

**Title: Souls with Sexuality: Social and Genital**  
**Biblical Text: Song of Songs 2**  
**Teaching Series: Whom My Soul Loves**  
**Preaching Date: January 14, 2024**  
**Preacher: Jason C. Helveston**

## **Song of Songs 2**

*I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. / As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women. / As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me! I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom." My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.*

---

Everyone has a sexuality. We're made this way. In modern consciousness, sexuality begins with discovery. According to the Bible, sexuality starts with design. God could have made human beings any way he wanted. Yet he chose to give us physical bodies with unique features and characteristics. ***Read Genesis 1:27 ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*** In this three-fold creative announcement, we're told humanity, unlike the rest of creation, bears the image of God. God is our Creator; like any creation, we bear the qualities and likeness of the one who made us. We look like our Father. Part of that reflection, we're told, is embodied in our sexuality: *male and female, he created them.*

There are two creation accounts. The first is a broad overview in Genesis 1, the seven days of creation. The second is a more detailed retelling in Genesis 2 of the sixth day, the day God made people. Adam, the male, was formed from the dust of the ground and God's breath (2:7). Eve, the female, God made *from* Adam and *for* Adam (2:20). This doesn't happen in immediate succession. Somewhat comically, there's a gap between their respective creation scenes. Before Eve was created, God looked at Adam ... imagine with me ... and said, ***Read Genesis 2:18 ... "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."*** Now, it might seem like a mistake has been made. Like God didn't think something through all the way. God is teaching us something: without women, creation is incomplete; without community, his design is unfinished. Isolation was never God's vision. And so, Adam looks over all of the ***"beast of the field and every bird***

*of the heavens,"* but none is *"a helper fit for him"* (2:19, 20). That's when God put the man to sleep, took one of his ribs, and made the woman.

When God brings Eve to Adam, he celebrates. *Read Genesis 2:23-25 ... "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.* Male, female. Man, woman. Two very different beings yet made for each other. They were made to reflect God's image together. And in their physical union, two bodies compose a single flesh. And, most profoundly, perhaps ... *they feel no shame.* That's what we see unfolding today between the two beloveds of the Song of Songs.

As we learned last week about love, our sexuality is *for* us, but it's not *about* us. Our sexuality is meant to shape the way we see ourselves and others ... in friendship, pleasure, wisdom, community, procreation, and so much more. But ultimately, our sexuality tells God's story, not ours. Or, as author Debra Hirsch explains, our explicit desire for one another reveals our implicit desire for God. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about how we embody the image of God without shame together and how that tells us and the world the truth about God.

Here's how we'll organize our time together in the Song of Songs ...

- The *design* of sexuality.
- The *distortion* of sexuality.
- The *healing* of our sexuality.

## **Movement 1: The Design of Sexuality (vv.1-2;3-6,**

### **Exodus 18:4, Psalm 54:4, John 14:26)**

Song of Songs is just that, a song. King Solomon wrote it in the 10th century B.C. It's about his courtship or love story with his wife. Unlike anywhere in the Bible, Solomon's words are sensual, descriptive, and unhindered. While this has led many to bristle at its inclusion in the Bible, Rabbi Aquiba thought, "*All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies*" (Danby, Mishnah 782). *How could he say such a thing about a book that barely mentions God and talks about something as carnal as sex?* This book is holy because the love contained within it is meant to point us to the love of loves. It's intended to give us an honest yet joyful ideal of romantic and sexual union as a pathway to knowing ourselves and God better. Our sexuality teaches us about God's design of humanity. Yet whenever we see our design, we see him.

This woman sees herself well. She's honest and grounded. Look at v.1. ***Read Song of Songs 2:1 ... I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.*** She's talking about herself. We have to be careful about assuming our culture on this one. After all, a rose is special to us. It's like a flower of flowers. But a rose in Solomon's day was probably more akin to a tulip or hibiscus. It's not even a rose. And Sharon was a coastal plain with little significance, biblically speaking. Metaphorically, flowers, in general, and lilies, in particular, are other girls or women. So, what the bride is saying is that she is one of many. One of many flowers. One of many women. She sees herself with dignity (as a flower) but not with distinctiveness (of the valleys).

