationship the way God intended it to be. Besides all this, Christian writers have often seen in the joyful marriage relationship of Song of Songs a parallel to the love that God shares with his people.

Song of Songs can at first seem difficult to interpret. Indeed, commentators have taken a wide range of fanciful approaches to it. Some have attempted to turn the entire book into an allegory about God and humanity. That is, they assume that it has no literal meaning (and in particular, says nothing about human marriage), but that instead every detail has some kind of hidden significance. Any attempt to do this quickly gets bogged down in unnecessary scrambling around, trying to force small details to mean something that they were never intended to mean. Other commentators go to an opposite extreme, trying to force the book into a detailed, chronological story line, often involving characters who exist only in these commentators' imaginations. Both of these approaches are artificial, and neither does justice to the book.

The book is not allegorical in every detail, and neither is it a mere story or a purely secular work without spiritual lessons. Although the language and imagery of Song of Songs may seem quite different from other books of the Bible, there is no reason to be uncomfortable with its obvious, natural meaning, as a poetic celebration of the marriage relationship. Marriage comes from God, and a celebration of marriage in the Scripture is just as appropriate as a celebration of any of God's other gifts and blessings. As with any of God's gifts, the more we appreciate it and give thanks for it, the more likely we are to use it in the way that God intended, rather than abusing it through worldly thinking. Then too, since human marriage is often used by Scripture as an analogy for some aspects of our relationship with God, it can be appropriate, as long as we stay grounded in the original context, to see in Song of Songs some principles and ideas that can also help any believer - married or not - in his or her relationship with God.

Few specific details are given about the bride and bridegroom in Song of Songs, because the interpretation of the book and its themes is largely independent of the specific married couple. Because of 1:1 and other references to Solomon, it is sometimes thought that Solomon was the bridegroom. But it is much more likely that he is merely the author of the Song, not the bridegroom in the Song. The book's intent is simply to portray an ideal bride and bridegroom. Their love for each other is such that the groom considers the bride "like a lily among thorns" (2:2). In his eyes, no other could ever compare in beauty or charm with his beloved. So too, we know that God's love for his people is incomparable in its depth and devotion.

Mark Garner, July 2004

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Two: An Overview of Song Of Songs

Song Of Songs consists of a series of short sayings alternately spoken (or sung) by the bride (or beloved) and by the bridegroom, with occasional short remarks from friends or onlookers. This is why the book gets its name - it is a 'song' consisting of a series of 'songs' by these characters. Though poetic, and not meant to follow a strict outline, the book does have a basic outline.

First we see them before their wedding (Song of Songs 1:1-3:5), then a poetic description of the wedding procession and the couple coming together (3:6-5:1), and then it describes their lives together (5:2-8:14). Each parallels our relationship with God. This outline is just a handy way of summarizing the main flow of ideas. The book is not meant to be approached by breaking it down too analytically; it is more important to consider the major ideas and themes.

The first section primarily follows the couple before marriage (1:1-3:5). It shows their anticipation, their affection and appreciation for each other, and their readiness to devote themselves to one another. We see how each clearly focuses on the other, appreciating all the good things about one another, and accepting their flaws. This is of course an important part of a marriage relationship or any close relationship.

Likewise, this same kind of closeness and joy is meant also to be part of our relationship with God. If we are capable of feeling this way about another mere human, how much easier it can be to learn to feel such joy and appreciation in knowing the God and Creator of the universe. And as with any lasting relationship, a lifelong walk with God cannot rely on excitement or on temporary feelings.

In the next section (3:6-5:1), we see an image of a wedding procession, and then the joy of the couple as they are united. As a marriage union is worth celebrating for its own sake, so also God calls us to understand that it means far more to come to know him, to become the Bride of Jesus. Likewise, God asks us to accept his blessings for their own sake, without feeling compelled to figure out a 'use' for them or a finding a way to deserve them.

In the last portion of the book (5:2-8:14), the main emphasis is on the married couple's life together. Their initial enthusiasm often has to give way to understanding and simple trust. They learn to accept one another just as they are, and they lay a good foundation for a lifetime of faithfulness to God and to each other.

So too, our relationship with God is not meant to be a fad that lasts only as long as we receive fleshly excitement or earthly acclaim from it. It too is meant to last, and if it is built on a strong foundation, it will. If our 'marriage' with Jesus is accepted with thankfulness, and if our eyes remain fixed on him than rather than on the world, then it will not only last, but will continue to satisfy the needs of our spirits, regardless of what happens in this world.

- Mark Garner, July 2004, revised February 2017

LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Two: An Overview of Song of Songs

Song of Songs consists of a series of short passages that are alternately spoken by the bride (or beloved) and by the bridegroom (or lover), with some short remarks from friends or onlookers in-between. Though poetic, and not meant to follow a strict outline, the book does follow a basic pattern. It describes the bridal couple before their wedding (Song of Songs 1:1-2), then it gives a poetic picture of the wedding procession and the couple coming together (2-11), and then it describes their life of love together (12-14). Remember, though, that this is just a handy way of summarizing the main flow of ideas. The book is not meant to be studied by breaking it down too analytically. It is more important to appreciate the major ideas and themes.

The first section primarily follows the couple before marriage (1:1-2). It shows their courtship, their eager anticipation, their affection and appreciation for each other, and their readiness to devote themselves to one another. On a literal level, it is a fairly familiar picture of persons "in love". Yet even such a familiar image can be instructive. In the right circumstances, there is nothing wrong with experiencing these kinds of deep feelings. Then too, each clearly focuses on the other, appreciating all the good things about one another. This is an important part of a potential marriage relationship, and it is important to sustain this perspective even when the initial excitement wears off. As a spiritual parallel, this passage reminds us that this same kind of closeness and joy is meant also to be part of our relationship with God. If we are capable of feeling this way about another human, how much more should we be capable of feeling such excitement in knowing the God and Creator of the universe.

