

**Title: Souls in Friendship: Heart and Mind**

**Biblical Text: Song of Songs 4**

**Teaching Series: Whom My Soul Loves**

**Preaching Date: February 4, 2024**

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## **Song of Songs 5**

*I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk. / Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love! / I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking. "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." I had put off my garment; how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them? My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city; they beat me, they bruised me, they took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love. / What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us? / My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices,*

*mounds of sweet-smelling herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.*

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Last year, the Surgeon General shared alarming new data about loneliness. He wrote in the *New York Times*, according to research from the Cigna Group and the National Library of Medicine, that "*one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. This includes introverts and extroverts, rich and poor, and younger and older Americans*" (*Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It's Time to Fix That.*, April 30, 2023). Across the country, people are lonely.

*But what exactly is loneliness? What are we feeling? What are we experiencing?* In her book *The Loneliness Epidemic*, Susan Mettes (a behavioral scientist and researcher) defines loneliness as "*the distress someone feels when their social connections don't meet their need for emotional intimacy.*" She goes on to explain that loneliness is "*lack. It's disappointment. It's something we are conscious of, even when we don't call it loneliness. Loneliness is a thirst that drives us to seek companionship—or, perhaps better, fellowship. Without*

*fellowship, we go on needing others and seeking relief for that need"* (chapter 2). So, loneliness is the absence of something deeply human ... something we can't live well without. Loneliness is the lack of intimacy.

If you remember, at the very beginning of the Christian story, God looks at Adam in isolation. He's standing by himself in the middle of the good creation. And in his loneliness, God says, *Read Genesis 2:18 ... "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."* Now, in most Evangelical Christian circles, this verse has been the victim of two unhelpful interpretations. The first is that Eve is subservient to Adam; she's just his *helper*. I tried to help correct that error a couple of weeks ago. The other misguided teaching is that God's observation is a commentary on marriage. In other words, the thing that's "not good" is that Adam's not married. He needs a woman. He needs a wife. Marriage, many of us have taught, is where we find intimacy. But *what if that's not true? What if God's not talking about marriage? What if he's talking about our humanity? What if he's saying it's not good for us to live without intimacy? What if, from the very beginning, God was telling us the same thing the Surgeon General is telling us?*

We're lonely, and that's not good.

One of the reasons many of us react so negatively to the Bible's sexual ethic is because we've conflated sex and intimacy. We ache for intimacy, but God says we can't have sex until we're married. Sam Allberry explains that we've believed the

lie that "*the choice between marriage and celibacy is ... the choice between intimacy and loneliness*" (*The 7 Myths of Singleness*, 48). He explains that this is a misunderstanding of marriage and intimacy. Marriage and sex don't end loneliness. Nor is intimacy reserved for marriage. The Bible tells us, and our souls know, that we need friendship. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about friendship, in and outside of marriage. I want to talk about how friendship fosters real intimacy and why marriage sometimes doesn't.

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

- The *design* of friendship
- The *distortion* of friendship
- The *healing* of friendship

[Prayer]

## **Movement 1: The Design of Friendship (vv.1-9,10-16; 4:12,16, 1 Corinthians 7)**

One of the many challenges with interpreting the Song of Songs is determining when the couple consummates their marriage. With all the sensual and poetic language, there are many times when it seems they may just be describing and anticipating sex ... or they might have actually had sex. It's not chronological. The end of chapter 4 is more explicit. In the middle of the groom's detailed description

of the bride's body, he says, ***Read Song of Songs 4:12 ... A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed.*** The terms *garden* and *spring* and *fountain* are all euphemisms for human sexuality. But in this case, they're locked and sealed. In other words, they aren't open to each other sexually. That is until the woman responds to her beloved's description, saying, ***Read Song of Songs 4:16 ... Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.*** What was once locked and sealed is now open and exposed.

And so the groom responds with joy at the start of chapter 5. ***Read Song of Songs 5:1a ... I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk.***

They've enjoyed physical intimacy, perhaps for the first time together, and it was wonderful. And their friends are pumped for them! Now, I don't think they were watching. Instead, having heard about their consummation and union, their community celebrates with them. ***Read Song of Songs 5:1b ... Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!*** They're happy for their friends.

The *design* of friendship begins to come into focus here. Notice the couple's private moments are shared with their single friends. Remember, there's a consistent third party throughout this erotic love poem (see 1:4b;11, 6:1;13, 8:8-9). That's interesting, *right?* That tells us romantic love shouldn't be an isolating relationship in which newlyweds abandon all their single friends and get new married friends so they can talk about super secret married things. Not at all! In

fact, romantic love isn't just shared (like information); their passion fosters communal love and celebration (generative). Love in every form creates intimacy with the whole community. Marital intimacy shouldn't undo or harm social intimacy; we shouldn't trade one form of isolation for another.

Intimacy is being known and loved. The couple shares their most intimate celebrations and, as we see next, their most alarming troubles with the whole community. They are allowing themselves to be known to each other and their community. And each member is choosing to respond with love. That's intimacy. It's being known and loved. That's the *design* of friendship.