But then the man speaks. Look at v.2. **Read Song of Songs 2:2 ... *As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women.*** The dude's like ... *nah. You're not one of many. You are one of one. You are a flower among thorns.* Solid comeback. Well done. Now, we shouldn't suppose he's demeaning other women. Rather, as a man enveloped in the affection of his soon-to-be-wife, he's using hyperbole to communicate his exclusive affection for his beloved. Scholar Richard Hess explains, **"he has eyes for her alone, not for anyone else"** (*Song of Songs*, 76). While she sees herself *humbly*, he sees her *uniquely*. She sees herself as a woman in a community of worthiness yet equality. He sees her as totally set apart. So, *whose right?* Well, of course, they both are. *But why? Why are they both correct? And what does this have to do with our sexuality?*

Well, if you notice, in the creation story, Eve is called Adam's *helper*, and they're also *naked without shame*. Both of these realities bear witness to our nature, specifically our sexuality.

You see, the idea of *helper* has often been interpreted as a diminutive term, casting women in merely a supporting role to men. *She's just a helper, not a leader, initiator, or authority.* However, when we follow the usage and evolution of this word throughout the Old Testament, it has a much richer meaning than we might initially suppose. In Hebrew, it's the word *ezer*. It bears the sense of aid and support. But most of the time, it's used to describe God.

- Moses spoke of God as his helper (*ezer*) for saving him from Pharaoh. **Read Exodus 18:4 ... "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh."**

- King David also celebrated, *Read Psalm 54:4 ... Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.* God wasn't supporting David as some ascent to his otherwise full and meaningful life. David was clinging to his Helper (ezer) for his life.
- Most profoundly, the idea of helper is carried on into the New Testament by Jesus, who tells us *Read John 14:26 ... the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

God is our helper.

And if God is our *ezer*, our Helper ... our sustainer, upholder, rescuer, and reminder-er of all that Jesus has taught ... then *helper* isn't some subservient calling. It's a deeply feminine way of relating to the world. It's a role in a designed partnership that embodies elements of God's image, which a man can not possibly reflect on his own.

This shapes what Joyce Huggett dubbed *social sexuality* (see *Dating, Sex, and Friendship*, 1985). In her book *Sexual Character*, Marva Dawn expounds on Huggett's work. She says, "***Our social sexuality is composed of all aspects of our being that are distinct from specific feelings, attitudes, or behaviors related or leading to genital union***" (*Sexual Character*, 11). *What's she saying?* Social sexuality is our embrace of being a man or a woman and enjoying life with other men or women without intercourse or romantic attraction being central to our relational dynamic or interactions. This isn't some trite condescension of cultural

stereotypes. Social sexuality is the understanding that we belong together and embody God's image together because we were *designed* for each other.

It's intimacy.

But it's intimacy without sex.

When the bride of the Song says she's *a lily of the valley*, she's speaking through her social sexuality ... her worth, identity, and connection as a woman with other people, other women. She is interconnected and known. But there's another kind of intimacy, *isn't there?* The bride isn't just one of many; she's one of one. Eve isn't just a helper; she's naked without shame. So, while there's a divine and meaningful intimacy that comes without sex, there's another aspect of human intimacy that comes with sex.

The bride continues to delight in the anticipation of what Huggett calls *genital sexuality*. *Read Song of Songs 2:3-6 ... As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!* She reciprocates the man's affection. To her, he's one of one too ... an apple tree among the trees of the forest. She anticipates his physical embrace, longing to enjoy his touch. But it's not an over-sexualization of the experience. Notice, as she imagines entering his home to enjoy some wine in the banqueting house, she says, *"his banner over me was love."* That means his intentions are holistic. His banner or motivation for sexual intimacy, physical contact, and enjoyment is love ... not conquest or consumption or momentary

pleasure. She longs for this genital intimacy to the point of feeling sick. She's got it bad ... which is good. Because she's no longer feeling any shame.

When Adam and Eve were created, they enjoyed an intimacy that displayed God's image together (*helper*). That's social sexuality. And when their bodies were joined in physical union, they enjoyed an intimacy (*two became one*) that's unique to genital sexuality. The *design* of sexuality is all about intimacy.