In the next section (3-11), we see an image of a wedding procession, and then the joy of the bridal couple as they are united. The description shows us that the marriage union is worthy to be celebrated for its own sake, even aside from its spiritual parallels or its role as a foundation for building a family. God intended it, as with all his gifts, "to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:5). One of the ironies of Christianity is that those who accept God's blessings for their own sake, without feeling compelled to figure out a "use" for them or to deserve them, usually end up being more thankful and appreciative than those who feel uneasy about enjoying the things God has given them.

In the last portion of the book (12-14), the main emphasis is on the married couple's life of love together. Unlike as in so many worldly marriages, their appreciation for each other does not diminish after marriage, but increases. They learn to accept, honor, and enjoy one another just as they are, and they lay a good foundation for a lifetime of faithfulness to God and to each other. Despite the claims of the world and its phony experts, God designed marriage to last a lifetime. If marriage is accepted with thankfulness, and with a willingness to practice it as God intended, then it will not only last, but will remain satisfying. So too, our relationship with God is not meant to be a fad that lasts only as long as we receive fleshly excitement from it. It too is meant to last, and if it is built on a strong foundation, it will.

Mark Garner, July 2004

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Three: Take Me Away With You (Song of Songs 1:1-4)

Song Of Songs opens with the anticipation of a bride as she looks forward to coming together with her chosen bridegroom, asking him to 'take me away with you' (1:1-4). This undisguised joy is also a parallel to the greater, more lasting peace we can find in knowing God, as we learn to delight in him. The bride seems giddy, inattentive to anything else. Likewise, as we come nearer to God, we begin to understand how deep his love is for us.

One of the ironies of Song Of Songs is that Solomon, the writer, had many inappropriate, even toxic, relations with women. His heart was hardened by idolatrous women, and in turn he oppressed them. Solomon never showed genuine love to his many wives and concubines, for he was more interested in outward appearances than in helping them to know God. Yet God can use even this sad situation to help us learn what it means to seek him and to know him.

This bride's eagerness to be with her future husband are extravagant praises, yet for the most part they are sincere expressions of appreciation and a pledge of genuine love. In the proper context, there is nothing wrong with such affection. Yet on the deeper level, her impatience for her 'king' to bring her into his chambers parallels the desire of our spirits to be with God, the longing of our souls to meet with him (as we see, for example, in Psalm 42:1-2).

The bride needs to wait until the proper time, as we see in other passages like 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4. It is human nature to want everything all at once, and this leads only to impatience and disappointment. As good human relationships take time and patience, rather than basing them on shallow words or self-centeredness, so also we are called to wait on God to give us what we need at the proper time; *as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior (Micah 7:7).*

This idea helps us see further parallels in our relationship with God. Just as this woman understands that many days are ahead, so that there is no reason to run ahead; so also God does not give us all the answers all at once nor fix all of our problems at the same time. Instead, he gives us the reassurance and understanding and grace we need each step, and he promises us that he will be with us.

Other scriptures such as Psalms 63:1, 84:1-2, and 143:6 also express our soul's desire for God in terms not dissimilar to those in Song of Songs. Filling our lives with material possessions, worldly entertainment, or other such things, cannot give the soul what it longs for. What this woman really needs, and what all of us really need, and what our souls seek, is to know our God.

- Mark Garner, July 2004, revised February 2017

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Week Three: The Anticipation of Love Song of Songs 1:1-4

For most humans, few feelings can approach "being in love" for its intensity and variety of emotions. In these verses, we see the eager anticipation of the future bride as she looks forward to coming together with her chosen bridegroom. This passage sets the tone for the book, which will often show us the undisguised joy of the prospective couple. They seem giddy, almost inattentive to anything else. Yet their feelings for each other are not selfish or irresponsible, but are based on genuine love and mutual appreciation.

Because the first verse connects the Song of Songs with Solomon, the book is sometimes called the Song of Solomon. Some commentators also imagine that Solomon is one of the participants in the Song, but it is much more likely that he was merely the writer. Solomon's own relations with women became increasingly worldly as he grew older, yet that did not necessarily prevent him from appreciating the kind of healthy, sincere marital love that is portrayed in Song of Songs. It is also possible that Solomon wrote the Song before his heart was hardened by idolatrous women. There are several verses in the Song that refer to Solomon or to "the king", sometimes in connection with the bridegroom, but in most cases these are simply poetical expressions. It is hardly unusual for courting couples to use this kind of exaggerated language to refer to each other.

The book opens with the bride-to-be, or the Beloved, expressing her eagerness to be with her future mate. Some of her expressions are the kind of extravagant praises for which persons "in love" are often ridiculed. Their presence in inspired literature ought to tell us that there is nothing wrong with such deep affection, as long as it is set in the proper context. She is impatient for them to be together, and she wishes for her "king" to bring her into his chambers. Her desire for him above all else is as it should be. Marriage should never be a temporary, partial commitment. It pleases God when a couple is ready to pledge to each other that they shall henceforth place each other ahead of all other persons in their lives.

Then too, for all her eagerness, the bride-to-be is fully prepared to wait until the proper time, as we shall see in other passages (for example, 2:1-2 and 4). She has found her true mate, given to her by God, and she knows that if the relationship lasts, there will be plenty of time together. Any relationship that is instead founded on an immediate gratification of physical desires soon becomes self-centered and self-serving, without a lasting foundation. Worldly persons who justify irresponsible self-indulgence in their relationships will never know the much greater joy and satisfaction that godly marriages bring.

Looking briefly at the parallels with our relationship with God, we can recall verses such as Psalms 42:1-2, 43:1, 44:1-2, and 141:1, which express our soul's deep desire for God in terms not dissimilar to those used in Song of Songs. Even Christians sometimes strive to fill their souls with material possessions, worldly entertainment, or other fleshly things, instead of giving the soul what it really longs for. Never forget that our souls have the same kind of earnest longing for God that this woman has for her special man. We should all learn to recognize and satisfy the soul's need for God.

