

Title: Souls with Desire: Fantasies and Fears

Biblical Text: Song of Songs 3

Teaching Series: Whom My Soul Loves

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Song of Songs 3

On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her who conceived 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. What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant? Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, all of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by night. King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple; its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

Reflecting on Deuteronomy 6:5, ***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*** ... author Andy Crouch describes human beings as ***“heart-soul-mind-body complexes designed for love”*** (*The Life We're Looking For*, 33). That's really good. If that's true, and I think that it is, then to be human is to be filled with desires.

Our hearts long for affection.

Our souls crave meaning.

Our minds are riddled with curiosity.

Our bodies ache with various hungers.

All these desires beg the question... *how do we respond to our desires? Do we seek them? Or do we resist them?* Some traditions teach resistance. The fourth-century philosopher Diogenes believed it was ***“the privilege of the gods to want nothing, and of godlike men to want little”*** (*The Daily Stoic*, 61). Wanting is bad, so we must resist our desires. In our modern world, we're more inclined to seek gratification. Spiritual teacher Sri Chinmoy wrote, ***“Desire means anxiety. This anxiety finds satisfaction only when it is able to fulfill itself through solid attachment”*** (*The Wisdom of Sri Chinmoy*, 3). It's common in our day to allow our inner hunger to dictate our behavior and even shape our self-concept. We satisfy our desires.

But the Scriptures teach us not all desires are equal. We all know this intuitively and experientially. There's nuance. While the Apostle Peter tells us to *Read 1 Peter 2:11 ... "abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul,"* God promises to give us the desires of our hearts (see Psalm 37:4). That means resisting every desire can be just as harmful as indulging every passion. What the Bible prescribes, then, amidst a world of feelings and longings and aspirations ... is wisdom. My brothers and sisters, we need wisdom. Proverbs even has the audacity to suggest that *Read Proverbs 8:11 ... "wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her."* Wisdom is about understanding and embodiment. It's not simply the ability to discern the truth of a matter but how to apply virtue. Wisdom is about thinking and living.

In the language of our journey today, wisdom doesn't simply know if a desire is good or evil. Wisdom knows how to seek or resist that desire appropriately.

Wisdom teaches us to *Read 2 Corinthians 10:5 ... "take every thought captive to obey Christ."* That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about how we take our desires captive and, in wisdom, interrogate their virtue and learn to seek or resist those desires in a godly way. This seems to be what the bride of the Song of Songs understands. She has wisdom. She seeks some desires and resists others. Yet, as we all do along the way, she battles fear and anxiety.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

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

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Design of Desires (vv.1,2-4, Genesis 1:24-25, Ecclesiastes 3:11-13)

As the Song continues, the bride can't sleep. *Read Song of Songs 3:1 ... On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not.* She's wrestling with her desires. The woman is longing to be with her beloved ... thinking about her impending wedding ... thinking about having sex ... thinking about her future. And this isn't a single occurrence. The phrase "*On my bed by night*" is better translated as "*Night by night on my bed.*" It's not one time. This is what she's feeling every night. It's a persistent feeling and a recurring experience, even a season of desire.

And notice, *I sought him but found him not.*

It's a desire unmet.

It's a longing unsatisfied.

It's a seeking without finding.

Her unmet longings cause her mind to wander. She gets out of bed. ***Read Song of Songs 3:2-4 ... I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?” Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me.*** While some Bible teachers think she literally leaves her house and goes into the city, that's highly unlikely. Remember, this is a song. It's a poem filled with figurative language. So, it's best to take this scene as a symbolic dream, a summary of what it feels like for her to wait for her wedding day and night.

