

Title: Souls in Love: Dating, Marriage, Sex, and Romance

Biblical Text: Song of Songs

Teaching Series: Whom My Soul Loves

Preaching Date: January 7, 2024

Preacher: Jason C. Helveston

Song of Songs 1

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. / Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine; your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. / We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you. / I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions? / If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents. I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels. / We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver. / While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi. / Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are

doves. / Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful. Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine.

Through history the Song of Songs has been interpreted in three primary ways ...

The first let's call, the *over-spiritualized* approach.

Over-spiritualization is about finding spiritual meaning where none is intended.

This has led many commentators to *allegorize* the Song of Songs. Proponents of this view suggest the woman and man who woo one another throughout the poem aren't real lovers in real history, but rather features of King Solomon's imagination used only to poetically explain the nature of God's love for Israel and Israel's love for God. Scholar Robert Alter explains that figurative language is more prominent in the Song of Songs than anywhere else in the Bible. But ... allegory is very different from figurative language and metaphor. Allegory invents to explain.

Metaphor illustrates to explain. Romance lends itself to the language of metaphor because plain language fails to capture the deepest expressions of the heart. So, this poem can't be *only* about God.

A second interpretation has gained momentum more recently. Let's call it the *over-sexualized* approach.

Many modern scholars have gone the other way from historical interpretation. Due to the lack of overt theological teaching and infrequent (if not non-existence) of God's name in the poem, they've determined that the Song is meant to liberate people by portraying an uninhibited view of human sexuality. In light of the prominence of the female's voice and her countercultural role, this sexual liberty is particularly good news for women. The bride in the poem not only is first to speak and accounts for over half the content (while the man only about a third), but she's also the initiator and expresses a romantic and sexual boldness unheard of in the ancient world. But ... so much of the Song begs for richer fulfillment than sex and romance can supply. So, this poem can't be *only* about sex.

Yet I think these are two very telling readings of the text. You see, each of these interpretations demonstrate two primary distortions within our collective sexual imagination. These distortions have powerfully impacted our view of the body, marriage, dating, romance, and sexuality.

- The first distortion is that sex is necessary but dangerous. While many who allegorize the book would concede the utility of sex for procreation (fulfilling God's creation mandate in Genesis 1:28, to *be fruitful and multiply*), they would passionately warn us to "***not stir up or awaken love until it pleases***" (2:7,3:5,8:4). *Sex is all about God.*
- The second distortion is that sex is just sex but it's also part of your identity. That is, from one vantage point sex is merely a physical act for which there

are low stakes (so long as it's consensual and protection is used). Yet from another vantage point the modern view of sexuality is woven within our self-understanding in some really substantive ways. After all, the woman seems unhindered by any cultural expectations or outside influences when she announces "***Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine***" (1:2). *Sex is all about you.*

Both of these distortions are damaging because they both deal in shame. Teaching that sex is all about God led to a purity culture in the 1990's which led kids to believe that if they had sex before they were married God would punish them with unfulfilling marriages or condemn them to life-long singleness. On the other hand, believing that sex is all about you has led to a generation that presumes God has little to say (or care) about their physical bodies; especially damaging rhetoric when our bodies are violated.

Today I want to begin sharing a third approach toward sex and Song of Songs: a view free from shame. Psychologist Dan Allender describes shame as "***a barnacle that can die, but its glue holds you to the host***" (*Shame-faced*, February 14, 2018). That means this will be a tedious process of healing, and it will take time. God made you a spiritual being—you bear his image—but he also made you a sexual being—your soul dwells in a gendered flesh with desires (see Genesis 1:27). Therefore God made your body for worship and that worship is embodied through physical enjoyment and pleasure (see Romans 12:1-2). That's what I want to talk about. **I want to talk about why sex is for you, but it's not about you.** To do this

we'll follow the same basic outline every week through the Song of Songs. We'll think about God's *design*, our *distortion* of that design, and then consider how we find *healing* from that distortion. And I pray is that this series will begin to undo that grip of shame.