Mark Garner, July 2004

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Four: God Can Heal Our Insecurity & Self-Doubt (Song of Songs 1:5-7)

We've seen the young woman's love and appreciation for her future husband, yet she also has some self-doubt and insecurity in her heart, and she now shares these things. Even when we have genuine, godly relationships, there will still be causes of fear, anxiety, and self-doubt from time to time - and more importantly, this is especially true in our relationship with God.

The woman openly expresses the things that make her feel badly about herself. She has lived a life filled with hard labor in the outdoors, and her complexion has been heavily darkened by the sun. She also has some family tensions, and some of her brothers boss her around. She senses that her hard life has perhaps taken its toll on her outward appearance. She hopes that this has not obscured her true, inner beauty, and she hopes that her husband will not look down on her.

We may often feel this way in our human relationships; and most of all we may feel this kind of insecurity in our relationship with God, and we often need to be reassured that God does not look down on us because of what we look like. This woman's husband loves and accepts her for who she is, and our God especially loves us and accepts us just the way he made us.

Most of us see things about ourselves that cause us to be insecure, and wonder if others look down on us because of our appearance, our habits, our possessions, and other such things. Often these are innocuous characteristics, which no one who really cares about us would ever find displeasing. Even more so, we have no reason to think that God would cease to love us because of personal characteristics that we ourselves do not like.

There is no reason for this young woman to fear what her future husband thinks about her appearance nor her status as a laborer. Simply expressing such doubts in the right way can often help us, even in human relations. And most of all, God made us the way we are, and he is ready to forgive even the worst sins of those who love and seek him. Even more will our Heavenly Father see even our flaws and quirks and misadventures as additional reasons to care for us.

After expressing these things, the woman indicates a desire to be with her intended, and asks where she can find him grazing his flocks. It is natural, when we are mulling over our anxieties, insecurities, and doubts, to seek re-assurance. Sometimes, as in the following verses here, we are able to receive such comfort at once from those who care about us. But at other times we will have to take our concerns to God - and that, of course, can be an even greater source of relief.

God loves us more deeply and completely than any human can love another. The more we learn to trust God with our needs and feelings, the more he is able to help. Sometimes those we are close to may not be able to provide such comfort, but God is always near and can give even deeper comfort.

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Week Four: Insecurity & Self-doubt (Song of Songs 1:1-4)

The young woman has expressed her eager anticipation to be with her future husband, and her deep love and affection for him. But she also has some self-doubt and insecurity in her heart, and she now shares these things. Even when we have genuine, godly relationships, there will still be causes of fear, anxiety, and self-doubt from time to time. Knowing how to deal with such feelings is a part of any healthy marriage.

The woman thus expresses some of the feelings in her heart. She has lived a life filled with hard labor in the outdoors, and apparently this is obvious just from looking at her. Her complexion has been darkened by the sun to the point where no one can help noticing. She also indicates some family tensions, speaking of brothers who boss her around. She senses that her hard life has perhaps taken its toll on her appearance already. Yet she insists, or at least hopes, that this has not obscured her true beauty, and she hopes that her true love will not stare at her or look down on her. Obviously, he has not done so, but she still has this anxiety in her heart.

Note that her specific insecurities are not as significant as the general point that they illustrate. None of us looks, acts, sounds, or is perfect. Most of us see things about ourselves that cause us to be insecure. We wonder if others look down on us because of our appearance, our habits, our possessions, and many such things. Often these are innocuous characteristics, which no one who cares about us would ever find displeasing. Here, there is no reason for this young woman to worry about what her suitor thinks about her beauty or about her being a laborer, but she still feels she has to mention it. Much of the time, the things about ourselves that cause insecurity or anxiety will be no obstacle in a relationship with someone who loves us sincerely. Simply expressing such doubts in the right fashion, and trusting in the re-assurance we receive, can often solve the problem. Even more so, we have no reason to think that God would cease to love us because of personal characteristics that we do not like. God made us the way we are, and he is ready to forgive even the worst sins of those who love and seek him. How much more quickly will he see even our quirks and misadventures as additional reasons to care about us.

After expressing these things, the woman indicates a desire to be with her intended, and asks where she can find him grazing his flocks. (That the man is working as a shepherd is one of the indications that he is not King Solomon.) It is natural, when we are mulling over our anxieties, insecurities, and doubts, to seek re-assurance. Sometimes, as in the following verses here, we are able to receive such comfort at once from those who care about us. But at other times we will have to take our concerns to God - and that, of course, should be an even greater source of relief. God loves us more deeply and completely than any human can love another. The more we learn to trust God with our needs and feelings, the more he is able to help. Not everyone has a special human relationship to provide such comfort, but God's comfort is far greater anyway.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Five: Mutual Reassurance Song of Songs 4:1-5

After his beloved's expression of self-doubt and anxiety, the future groom (or lover) begins to speak for the first time. He re-assures her that he loves her as deeply as she loves him, that he wishes to be with her, and that in his eyes her beauty is extraordinary. For her part, she responds with a new expression of praise. This couple sets an encouraging example in the way that they understand each other's needs, and in the way they make efforts to meet those needs.

In the preceding verse, the woman had indicated the desire to see her beau at once, and asked where to find him. The directions now given in verse 4 may be from him (in which case this may be her imagining what his response may be), or they may instead be from onlookers who help her, as the section headings in the NIV and some other versions would suggest. In either case, God provides the two with a way to meet. Often best way to gain re-assurance is to share our insecurities and anxieties with those closest to us. This also implies that we must be ready to help others in the same situation. No Christian, of course, could be expected to listen to everyone else's troubles or worries. But we have all been blessed with those with whom we have particularly close relationships, and we ought to be able to re-assure those others, when appropriate, just as we may sometimes need to share our problems with them.

In the next few verses, the couple exchange expressions of appreciation and re-assurance. The man begins by comparing his beloved with one of the beautiful, magnificent horses that carried the chariots of the pharaohs. To him, it matters little that her body has been taxed by years of labor, or that her family does not appreciate her. He openly expresses his love and appreciation for who she is, and he adds his promises to make her look even more beautiful.