Four times, the bride clarifies that she's after *him whom my soul loves* (vv.1,2,3,4). Her unique choice of words helps us understand her wisdom and the virtue of what she's seeking. She's speaking about herself and her beloved in the language of *the soul*. Her desire goes beyond the physical or emotional. In Hebrew consciousness, the soul conveys ***“the life of a person”*** (Hess, 103). That's what Andy Crouch is getting at with his ***“heart-soul-mind-body complexes designed for love”*** idea. It's our whole being. The bride's whole life longs to find meaning, security, love, and peace in her soon-to-be-husband. One scholar explains the groom ***“is named by her desire”*** (Longman, 129)

Marriage is about two souls or two whole lives becoming one (we explored this last week). That's been the design since the start. *Read Genesis 1:24-25 ...*

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. That's what she desires. Two souls uniting as one. And that's a

good desire. Marriage is a good desire. It's good to desire something God calls good. It's good to desire *the one whom your soul loves*. That's the *design* of our desires.

Our desires are *designed* to guide us to *Shalom*. *Shalom* is wholeness, completeness, flourishing, or peace. Satisfying hunger with good food makes our bodies healthy. Assuaging loneliness with friendship and conversation makes our hearts full. Fulfilling curiosity with truth sets our minds at ease. Satisfying a desire for oneness with genital union in marriage brings great joy and pleasure. You see, a good desire rightly satisfied, guides us to *Shalom*. That's the *design*. But there's more, and this is why we need wisdom.

After all, what we really need, what our souls require, isn't a good meal, friendship, understanding, or marriage. No meal is eternally satisfying. No conversation keeps us full forever. No one answer leaves us without anymore questions. No marriage completes us completely. That's because *he whom our souls truly long for* is our Creator. God is our true *Shalom* (see Ephesians 2:14). You see, even the satisfaction of a good desire leaves us wanting more.

Our deepest desire for God was stamped upon our souls at creation. Ecclesiastes explains that God *Read Ecclesiastes 3:11-13 ... made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.* There's much for us to enjoy in this life. But it's eternity that's on our hearts.

Seventeenth-century philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal called this a *God-shaped vacuum* or desire in the hearts of every human being; he says this void *“cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”* In many respects, we're all like the woman searching the city for her beloved. Every unmet desire causes us to search more for the one our soul truly loves. But ultimately, it's not a man or a woman. It's not sex. It's not romance. It's not a wedding or marriage.

God is the one our souls genuinely love.

God is our true *Shalom*.

Even our desires or longings, which find no temporal or partial satisfaction, point us to God. C.S. Lewis explains that our unmet desires reveal our need for God. He says, *"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world. If none of my*

earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud.

Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death.' (Mere Christianity, 136-137).

Met or unmet desires are *designed* to guide us to *Shalom*. The woman's desire for her beloved leads her to embrace the one *her soul loves*. Her soul-level desire leads her to the flourishing of her marriage. That's the *design*. But, she's also not fully satisfied, not entirely settled.

This leads us to the *distortion* of desire.

Movement 2: The Distortion of Desire (v.5, John 8:7,10-11)

A song has the power to convey feelings that prose doesn't possess. So it's good to think about our emotions through this portion of the Song. Something happens to us reading about her restless nights, feverish searching, meeting clueless watchmen, and all this sexual tension. Even when she finds her beloved, she grabs him and squeezes him tightly like she thought she might never see him again ... then she rushes him off to her mom's house. Something is unsettled in the bride's

desire for her soulmate. It's anxiety-inducing. It's stressful. It's uncomfortable. *But what is it about her desires that's causing such anxiety?*

In the days of King Solomon and his bride, virginity was a mark of virtue, purity, and *marriability*. Well, for women, anyway. (We'll get to that double standard more in the coming weeks.) This was such a revered status that a bride's parents would often ask for the sheets from her wedding night, showing a blood stain, to prove her virginity. One scholar explains, then, that this passage “*represents the mental anxiety of the woman as she goes through the process of preparing to become a wife ... she knows she cannot have him without going through the event of losing her virginity*” (Garrett, 174). Her entire life, she was told her value as a woman was predicated upon the fact that she was chaste. That she didn't have sex with anyone. And now, knowing that she's about to have sex ... *she's lost*. She cherishes her beloved. But she's learned to protect and value her virginity above everything else. So as she thinks about losing her virginity, she feels like she's losing herself ... her reputation ... her value. Competing desires are at war within the bride, causing her to lose sleep night after night.