Today, here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- The *design* of love
- The *distortion* of love.
- The *healing* of love.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Design of Love (vv.1,2-4, 1 Kings 4:32, Ephesians 5:32, Proverbs 5:18-19)

King Solomon is the son of King David. And like his father who wrote 73 of the Psalms, Solomon was a writer. 1 Kings 4 reviews his wealth and wisdom, telling us Solomon *Read 1 Kings 4:32 ... spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.* He was prolific. His works are included in Proverbs, he wrote Ecclesiastes, and he wrote this book, *the Song of Songs*. Or as some prefer, *the Song of Solomon*.

From the outset of this book we read Solomon's own description of his poem or song. Look at v.1. *Read Song of Songs 1:1 ... The Song of Songs, which is*

Solomon's. Though his authorship is often contested, it's best to take him as the primary author of the book. That's what has been plainly preserved in the first verse. Not only so, but in the first verse Solomon tells us he sees his words as something of a *magnum opus*. That is, he says this is the *best song of all songs*. It's the greatest of his works, yes ... but he also seem to suggest of all lyrical expression. Pretty grandiose, *right?* Well, upon further consideration, knowing these are Solomon's words, we realize he's actually telling his readers something else. From the very beginning of the book ... his song is pointing to something greater, better, more enduring, and more beautiful than human affection. What is captured here is a love between two lovers that points us to the love of loves.

Their love is real.

Their love is physical.

Their love is for them, but it's not about them. *You see?* Therefore at every moment of human elation, we're invited to worship the one from whom all this love is given and to whom all this love points.

That's the primary feature of the *design* of love. Human love is about another love. Our love for each other is always meant to be shaped by God's love for us and thus point one another and our community to the love of God (see 1 John 4:19 and John 13:35). The Apostle Paul makes this explicit in his writings to the first-century church in Ephesus. In speaking about love, marriage, romance, and sex Paul explains, ***Read Ephesians 5:32 ... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*** Human love is meant to tell the truth about

divine love. When we fail to rightly set our gaze on that greater affection, we distort love's design. In other words, when we make human love about humans ... when we over-sexualize love ... we distort God's intentions for love. However, we also distort God's love when we belittle human love by over-spiritualizing the love of God.

One of the first things we notice about the lovers in the Song of Songs is their utter delight in one another. It begins with the bride. *Read Song of Songs 1:1-4a ... Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine; your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers.*

Okay, she's pumped. She's got it so bad for this dude.

She wants to kiss him.

She's wants some wine.

She's intoxicated by his smell.

She admires his reputation.

She knows other women would love to have him.

She wants to run away with him.

And, she also wants to have sex with him.

Notice the word *love* in v.2. That word translated in many of our English Bibles as *love* is really the Hebrew word *dod*, which means *lovemaking*. Scholar Richard Hess puts it all together for us ... "*The kisses on the mouth, the lovemaking, and*

the wine join together to provide readers with an introductory verse that plunges them into the heady waters of this poem. Here is no gradual acclimation, a step at a time, but rather a baptism by fire!" (50). We're jumping right in. This is no spiritual allegory. This book is about romantic love. It's about sex. It's about romance and marriage and attraction and physical pleasure.

That leads us to the first thing we should notice about God's *design* of love by beholding the love of this couple ... love is a delight. The writer of Proverbs celebrates this truth too. *Read Proverbs 5:18-19 ... "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love."*

Romantic love is meant to be a joy. But it's not simply a joy. These feelings and experiences of love long to be expressed physically. She wants to kiss him, smell him, have sex with him, and draw close to him. Her love longs to be expressed in the flesh. It's what psychologists call *embodiment* (something we'll explore more through this series).