She responds in kind, giving him in person the kind of praises she sang to him earlier when she was alone. He did not ask for any such praise or assurance for himself, but she does not wait until he does. How often do we notice good qualities in others, or know that someone did or said something helpful to us, and then neglect to express this openly? We can at least make an extra effort to verbalize our positive thoughts to those who are close to us. In marriage and family, it is especially important to make sure that there is always an atmosphere of mutual appreciation and assurance.

God, of course, will also willingly do this for us - that is, if we let him. In his word, he has expressed in countless ways how much he loves his people, and if we take time to notice, he also tells each of us every day, in many ways, how much he cares about us. As encouraged as we all are when we are built up by other persons, it ought to mean even more when we are given signs of God's appreciation of us, and of his desire to re-assure and comfort us. We have to pay attention, and look a little harder, to see these signs. But they are worth looking for.

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Week Six: A Lily Among Thorns and An Apple Tree (Song of Songs 2:1-2:17)

In these verses, the betrothed couple express the perspective that characterizes the book of Song of Songs. Each of them sees the other as the most beautiful, most wonderful, and most important person in the world. To the man, the woman is "like a lily among thorns", a source of delicate beauty in the midst of a world of trouble and sorrow. To the woman, the man is "like an apple tree among the trees of the forest", the one tree that has the fruit she desires, and a source of strength and life.

So many persons in the world could save themselves great heartache and frustration if they would listen to God, and accept the things his Word teaches us about courtship, love, and marriage. The world makes up myths, lies, and rationalizations to justify their irresponsible indulgence of immediate fleshly desires, and then wonders why they are so unhappy when things do not work as they wished. God teaches that it is not only desirable, but possible, for a man and a woman to give each other a total commitment of faithfulness and loyalty. His Word also teaches us that purity in such matters is not only possible, but essential, for anyone who wishes to walk with him. The world will never cease to offer temptations, but a child of God must learn to resist those temptations, and should not learn to make up rationalizations for giving in to them. A simple, but powerful, means of combatting these temptations is to instill in ourselves a sincere love and appreciation for our own spouses.

This man and woman each believe in their hearts that the other is the most desirable and wonderful person in the world. After a brief exchange of compliments (1:1-2:1) similar to their earlier statements, in 2:2-17 they each express the feeling that serves as the theme for our study of Song of Songs. These two genuinely and without reservation desire each other above anything else in this world. Their specific words, or others similar to them, could also have been said by many other couples, though without such sincerity. But these two maintain their feelings throughout the book and throughout their lives. Their feelings go beyond physical attraction or mutual self-interest.

In one sense, there is no one who objectively deserves the title of greatest or best-looking or most wonderful person in the world. Even those individuals to whom the world sometimes accords such titles do not truly merit them—in the world these are more of an indication of silly fleshly trends and whims than of the real merits of such persons. But with God's help, we can learn to appreciate and love those whom God has chosen for us, to such a degree that we truly feel the way that these two young persons feel about each other. Everyone has weaknesses and faults, but if God can overlook these in order to have a relationship with us, we can certainly learn to forgive each other, and especially those closest to us. Everyone also has a lot of good things inside, and if we only learn to look for them, we shall find that there is a great deal to love and admire inside almost any human, and certainly inside any Christian.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Seven: Writing For the Right Time Song of Songs 1:1-4

In these verses, we see the first mention of one of the most significant teachings in Song of Songs. No fewer than three times in the book does the woman exhort those listening to her, "do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." (The other two are in 2:1 and 2:4.) The gift of romantic love is not a toy to be trifled with, nor is it an achievement that we deserve or earn, nor is it meant to be a subject for boasting. It is a gift from God, and should be accepted with the same humility and gratitude that we should show for all of his gifts. Although it is a curiosity about Song of Songs that it nowhere mentions the name of God, this is one of the examples that best show how God's perspective lies behind every one of its teachings.

The context of the charge to "not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" is important. It comes from the young woman herself, even as she celebrates and enjoys the love that she has found. Just before giving this advice, she has once again expressed the joy she has found with her future husband, as well as the combination of love and anticipation that she is feeling now. In other words, this call to be self-disciplined does not come from a questionable source, such as someone hardened or embittered against love or against the opposite sex. Good advice should, of course, be heeded whether or not it comes from a reliable source. But in practice, we know that most persons - and especially most young persons - will ignore advice from those whom they consider not to understand their problems. This young woman understands exactly what it is like to be "in love", but she also keeps a godly perspective about it.

That it is this captivated young woman who gives this sound advice has two important implications. First, it shows that she herself has a clear conscience and has conducted her own relationship according to godly principles. Those who indulge in immorality or impurity are often pleased to see others do the same, since they think that this somehow lessens their own sinfulness. But this woman wants to see others enjoy God's blessings with purity and sincerity. Second, her advice shows that it is possible to behave in a pure, godly fashion towards those of the opposite sex, and still enjoy the blessings of love at the proper time. The selfish and the worldly often sneer at God's commands because they think that God's way would be less enjoyable. In fact, those who indulge their fleshly cravings soon find them to be less and less satisfying, while those who wait patiently are the ones who are able to have the greatest joys.

In verse 4, the woman says of her future husband that "his banner over me is love". She means that, just as ancient armies used to hoist banners that announced the causes for which they fought, his attitude towards her is based on genuine love, not selfishness or sensuality. Christians sometimes use this same saying of God, for indeed his "banner" is love. Whether giving us gifts or giving us commands, God loves us and has our best interests at heart. Surely we should trust his love, in our relationships and in everything else.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Eight: Rendezvous in the Countryside (Song of Songs 2:1-17)

After the bride-to-be has exhorted her listeners to wait for the right time (in verse 1), the setting changes. These verses describe, in some detail, a pleasant and satisfying time that the couple spends together in the countryside in springtime. The passage is filled with imagery and references involving nature and God's creation. Not only here, but in many places in Song of Songs, we see a link between the joys of love and the joys of God's creation. The two are much closer than one might think them to be. Both nature and marriage show the combination of God's love and God's wisdom.