## **Movement 2: The Distortion of Sexuality (v.7)**

Regretfully, though, God's *design* of sexuality has been *distorted*. And the woman knows this. That's why, as she's raptured in this love that's on its way to marriage and genital union, she shares a warning with her girlfriends. Look at v.7. ***Read Song of Songs 2:7 ... I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.*** She cautions them not to arouse love *until it's time*. She repeats this exact counsel twice in the Song (see 3:5 and 8:5). She wants them to make a promise. Specifically, she encourages them to vow not to have sex until they're married. Her warning is eventually calcified into the New Testament's sexual ethic.

In his book, *The 7 Myths of Singleness*, author Sam Allberry describes three primary aspects of the New Testament's teaching about genital sexuality (24). Essentially, he's answering the question, *how and why ought we not arouse love until its time?*

- First, Allberry observes that genital sex outside of marriage is sinful (see Matthew 15:19).



- Secondly, sexual sin includes not just the physical act but our thoughts and attitudes, too (see Matthew 5:28).
- Thirdly, Marriage is between a man and a woman for life, and the godly alternative is to be celibate (see Matthew 19:4-5, 10- 12).

Perhaps this seems archaic, even draconian. In fact, to our modern ears, life-long celibacy or reserving genital sexual expression for marriage seems like cruel and unusual punishment. It feels dehumanizing. *Doesn't it? After all, why should anyone be denied the experience of sexual intimacy and romantic love? Especially if that desire is intense and persistent in their bodies and hearts? Or if a person believes satisfying a particular inclination will make them happy and whole? Our natural distaste and resistance to these ideas begin to expose the **distortion** of sexuality.*

Ultimately, what you and I have been led to believe is that to have a whole and meaningful life, we must be free to experience genital sexuality when and however we desire. That genital intimacy is necessary for experiencing our full humanity. In response to this presumption, Allberry makes a helpful connection with the life of Jesus. There is no credible evidence that Jesus pursued or experienced genital sexual intimacy. So Allberry explains, *"To say that it is dehumanizing to be celibate is to dehumanize Christ, to deny that he came fully in the flesh and that his humanity was a 'real' one"* (27). You see, Jesus didn't simply bear God's image. The Apostle Paul tells us, *Read Colossians 1:15 ... **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*** You and I bear God's image. Jesus is God's image. That is, Jesus is the *most* human being. Therefore, romantic

relationships and genital gratification must not be required for a full and meaningful life.

The *distortion* of sexuality is a distortion of intimacy. The bride knows her friends are longing for intimacy. Watching her fall in love and get married naturally tempts them to hurry up the process. Considering this verse, scholar Temper Longman explains we should "*learn the same lesson: Wait for love to blossom; don't try to stimulate it artificially*" (Longman, 115). That's the *distortion*. Instead of allowing God's perfect design to satisfy our longings for intimacy with others and himself appropriately, we're tempted to stimulate intimacy artificially. We do this inside and outside of the Christian community. Both distortions cause us to misuse the beauty and meaning of human sexuality.

- In the Church, we try to artificially stimulate intimacy through marital status. And so, in most religious settings, marriage is revered not as one of two ways men and women bear witness to God's image but rather as the defining marker of Christian maturity and sexual gratification. All sexuality and, therefore, a great majority of our notions about intimacy are fulfilled in marriage. Marriage becomes our sexual savior.
- In the broader culture, we try stimulating intimacy through self-exploration and experiences. And so marriage is not only not really esteemed but even belittled as a meaningless "piece of paper." Sex and satisfying sexual desires become the prescribed pathway for meaningful personal discovery, fulfillment, and connection. Our genital sexuality even becomes our identity. The act of sex and romantic emotions become ultimate.

These two distortions reshape our view of ourselves and each other. It reshapes our view of intimacy. Again Marva Dawn warns, "*we must understand that the desperation in our society for intimacy often leads to genital experimentation by those who truly long instead for social affection*" (*Sexual Character*, 16). To put it bluntly, we go to sex when we're really looking for friendship. We join our bodies when we really want someone to see us, heart and soul. In this distorted climate, we presume upon same-sex and opposite-sex connections. For instance, intimacy between two men is perceived as a romantic attraction. A woman and man who enjoy each other's company, we assume they want to have sex with each other (or already have). In other words, in both contexts, social sexuality is an inconceivable avenue for intimacy. We presume all intimacy is about sex. And that sexuality is all about us. That's a *distortion*.