As we continue the poem we see more of God's love *design*. We see that it's communal. Notice, the woman's friends all chime in. That's right. She didn't say all that to herself. She's was talking to her girlfriends! *Read Song of Songs 1:4b ... We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.* So, her friends respond to her longings and desires and joy. Her community is involved in her romance. They're watchful over her, celebratory and committed to her joy in romance. Throughout the poem they serve as a kind of

choir, rejoicing and encouraging her in the background, exulting over the love between the couple.

Okay, so we've collected a few ideas about the *design* of love. It's not comprehensive, it's just a glimpse. This is a poem after all, not a textbook. *Love is a joy. Love longs to be expressed physically. Love is communal.* And it's at each aspect of love's *design* that we have experienced a *distortion*.

Movement 2: The Distortion of Love (vv.5-7, Genesis 2:7)

From the bride's joy, shame shows up; as it often does in our most intimate relationships and conceptions of ourselves. The woman vulnerably conveys a deep level of self-consciousness. *Read Song of Songs 1:5-7 ... I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions?*

There's a lot here. The bride is ashamed of the color of her skin. As a middle eastern woman, her complexion was likely already dark. But she's also been mistreated. Her brothers made her work in the sun for far too long working the fields. This has made her skin even darker.

As she anticipated being naked before her beloved, she's unsettled by how she looks. In fact, a better interpretation of v.5 is "***I'm black yet beautiful.***" She begins with confidence. She starts with the joy from the previous passage. But she's at war within herself. She's battling shame. "***Do not gaze at me because I am black.***" Colorism is not a new distortion of the body. Founder of *Colorism Healing*, Dr. Sarah Webb defines colorism as "***the social marginalization and systemic oppression of people with darker skin tones and the privileging of people with lighter skin tones***" (colorismhealing.com). She felt lesser because she was darker. A body meant to experience joy is now riddled with shame.

Not only so, but the bride has endured physical trauma. It's impossible to overlook that men in her life who were meant to care for her, hurt her. That's trauma. Her brothers were angry and used their familial and physical authority to force her into manual labor to the point that it changed the complexion of her skin. Her body was not simply born in a way that society deemed less worthy, but she was also physically abused. And now, approaching her wedding night ... considering being fully naked before her soon-to-be husband ... she is overwhelmed with unworthiness. In other words, her shame is now a threat to love's joy and her community isn't celebrating her love, it's against her. And a body previously longing for physical expression is frozen with fear.

She needs healing.

And so do we.

You see, the distortion underneath the bride's shame is a disconnect between her body and soul. Not only was her culture telling her her black body was not beautiful, but her brothers were also exposing her body to harm. Her flesh wasn't seen through the lens of her sacredness. This has been our curse from the beginning. After our first parents, Adam and Eve sinned against God, Genesis tells us that ***Read Genesis 2:7 ... the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*** Previously they were joyful, communal, and enjoying physical expression through sex. Now, like the bride in Song of Songs, they're self-conscious about their naked bodies. The instant they reject God, their bodies were divided from their souls. We might say their sexuality was severed from their spirituality.

Ironically, when their "eyes were opened" they saw less, not more. They no longer saw their flesh through the dignity of the image of God. They perceived imperfections. They felt anxious. And so, they hid; first behind fig leaves and then behind trees. Pastor Rich Villodas explains, "***Adam and Eve find themselves in shameful estrangement with their bodies because of their estranged relationship with God***" (*The Deeply Formed Life*, 135). He goes on to say, "***our sexuality is perverted by a powerful root of shame***" (135). My sisters and brothers, we need healing. We need healing in how we view of ourselves. We need healing in how we view each other. We need healing in how we view love. Because it's all been ***distorted*** by sin.

How has this happened?