As the young woman describes the time that she is spending with her loved one, she even describes the man himself in terms that refer to nature. She calls her intended mate a gazelle and a stag, emphasizing the gracefulness and strength that she sees in him. It is not uncommon for us to use living things or other features of nature in describing other persons or their habits, and indeed it is appropriate to do so. For the same God who created humanity also created nature, and there are many natural resemblances of having come from the same Creator and Father. In particular, when it comes to someone we love or care about, it is much more suitable to appreciate the characteristics of that person that come from God, rather than qualities that are defined by the world, such as his or her possessions, status, or power.

She also describes in some detail the natural world that they see around them. Spring flowers, early fruit, fragrant vines, cooing birds, and more are all part of their world. How praiseworthy it is for her to notice such gentle blessings from God, even when she is in the midst of a euphoric meeting with her beau. Further, it seems likely that a woman who appreciates so many of God's blessings and creations is also going to be more likely to appreciate godly qualities in other persons. She does not make the mistake of being attracted to flashy, noisy earthly things, as even many Christians do. She knows what constitutes real beauty.

We would do well to spend more time appreciating the natural world, for it is one of the surest ways to appreciate God's own qualities. The marvels of nature and the universe take more thought and sensitivity to appreciate than do the fast, loud, crass man-made items that the world so admires. If we learn to see the Creator around us, we bring blessings on ourselves in several ways. When we appreciate the world that God has made, we find a never-ending and inexhaustible source of confirmation of God's wisdom and love. We also find more to appreciate about God himself. Finally, those who attune themselves to the kind of real beauty and real creativity that come from God will also be better able to see these kinds of qualities in others. Too many Christians value the same superficial qualities in others that the world values. These verses provide us with one way of helping ourselves develop more godly values.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Nine: *“Catch the Little Foxes”* Song of Songs 1:1-4

These verses contain a somewhat playful and ambiguous exchange between the young man and the young woman. There are several aspects of these verses that biblical commentators consider to be open questions. Even the exhortation in this passage to "catch for us ... the little foxes that ruin the vineyards", one of the verses in Song of Songs that may be somewhat familiar to general readers, is clear in itself, but it can be applied in more than one possible way. What is clear in the passage is the devotion to each other that the young couple displays. They may tease one another or even mis-communicate at times, but they are always ready to reaffirm their mutual love and support.

The passage opens with the young man calling for his beloved to come out from hiding. This could mean that she is hiding in a literal sense, or it could mean simply that he finds some things about her to be so mysterious that it is as if she is hiding from him. In either case, he expresses himself in a light tone, coaxing her, rather than demanding her to cooperate. It illustrates the need for even the closest couples (or friends, or even family members) to overcome the many differences of personality, habit, and perspective that distinguish one person from another - and especially those that distinguish men from women. The young man sets an example by doing this in such a gentle way.

In the next verse comes the call to "catch the little foxes". This interesting image could have been said by either person (commentators have various views as to which one is saying it). The general image is clear: foxes were nuisances or even pests in a vineyard, and it could require both vigilance and ingenuity to keep them from doing damage. Yet they were hardly dangerous threats on the order of a bear or a swarm of locusts. So the need for the young couple is to make sure not only to avoid big problems, but also not to let "little foxes" accumulate to the point where they do real damage. It seems very possible, given the context, that the "foxes" specifically include the kinds of communication barriers that can so often cause hurt feelings or misunderstandings. There are, of course, many other "foxes" that can derail a relationship a little bit at a time. The playful image used here suggests that these two are willing to "catch their foxes" with affection and kindness, not with suspicion, harshness, or selfishness.

The next two verses (v. 1-4) are one of many statements of re-assurance that we find in the Song. The woman re-affirms her absolute devotion to her chosen one. Even if there has been, or still is, some kind of misunderstanding or insecurity, he is still and always her *gâ'el*, her *stag*. This kind of mutual reinforcement is invaluable. No two humans will ever entirely avoid difficulties in their relationship, but with the right perspective, the relationship does not have to be weakened by them. Even more importantly, this kind of person-to-person affirmation of love and devotion should remind us of the even more certain constancy of God in his relationship with us. No matter how badly we disappoint him or misunderstand him, he still has a commitment to us that no human could ever match.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Ten: Longing □ Fulfillment □ Song of Songs □ □ □ □

These verses describe the woman's longing to be with her intended husband. She has expressed similar feelings earlier in the book, but this time her thoughts convey a somewhat different perspective. Here, she shares the experience of waking in the dead of night with a sudden, almost desperate longing to see her sweetheart. The passage that follows most probably describes a dream experience, not an actual event, but it nevertheless reveals some of the feelings and thoughts that she has in her heart as the day for her wedding draws nearer.

The young woman tells of passing a sleepless night, filled with thoughts of her future husband. She even describes going outside to look for him in the middle of the night, roaming streets and squares, filled with longing. The only other persons still awake are watchmen, whom she questions. These descriptions most likely refer either to a dream that she had, or else to her thoughts, as she lay awake, about what she wished to do, so these verses probably do not mean that she actually carried out these actions. One indication of this is that she describes wandering in a fruitless search for her sweetheart's home, when she would surely have known where to go if she had actually gone to look for him. She is simply showing by this that she feels a deep need to be with him, and she feels as if he is nowhere to be found.

Anyone who has had a close relationship with someone of the opposite sex knows that feelings of insecurity and uncertainty often arise. There are times when we are simply seized by a need for re-assurance, support, or companionship, and it can seem as if only the immediate presence of that special person can meet these needs. In this particular case, the young woman almost cannot bear to wait for her wedding day, so that she can be together permanently with her beloved (this is what the last part of verse 4 essentially says).

The first significant point from these verses is that this kind of feeling is a natural part of a romantic relationship. It isn't a unique feeling that is only felt by the Romeo's and Juliet's, or by other great lovers. When we have found someone with whom we have a special level of communication and understanding, of course we shall want to be together constantly. It is one of the numerous aspects of relationships that we can handle better once we realize that we are not unique or special in the kinds of feelings that we have. Whether we are feeling lonely, or whether we are battling our own desires, many others have been there before, and thus many others do understand what we feel, more often than not.