This is a *distortion*.

While our desires are designed to guide us to *Shalom*, because of sin, they often lead us to shame and death, and fear instead. This is why she warns or reminds her friends about the preciousness of their virginity for a second time in the Song (see 2:7). *Read Song of Songs 3:5 ... 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. This is where we need wisdom.

There's always a desire underneath our desires. After all, the bride doesn't value virginity itself. Instead, she's learned to esteem what virginity gives her. The desire to be a virgin in the ancient world was a desire to be seen as worthy and holy and, therefore, desirable for marriage. In other words, virginity was the pathway to a kind of peace. And so the woman, night after night, is anxious. Not necessarily because she's doubting marriage or marrying this guy, but instead, she's doubting herself. She's likely questioning her upbringing. *I thought virginity was my Shalom.* So much has been wrapped up in her identity as a virgin. This, of course, is complicated further by the fact that Solomon, the groom, is most likely not a virgin. (Again, we'll get to this more in a few weeks.) Suffice it to say that though he's singing this song, he doesn't seem to be battling the same anxiety of identity and worthiness.

Of course, virginity isn't just an ancient value. Being a virgin is still a complicated value and identity marker in our contemporary culture. A preacher once told a story about a conference speaker. The speaker passed a rose around the room as he delivered a message about sex and purity. Near the end, he asked for the rose to be passed back up front to him. He held up the rose: only a few pedals remained, and the stem was broken, barely resembling its previous form. The speaker asks the room full of teenagers, *"Now, who would want this?"* His point was clear: when you lose your virginity, you become undesirable.

I suspect many of you can identify with that room full of teenagers. Many of you can identify with the bride. If you grew up in a church community, then more than likely, you've been taught, directly and indirectly, that your value and identity are a direct result of abstaining from sexual desire. *That's your peace.* In a more modern environment, we're told the opposite: your value and identity come from seeking and exploring your sexual desire. *That's your peace.*

But the Bible constantly holds God's desire for holiness in perfect tension with his desire for wholeness.

When a woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus, the religious leaders wanted to stone her. She was no longer desirable. They even had a verse! But in his sovereign wisdom, Jesus says, *Read John 8:7 ... "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* As the crowd thinned out, Jesus spoke to the woman. *Read John 8:10-11 ... "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."* Do you see? Jesus holds in perfect tension holiness (*go and sin no more*) with wholeness (*neither do I condemn you*). Church, your value isn't in your virginity or lack thereof. Your sexual desires met or unmet, are not what brings you peace. That's the distortion. That's what we believe in a broken world. The *distortion* of desires is making our desires our peace.

This is so critical because, as pastor John Stott explains, our “*natural desires have been perverted into sinful desires*” (*God’s New Society*, 74). Think about it.

Sometimes, we crave less food than we need. Other times, we crave more than we need. That's a distortion. Sometimes, we desire less human connection than is good for us. Other times, we are enmeshed and codependent in relationships. That's a distortion. The same is true with sex. Sometimes, we ask too much of our sexual desires, that seeking them brings peace. Other times, we make too little of our sexual desires, that blind abstinence will bring peace. That's a distortion. The *distortion* of desires is making our desires our peace.

Marva Dawn explains, "*Shalom starts with the recognition that God is a gracious God. The Creator designed us for wholeness and created our sexuality to be a source of delight. That delight can best be found if we live according to our Design's plans and purposes*" (*Sexual Character*, 163). God desires that sex be enjoyed exclusively within the covenant of marriage. But God also meets us in the sexual pain, chaos, and distortions of our lives. He desires holiness. But he also knows we need *healing*.