After enjoying the blissful heights of sexual pleasure and physical intimacy, the couple is now brought back to earth. Similar to the scene in Chapter 3, the woman is in bed but can't sleep. She says, ***Read Song of Songs 5:2 ... I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking. "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." I had put off my garment; how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them?*** She may be literally waking up from a dream or dreaming or somewhere between awake and asleep. The text is unclear. What we do know or feel is her experience and emotion.

The groom knocks, presumably, on the door to their bedroom. But a door and knocking isn't simply literal. A door is a long-standing metaphor with sexual overtones (see 8:9). In essence, he's asking if she's sexually open to him. *My sister,*

*my love, my dove, my perfect one.* He's likely been out late working or traveling, hence the dew on his head. He's just got home. She's already in bed. And she's like, *I'm in my pajamas, I've taken a shower, I'm warm, I'm comfortable ... I'm good.* She draws particular attention to her feet. *Feet* was also a sexual euphemism, literally "lower members" (see also Ruth 3:4,7). So, while he's expressing a desire for sexual intimacy, she's expressing reluctance. The young couple is experiencing (again, perhaps for the first time) the awkward, vulnerable, frustrating, and confusing tension of marital sex life. Sometimes, one person is open, and the other is not.

Now, this doesn't mean there's trouble in paradise. Missing each other like this is common. It's natural. It's normal. But it's really hard to talk about, *isn't it?* I was sharing my struggles to speak with Laura this week with our group. It's simple to have sex. It's a lot more complicated to talk about sex. In other words, it's simple to be lovers. It's far more complex to be friends.

The Apostle Paul gives couples language for these types of conversations. Meet me in 1 Corinthians 7. He talks about married couples not having sex. ***Read 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 ... The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you***

***because of your lack of self-control.*** It should be stated that Paul, a single man, is giving married couples marriage advice. That alone tells us about the unique relationship between single and married folks in Christian community.

Additionally, Paul lays out one of the most counter-cultural principles found anywhere in ancient literature. He says the husband and wife have mutual conjugal rights and bodily ownership. In the Greco-Roman world, women were socially subservient, even, if not especially, in marriage. Paul teaches mutuality. He teaches friendship. Of course, this doesn't mean that a spouse can demand sex whenever they want because *that's my body, too*. That's abusive. Instead, this teaches us that sexual union is not about self-gratification. It's about self-giving. Therefore, married couples shouldn't enter into extended periods of withholding themselves without talking, communicating needs, and mutually agreeing on a time and way of returning to sexual union for the good of their souls and marriage.

Self-giving is the act of friendship. It's knowing someone and responding in love to what you know. In the Song, the woman knows her beloved wants to have sex. And even though she doesn't, she persists, not out of sexual impulse, but out of friendship. Look back at Song of Songs with me. It's an act of service and self-giving. ***Read Song of Songs 5:4-7 ... My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no***



*answer. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city; they beat me, they bruised me, they took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls.* At first, the groom is open, and the bride is closed. Now, it seems, the bride is open, and the groom is closed. *How real is this?* Without the language of friendship, we might think these two lack sexual chemistry. We might even determine the relationship is going to fail to work out.

One myth about sex is that it makes marriages strong. That's because we think sex is the ultimate form of intimacy. We think sex strengthens intimacy. In actuality, the opposite is true. Intimacy strengthens sex. Sex educator Emily Nagoski shared recently in her TEDx talk that couples who sustain a "***strong sexual connection***" for a lifetime do so primarily because they have a "***strong friendship***" (*How couples can sustain a strong sexual connection for a lifetime*, May 2019). *What does all this tell us? Especially in light of this idyllic couple missing each other sexually like this?* Well, we might boil it down to this principle: A great sex life cannot overcome a bad friendship, but a great friendship can overcome a bad sex life ... or no sex life at all.

In other words, friendship is the truest form of intimacy. It's being known and loved.

That's how God ***designed*** it.

## Movement 2: The Distortion of Friendship (v.7, 1 John 1:7, Romans 14:15)

As good as friendship is, we're not always good friends. In fact, our friends hurt us all the time, *don't they?* And we hurt our friends, *don't we?* Sometimes, on purpose. Other times unwittingly. Whatever the reason, the bride is hurt. Look at v.7 again, *Read Song of Songs 5:7 ... The watchmen found me as they went about in the city; they beat me, they bruised me, they took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls.* The bride's willingness to give herself exposes her to rejection and therefore, pain and suffering. Remember, we're reading a double meaning at work within these words of poetry. It's unlikely that she physically leaves the bedroom and walks out into the streets. More likely, it's a continuation of a previous metaphor (see 3:1-5). Remember, she is wrestling with the story she was told and is telling herself about her virginity. She believed her value as a woman was based on the fact that she never had sex. Now, having given her virginity to "*him whom my soul loves,*" ... he seems distant. She feels beaten and bruised and exposed and isolated. The most straightforward reading tells us her expectations for intimacy in married life and herself aren't being met. She's lonely.