This is also important to remember in connection with a second point from this passage, namely, that this kind of longing cannot always be fulfilled at once. There is a stage in any potential marriage relationship when waiting is appropriate, necessary, and healthy. At the end of her experience, the young woman re-iterates her exhortation to others that they "not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." She realizes that others have these same kind of feelings, and that they will need to wait until the proper time. She also knows that she herself must wait just a little longer before she and her beloved can be together to stay.

Mark Garner, Teacher 2004

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Eleven: The Wedding Procession (Song of Songs 1:1-11)

With this passage, the second portion of the book begins. Until now, we have seen the feelings and thoughts of the prospective couple as they look ahead to their marriage. It is now time for the couple to be united, and the material in Song of Songs 1:1-11 is set in the general context of their wedding day and the celebration that accompanies it. It is not meant as a completely literal description, but rather as a series of images of the new life into which the young couple is about to enter.

In the last several verses of chapter 1, the young woman describes the wedding procession, as she sees her husband-to-be approach. Her description of the details is not meant to be literal, but rather indicates her excitement and her adoration of her chosen husband. For example (as discussed in a previous article), the bridegroom is almost certainly not Solomon himself. Rather, the references in verses 2 and 3 simply indicate the bride's fervent appreciation of her bridegroom. Since he was a shepherd, the actual procession was probably a humble one. But to the bride, it seems as magnificent as if he were riding in King Solomon's own carriage, with Israel's finest warriors accompanying him. How much healthier our relationships would be if we would learn to see one another in this way!

When a young couple are first "in love", they generally see each other in an idealized light, seeing all the things that they think are wonderful about one another. Unfortunately, as they grow more familiar with one another, they often begin to take one another's positive qualities for granted. Once this sets in, it becomes all too common for a wife to wish that her husband were richer, or that he had a more powerful or important job. Likewise, it becomes all too common for a husband to compare his wife with the kinds of images represented by shallow, phony celebrities. There are of course many more variations of this problem, but all can be solved if we learn to appreciate one another for who we are, and to be grateful for one another for the right reasons, rather than wishing for fleshly qualities that are over-valued by the world.

This even applies in our relationship with God. God loves us in a way deeper than the world can even understand, and the things we get in our relationship with him are of infinite value. But if we have the wrong expectations, if we expect God to give us worldly baubles and to satisfy all of our fleshly desires, then we can quickly become bored or disenchanted with him. God so often uses our human relationships to teach us the qualities that really have value - in ourselves, in one another, and in him. When we learn to value the right things in each other, it also helps us to value the right things about God.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Three: The United Song of Songs 1:1-4

After the wedding procession described in the last portion of the third chapter, the couple are now united, and are able to celebrate their union along with their friends. These verses do not describe the literal details of the wedding rites so much as they detail the thoughts and feelings that characterize the occasion. Indeed, the details of a wedding ceremony are hardly significant in themselves. What counts is a bridal couple's love for each other and devotion to each other.

Almost all of the fourth chapter is spoken by the groom, and this is the first time in the book that he has said more than a couple of sentences at a time. In the first few verses, he pays his bride a whole series of lavish compliments, using numerous kinds of imagery. A few of his images may need brief explanations for us to appreciate them (for example, the end of verse 1 "Gilead was known for its goats with rich, beautiful wool, and was thus a suitable compliment to pay to her hair), but the meanings of others are readily apparent to anyone.

It is significant that he chooses this time to express so many of the feelings that he has had in his heart. Upon getting married, a husband should not feel that he has now proven his love to his wife, and that he thus can stop making efforts to compliment her. Rather, it is after marriage that a man should learn to build up his wife in every possible way, since there is now no need to use restraint in his expressions of affection. Likewise, he should learn to appreciate his wife in ever deeper ways, especially as regards her spiritual qualities.

Next (verses 1-4), he expresses his wish to become one with his beloved from this time forward. He commits his heart to her, and makes no secret of his need for her. Once again he is a good example for husbands or prospective husbands. While it may impress the worldly for a male to boast about how lucky a woman would be to have him as her husband, this hardly pleases God. This husband knows that he is lucky and blessed, and that his beloved is a gift from God, for which he must always be thankful and appreciative.

The bridegroom also knows that they will soon have a much deeper level of intimacy, and at the same time he understands the emotional commitment that comes with it. The worldly want to experience the intimacy, but without the commitment. The two are meant to go together, and in fact both - even the call for commitment - are gifts of grace from God.

In reply, the bride makes a short statement of acceptance (verse 1). She figuratively welcomes her husband into her garden, implying that she now expects to share everything with him. She too knows that she is blessed and fortunate, and is willing to give all that she has to her mate. The husband confirms his acceptance of the new bond between them, and of the responsibilities and blessings that it involves (2). Then their friends give them a brief exhortation to celebrate their union with joy (3). All who love God should rejoice whenever God joins together a young couple who have pledged themselves to each other in accordance with God's will.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Thirteen: Miscommunication and Anxiety Song of Songs 1:1-4

Like Song of Songs 1:1-4, this passage most likely describes a dream that the young woman (and new wife) has experienced. In her dream, she mis-communicates with her husband in such a way that she feels a deep anxiety and an urgent need to find him at once. It is a rather frightening experience for her, yet by sharing it she provides some helpful direction for others.

As the young wife is asleep or half asleep, she imagines that she hears her husband knocking at the door, eagerly asking to come in (verses 2-4). She deliberately makes him wait, either out of a desire to tease him or as a slight "punishment" for something he has done or said. After making him wait for a sufficient time, she then opens up the door, only to find that he has given up and left her (verses 5-6). Her attempt to be playful or coquettish has backfired, causing immediate anxiety (verse 7). In the dead of night, she goes out into the street to find him, and the town's watchmen assault her, beating and bruising her (verse 8). Her ordeal ends with a plea that any bystanders tell her mate of her desire for him (verse 9).