### **Movement 3: The Healing of Sexuality (vv.8-17)**

Our sexuality is *for* us, but it's not *about* us. Notice how the couple enjoys coming together but leaves room for more to be desired. *Read Song of Songs 2:8-17 ...*

*The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards*

*are in blossom.” My beloved is mine, and I am his; he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains.* This is a serious courtship. It's exposing. It's vulnerable. The woman has already faced some of her worst fears and deepest self-consciousness. But it's also fun and playful. It's springtime—a season of fresh blossoms and romance. Catching foxes in the vineyard was a typical children's game in the days of Solomon and his bride. Not only that, but their romance is unfulfilled. The woman is not fully accessible, not fully known, if you will. She is like a *"dove, in the cleft of the rock,"* and her beloved asks, *"let me see your face"* (v.14). It's full of goodness and enjoyment but not completely self-satisfying. There is rich yet unfulfilled intimacy.

So ... *what exactly is intimacy?*

Intimacy is safety in vulnerability. Eve can only be Adam's helper if he allows her to see his need for help, weakness, and vulnerability. Equally, this partnership can only be fulfilled if Eve doesn't exploit or use Adam's weaknesses for her selfish advantage. *With me?* To be truly intimate in their social sexuality, there needs to be safety in vulnerability. In the same way, Adam and Eve can only be one flesh to the degree that they're vulnerable (or naked with one another) and honor their nakedness (no shame). There needs to be safety in vulnerability for genital oneness to be fully embodied.

When we artificially stimulate intimacy, we're operating in fear. We're attempting to achieve some measure of safety without the risk of vulnerability or some level of vulnerability without losing safety. This speaks to our most profound human need. In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Pastor Tim Keller uses the language

of love and knowledge. He says, *“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us”* (101).

Within appropriate and healthy boundaries of friendship, men and women must learn to know and love each other—that’s the intimacy of social sexuality, *safety in vulnerability*. Within appropriate and healthy boundaries of marriage, husbands and wives must learn to know and love each other—that’s genital sexuality, *safety in vulnerability*.

However, we haven’t always been known and loved this way, *have we?* We all bear the wounds of a vulnerability exploited in family, friendship, or marriage. We all have relationships—family, friendships, or marriages—in which we’ve remained too guarded and never enjoyed an authentic and meaningful connection. We’ve just stayed safe.

We’ve been loved but not fully known.

We've been known but not fully loved.

We've been vulnerable but not safe.

We've been safe but not vulnerable.

This is why we need **healing** in our sexuality. When our sexuality is all about us and all for us, we all get hurt. This is why it's such good news that our sexuality is *for* us but not *about* us. Our sexuality points us to Jesus Christ, the image of God, the most human being. Only in Christ are we fully known and fully loved. Only in

him are we utterly vulnerable and totally safe. *Read 1 John 1:7 ... But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.* In the light, *vulnerability*. We have fellowship and are cleansed, *safety*.

This means no matter how good a friendship, *Jesus is a better and truer friend*.

This means no matter how devastating a friendship, *Jesus understands your pain*.

This means no matter how good the marriage, *Jesus is a better and truer spouse*.

This means no matter how devastating the marriage, *Jesus loves you, sees you, and still wants to be with you*. Jesus is our helper who heals us through a divine intimacy that never leaves us exposed or walled off. He alone was one of one, who became one of many. He was utterly safe in the halls of eternity with his Father and became vulnerable to the point of death on a cross (see Philippians 2:8).

Church, God's sexual ethic is only cruel if sex is all about us and if genital sexuality is the only way to foster intimacy with each other and God. But in his divine wisdom and grace, our sexuality is *for* us, but it's not *about* us. The image of God is meant to enjoy intimacy through social and genital sexuality ... both of which point us to Christ, the one our hearts and bodies are truly longing for.