Well, some of us feel shame because of the over-spiritualization of sex. Perhaps, like me you grew up in the church where you were warned about sex but not really disciplined about sex. We learned that sex and things like pornography and masturbation were all wrong, but we we're never helped to understand our bodies and sexual impulses. We only learned that one day, after years of abstaining from sex and resisting every sexual impulse, marriage would bring incredible joy and sexual experiences. *But what happens when you mess up? What happens if you do have sex before you're married? What happens if like me you become addicted to pornography? What happens if you do get married and feel too dark? Too broken? Not sexy enough? What if you never get married?*

You see, that's the distortion of shame.

Body and soul have been separated; a spirituality without sexuality.

Others of us feel shame because we bear the wounds of a freedom; a freedom that has left us unsatisfied. It's an over-sexualization. We were told sex was just sex, but long after the break up we still feel intrinsically connected. We were told pornography and masturbation were all good things, *but what about the unjust industries that create porn and the fact that it turns us into performers rather than servants in the bedroom?* This distortion has taught us to use sex as a cover for a lack of intimacy, trust, and love. It has brought cycles of asking sex and our bodies to produce greater and greater experiences and richer and richer identities ... but

we're never satisfied. *What happens when freedom brings addiction? What happens when we feel used? What happens when we're left unsatisfied?*

That's the distortion of shame.

Body and soul have been separated; a sexuality without spirituality.

Love is a joy, but we feel shame.

Love longs to be expressed physically, but we're afraid to be truly exposed.

Love is communal, but we don't know how to talk about love and sex in healthy ways because it's all about God or all about us.

So, how do we find healing for our bodies? How do we rid our love of shame?

Movement 3: The Healing of Love (vv.8-11;12-17,

Hebrews 12:2)

Well, first we have to name the religious and modern remedies. Ironically, they're identical. Purity culture and progressive culture teach us to rid ourselves of shame. Religiously we do that by obeying with more faithfulness, that will ease the dissonance. *I'll do what God says this time.* In modern society we do it by rejecting any higher power or moral reality that makes us feel bad. *I'm done doing what God says.* But neither wash away shame because both simply make a new law.

Remember, love is *for* us, but it's not *about* us. Therefore the **healing** of love is found by centering ourselves on a love that is perfectly joyful, expressed physically, and communal. A love without shame. This is what begins to bring healing to the bride as the poem unfolds further. ***Read Song of Songs 1:8-11 ... If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents. I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver.*** We hear the man speak for the first time. And his words are directly addressed to her shame. He calls her *beautiful*. This is the first of three times in this opening chapter that he calls her *beautiful*. He also calls attention to her body through metaphor of a horse and ornaments. She's prestigious and the blush of her cheeks is an adornment.

But he's also being playful. Notice, he reciprocates her desire for physical intimacy. But his direction about how to find him are terribly unclear and unhelpful. Unless it's part of the dance. *You know where to find me.* He's not ashamed of her body. He's not ashamed of her. And the community responds, *we'll make y'all some jewelry! We're so excited!*

She responds with fresh delight. And they celebrate each other. ***Read Song of Songs 1:12-17 ... While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Engedi.***

Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves. Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful. Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine. Engedi was an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea. It was a place of vegetation and refreshment; a place of restoration amidst a punishing desert. *Engedi* is in direct contrast to the scorching sun that darkened her skin. The bride is saying her beloved is a healing oasis amidst the distortions of shame. This is Paul's profound mystery that points us to Christ and the people of God.

You see, if this is an allegory the lesson is that only God will bring you this kind of healing. If this is about sexual liberation the lesson is sexual fulfillment or romantic love (especially marriage) will heal you. *But what if love is for us but not about us?* Well, then maybe the point is that God may use sex and romantic love to bring you a level of safety, pleasure, and security. But not because sex and love are healing ... but rather because in that imperfect enjoyment we're drawn to a better love.

A love that is perfectly joyful.

A love that is expressed physically.

A love that is deeply communal.

The writer of Hebrews tells us to look to Christ in all things. *Why?* Because he is, *Read Hebrews 12:2 ... the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* He was joyful, even through the cross. He's love