Her dream can best be understood by comparing it with the similar dream experience in Song of Songs 1:1-4. In the first dream, she felt a sudden need for her beau, and made an immediate search for him during the middle of the night. This time, it is he who desires to be with her, but she makes him wait, with negative consequences. She actually had felt the same desire to be with him, but she had put him off for her own reasons. She thus learns that such forms of communication can easily produce misunderstandings. If she had wanted to tease him, it would have been better to make that clear to him, rather than acting ambiguously. If she had been irked by some minor offense on his part, she should have said so openly.

Another key difference between the two dreams is the behavior of the watchmen. In the first dream, they are useless yet benevolent bystanders, but in the second dream they punish her brutally. This is, most likely, a simple expression of her guilt feelings for having caused the problem. In a sense, it actually speaks well of her. She immediately acknowledges that her attempt to communicate has gone wrong, and she eagerly wants to put it right. If she always responds this way to her slightest mistakes, then her husband is deeply blessed to have her as his wife.

A further question would be why the young wife had this dream at all. It could well have reflected an actual incident of mis-communication or hurt feelings that was fresh on her mind. The dream represented the basic features of something that may have happened, except with exaggerated details. That is, her wandering through the streets at night was certainly not literal, nor were the violent actions of the watchmen. These details would have represented her distress and self-reproach for what happened. To have such a dream shows her genuine love and appreciation for her husband. No one likes to feel guilty or anxious, but there are times when feeling those emotions can teach us about our lives.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Fourteen: Guiding One Another Song of Songs 1:1-4

In these verses, the new bride answers some questions posed to her by friends of the newlyweds. The woman's friends ask her (verse 1) to explain why her new husband is so special to her, and then they ask her where he is (v1), perhaps implying that he does not love her as much as she thinks he does. In both cases, the young woman quickly and happily praises her husband for his appearance, his nature, and his devotion to her. Not only does she decline to use any opportunity to critique him, but she is more than happy to compliment him in front of others.

Although many couples find it easy to praise and compliment each other before marriage, many things change afterwards. Living with someone day after day, and of necessity seeing someone in the less glamorous parts of life, puts someone in an entirely different light. In a strong marriage, a husband and wife must maintain their love and respect for one another despite each other's more ordinary characteristics. All too often, married persons can reach a time, after they become familiar with one another, when they begin to look more closely at the negatives, and to take the positives for granted. This young woman is not making that mistake.

Human relationships were never meant to be based primarily on physical attraction, or on having fun all of the time. Nor can we build strong relationships if we have unreasonable expectations of one another. The most attractive person will not always look that way, and the most sensitive person will have times when he or she expresses negative emotions. When we see such things in one another, a simple self-reminder of our own shortcomings can often prevent us from developing unjustified negative attitudes.

Above all, we should not needlessly criticize our spouses, or any others to whom we are close, in front of others. It is another all too common habit for husbands or wives to look for opportunities to tell others about their spouse's bad habits. This is only appropriate in very specific circumstances, and only when those listening are doing so with a desire to help or to counsel, not just to gossip or to join in the criticism.

This young wife says only good things about her husband to her friends. It is surely possible that some of those listening may have found her lavish praises to be silly or overly sentimental, and indeed all of us can remember times when our friends who were "in love" said things that we thought were too "mushy". But which is better, to praise our loved ones too lavishly to others, or to criticize them and embarrass them in front of others? The woman in Song of Songs has chosen what is best.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Fifteen: Continuation of Recitation of Song of Songs 4:1-7

Twice in this passage, the husband gives lengthy descriptions of his wife, praising her for her beauty and her personality. Both of the main passages in this section (Song of Songs 4:1-7 and 4:11-15) are similar to his earlier speech in 4:1-10, which there is set in the general context of the couple's wedding day. All three of these talks have the same kind of pattern, and indeed there are several phrases or statements that occur in more than one of them. The husband, then, not only knows what he appreciates about his wife, but he also tells her. And he not only tells her, but he tells her numerous times, to re-affirm his love and appreciation.

As simple as the point is, appropriate praise and compliments are an important part of close relationships. No one does not like being complimented. Further, we all face many forms of negative reinforcement from the world. Worldly values are shouted at our ears and forced in front of our eyes, and one of the worst effects of all this is that it can make us feel constantly insecure, anxious, or inferior. The world has ridiculous standards, but it proclaims them with such boldness and persistence that even Christians can be tempted to adopt them. The things the world values are crass, fleshly, and short-term, yet they can make us feel very uncomfortable when we do not measure up to their standards. It is therefore all the more important for Christians to build one another up, and especially in our closest relationships.

This is nowhere more important than in marriage. The old cliché about the insensitive husband who no longer tells his wife that he loves her because "I told her once, and if I change my mind, I'll let her know" is still too common. The husband in Song of Songs is not going to make that mistake. He feels neither embarrassed nor inconvenienced to build up his wife as often as he can, even if he is just saying the same things that she has already heard him say to her.

There are many good things in our spouses, families, and friends. To find them, we just need to take our minds off of ourselves for a few moments. Then, to encourage someone costs nothing, is painless, and can usually be accomplished with a minimum expenditure of time and other resources. Naturally, as Christians, we cannot always say only positive things to one another, but positive things really should constitute most of what we say about one another. You know how many ways the world makes you discouraged during the course of the week. Your spouse, your family, and your brothers and sisters in the Lord have the same kinds of experiences. In the world, it usually happens that the negative, the rude, and the fearful far outweigh the positive, the kind, and the hopeful. We can make sure that it stays the other way around in the church.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Sixteen: A Edge of eotion Song of Songs 1:1-2:17

After her husband has give two lengthy descriptions of her beauty and gentleness, the wife declares her ever-stronger devotion to him, and her desire to be one with him. She goes even further here than in previous passages, declaring that she belongs to him, and vice versa. She observes that their love for each other and their commitment to each other are both strong in two different respects. First, they are strong in that their appreciation for each other and their attraction to each other are both deeply felt. Second, their commitment to each other is an exclusive one. They have each given up some of their rights and options so that they can be together.