And so, that's where we turn next.

Movement 3: The Healing of Desires (vv.6-11, Romans 7:18-19, Proverbs 9:5-6;16-17;10, John 6:26-27)

When it comes to our souls, we're not at peace. Are we? There's a war waging in every human heart. The Apostle Paul says, ***Read Romans 7:18-19 ... For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*** He desires what is good and what is evil. He's at war within himself. We all are. This is particularly true of our sexuality. We live in these two worlds. One world, the religious world, is telling us to abstain until we're married, and then all shall be well. *Resist all sexual desire.* But that doesn't feel very peaceful in singleness or marriage. The other world, the broader progressive culture, is telling us to gratify our sexual longings, and all shall be well. *Indulge sexual desire.* But that doesn't bring peace either.

Resisting every desire seems just as harmful as indulging every passion.

We need peace.

We need healing.

We need wisdom.

This tension of our desires shows up in Proverbs 9. In the first scene, Wisdom is portrayed as a woman calling out to a city. She says, ***Read Proverbs 9:5-6 ...***

“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple

ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” In the next scene, Lady Foolishness calls out to the same city. She says, ***Read Proverbs 9:16,17 ... “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here! ... Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”*** It's subtle. But the difference is that Foolishness offers a stolen meal. Wisdom provides a meal she made herself. One is fake. One is real. Foolishness isn't even hiding. She says a stolen and secret meal is better.

The meal of wisdom brings life (v.11).

The meal of foolishness brings death (v.18).

So, *how do we know the difference?* On the surface, the invitations and the meals look the same. So, *how do we know that the desire for wisdom's meal is better than for the meal of foolishness?* Well, we don't. And that's where wisdom begins. The Proverb says, ***Read Proverbs 9:10 ... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*** The difference between wisdom and foolishness is humility. The fool acts like they know everything. The wise person admits their lack of wisdom and thereby acknowledges God's infinite wisdom. Socrates said, ***“Ignorance is the beginning of wisdom.”*** Maybe that's why the Proverb tells us that fools hate to be corrected, and wise people love it. This is where healing begins.

We've been told *sexual desire is bad. Resist, abstain.*

We've been told, *sexual desire is good. Seek, indulge.*

Wisdom tells us to take every desire captive and confess our need for wisdom. *This is what I'm feeling; what should I do? This is what I want; is it from the Lord? This is a longing, urge, craving I have ... would it honor the Lord to enjoy this now or wait? In other words, we're asking, will fulfilling these desires lead me to Shalom? Or am I looking at this desire to be my Shalom?* Wisdom is about realizing you don't know what you're really seeking (see Jeremiah 17:9). Wisdom is about learning you're unsure if you can do the good God has made clear (see Romans 7).

All these distortions of desire find healing in Jesus because he experienced all those distortions in his flesh yet never sinned (see Hebrews 4:15). He never ate the meal of foolishness. Jesus is our peace; his wounds bring us healing (see Isaiah 53:5). Jesus is our wisdom; his life brings us to God (see 1 Peter 3:18). After all, Jesus gives his people a meal, too. One that's real. One that leads to life. In fact, he says he is the meal. Jesus says, ***Read John 6:26-27, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. ... Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*** Wisdom comes from being in life with Jesus. Wisdom comes from looking to Jesus, not our desires, for peace.

Having our most fundamental need met—peace with God—enables us to seek desires *from* peace rather than seek our desire *to get* peace.

Amidst her desires, the bride beholds her husband coming. A true gift from God, but not the culmination of her desires or the source of all her peace. ***Read Song of Songs 3:6-11 ... What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant? Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, all of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by night. King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple; its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.*** They're one step closer to marriage. Their hearts are glad and full. Their desires for each other are being satisfied by the gift of marriage and sex. But the Lord, the one whom their souls truly desire, is the source of their full and forever peace.