This is the way that God intended the marriage commitment to be. When we enjoy the intimacy and closeness of marriage, we must also accept the responsibility and commitment that go with them. To desire the pleasures of marriage without the commitment is selfish and irresponsible. This couple is able to enjoy their marriage to the fullest because both of them know that they are pledged uniquely to each other. The world, in its ignorance, thinks that responsibility and commitment are confining, but in fact they free us to enjoy the blessings that God has given us.

Because secular culture makes idols out of physical appearance and sensual enjoyment, the world's view of the marriage commitment is distorted and wrong. They try hard to promote a less godly view of marriage and relationships, by glorifying sin in their music, their movies and television shows, and other such means. Christians must guard themselves against the trap of falling into worldly perspectives through being constantly exposed to such material.

Even Christians often fall prey to the crudest of temptations, because they allow the world to convince them that sin is not as bad as God says it is. And even Christians sometimes make use of the kinds of excuses that the world concocts to rationalize their sin. But there is an even more insidious way that Christians allow the world to dictate values to them, in that we can allow the world's determined advertisements for sin to make us feel that by abstaining from sin we are "missing out", or that we are "unsophisticated", or simply that we are going to be unpopular.

One of the reasons why Song of Songs is in the Scriptures is to help us to refute, at least in our own minds, the world's attempts to make us feel that sin is more fun than godliness. The young married couple in Song of Songs are getting much more enjoyment out of their relationship because of their faithfulness to each other and their commitment to each other. When you watch a worldly movie or television show, adulterous couples are often portrayed as happy and secure. When you listen to a worldly song, it might celebrate how much "fun" it is to indulge the flesh irresponsibly. But the truth is that any enjoyment is, at best, short-lived and shallow. Those who live lives of sensual indulgence are insecure, joyless, and desperate, even if they have devised skilful ways of appearing contented, "sophisticated", or "hip". Don't let them fool you. Godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Timothy 6:6), and godly relationships bring the greatest and most lasting joy.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Seventeen: The Younger Sister (Song of Songs 4:1-5)

These two verses constitute an interesting digression from the main flow of thought in Song of Songs. The ongoing interaction between the young couple is interrupted to consider a third party, a younger girl, most likely a sister of the bride and her family. The thoughts here are straightforward and relatively simple, in that the bride's family and/or friends (most likely, she and her brothers) express their intention to protect the young girl, and if necessary to shield her until the time is right for her also to experience courtship and marriage. Yet even these simple thoughts contain a number of helpful points.

The young woman and her family clearly acknowledge that there is an appropriate age for a young person to become aware of this part of life, and that before that time, it is not right for a young child to be exposed to things that he or she is not physically and spiritually ready to deal with. As difficult as it is to do in the midst of a secular culture dominated by sin and selfishness, it is right to do what is possible to shield younger children from dangerously inappropriate influences. There is no reason to feel guilty or embarrassed for so doing.

Then also, the young bride and her family accept the responsibility for bringing up their younger sister in the right way. This includes the ways that they teach and instruct her, and it also includes their own example. They are willing to do what they can to keep her out of harm, and to keep her pure, even if this means that she may be displeased with them for the time being. In the case of the older sister who is now a wife, she realizes her responsibility to set an example for her younger sister, through her own purity and faithfulness. She knows that she should provide the same kinds of example and practical instruction that Paul describes in Titus 2:1-5.

Finally, all of these other perspectives come from the more basic acceptance of sexuality as a gift from God that must be received in the proper way, with thanksgiving, humility, and purity. It is not something that humans invented in their own genius, nor is it a toy that everyone has a right to play with as they see fit. It is unfortunate that so many humans take the very things that God gave them and then twist and pervert them into objects of abuse. It is sad because it is so sinful and wrong, and it is also sad because those who abuse God's gifts in order to have "fun" will never know the deeper satisfaction that comes with living in the way that God has called us to live.

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LIKE A LILY AMONG THORNS: LESSONS FROM SONG OF SONGS

Week Eighteen: Love Freely Given Song of Songs 4:1-5

After all of the thoughts that they have shared with each other, the young couple closes the Song of Songs with a declaration of the love that they have freely given to each other. They share affection and support with each other out of a mutual love for each other and for God, not as a fulfillment of a requirement list, or out of a feeling of joyless obligation. As in so many other things that we have seen in this book, in this too they set an example worth following.

Another of the basic flaws in so many human relationships is the tendency to keep track of the things we have done for each other, right and wrong. When we do something to help others, it is easy, but misguided, to feel that they automatically "owe" us something in return. When someone does something that makes us feel hurt or uncomfortable or annoyed, we often feel that they now "owe" us something by way of compensation. Such an approach can never lead to the kinds of satisfying godly relationships that God wishes us to have. Further, we are told many times by Jesus and the apostles to keep no record of wrongs, to give to those who cannot give back, and to base everything in our relationships on grace, out of appreciation for the grace that we ourselves have received from God.

As we see this couple in Song of Songs, their relationship is in an ideal condition. It is true, of course, that the test of time lies ahead for them. They have dealt well so far with the few trouble spots that have arisen, but the long-term test is always more of a challenge. In practice, the test often comes when something goes wrong, either because one party hurts the other, or because something external hurts one or both of them. Either difficulty can make one or both partners withdraw his or her love from the other, either out of anger, or out of fear, or out of pain. The challenge is then to realize that continuing such a pattern is good for no one. Love freely given is the only way to get past these struggles.

There are times when an excuse to stop giving and loving is easy to find, and this is why so many marriages fail. But remember - what is God's standard for loving us? Does he give his love to us only when we deserve it? Does he love us only when we do what he wants us to do? God, of course, gives and loves - freely - at all times. We also must learn to do this if we want our relationships to last. Even if we are hurt or angry or afraid, we should not stop loving. It is difficult to do, but God's own example should be enough to persuade us to try.

Mark Garner, Summer 2004

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