This is where true friendship matters: when we're not doing well when our friends aren't doing well, and when we're learning new things about ourselves and our friends. When we're feeling afraid. Yet, this is often where lies about intimacy and friendship push us to isolation and loneliness. This is where we meet the *distortion* of friendship. If intimacy is being known and loved, then isolation and loneliness

are about being known but not loved ... or loved but not known. Pastor Tim Keller calls this our greatest fear.

Sometimes, we love each other but don't really know each other. We keep things on the surface. Sometimes, we boil friendship down to how we feel about someone. However, when good feelings about someone don't lead us to a curiosity about their lives, it can be superficial, even damaging. To be sure, not all friends get all of us. But true intimacy requires knowledge. I learned this early on in my marriage. I loved Laura, no doubt. But I needed to gain knowledge. At the end of the day, she'd ask me how it all went. I was happy to tell her about what I was working on, who I met with, what I had for lunch, and how I felt about it all. Then, I'd move on to dinner or evening plans. One day, she very kindly but very clearly told me, *you know, you never ask me about my day.* I saw friendship (or intimacy) as love but not knowledge.

Being loved but not known makes us lonely. While we might enjoy our time with someone (even our spouse), we aren't really seen, valued, and not really known.

This can manifest in our friendships at church in the form of vagueness. We share just enough information with our group to maintain relational safety. We don't tell each other what's really going on. We give enough information to make sure we're still loved. We say things like, *life is crazy right now.* We don't say, *my boss questioned my integrity in front of the whole team, and I yelled at her because I got angry. When I got home, I yelled at my kids and husband.* In essence we disbelieve

what the Apostle John taught that, ***Read 1 John 1:7 ... if we walk in the light, as [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.*** Light or knowledge is seen as a threat to love, not the way intimacy is fostered. And so we isolate. This tells us we need some healing.

Other times, we know each other but don't love each other well. It's tempting to think about friendship in terms of information or familiarity. Like when you've known someone for a long time or when someone has a lot of friends. However, when knowing someone and their story or situation doesn't lead us to appropriate actions of love and care, our friendships become hurtful or even manipulative. There's a responsibility that comes with knowledge. That responsibility is love.

This is what Paul was getting at when he said, ***Read Romans 14:15 ... For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*** If you know something about your brother or sister, it should impact the way you live.

Being known but not loved makes us lonely. While people may know us and know what we're going through, it's their loving response to this knowledge that creates intimacy.

This can manifest in our friendships at church in the form of apathy. We know a lot about each other. In response, we may say we're thinking and praying, but we don't really do anything. Or we might do a bunch of stuff for someone but never ask a question. I'm convinced that responding to knowledge rightly almost always begins

with a question. *How can I show up? What do you need? Can I make a meal? Do you have a good counselor? Can I give you a ride? How can I show you love? I know you've got a big week coming up; how would you feel cared for that week? I know tomorrow is the anniversary of your mom's death; how are you? Wanna grab coffee?* When we don't respond to knowledge with a curious readiness to take action, it can cause isolation and loneliness. It harms intimacy. This tells us we need some healing.

In either case--when we know but don't love or love but don't know--what we're failing to do is give ourselves. In other words, we're seeking friendship without sacrifice. That's the *distortion*. Therefore, isolation and loneliness persist in a lack of intimacy. And then we look to marriage in general and sex in particular to give us something that neither can supply.

We need *healing*.

### **Movement 3: The Healing of Friendship (vv.8,9,10-16, Romans 12:4-5, Isaiah 41:8, John 15:13-15)**

I hope you see that this scene isn't really about marriage. It's about friendship. It's about intimacy. To be sure, the bride's pain is wrapped up in her sexual identity. However, the suffering is caused by stepping into the light and not being seen. Fear shows up because it feels like she is known but not loved. In her dissonance and confusion, she calls her friends. Courageously, she refuses isolation. She says,

***Read Song of Songs 5:8 ... I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am sick with love.*** She asks, no tells them, to help her find what she's lost. *Tell him I'm sick with love. Find him!* She's feeling vulnerable. She's feeling unsure. She's feeling unsettled. She's asking for reassurance and the retrieval of what's been lost. Her friends wisely respond, ***Read Song of Songs 5:9 ... What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?*** It's like they're baiting her. Like, *what makes him so special? You're the most beautiful woman we know. You're awesome. You could have any man you wanted. What makes this dude so special?* We get this sense that they're inviting the bride to remember why she wanted this man to be her groom.

She's more than willing to answer their question. She goes into a long physical description of her beloved that ends in an unexpected place. ***Read Song of Songs 5:10-16 ... My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water, bathed in milk, sitting beside a full pool. His cheeks are like beds of spices, mounds of sweet-smelling herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory, bedecked with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set on bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.*** Much like the groom's description of the bride in chapter 4, the bride describes how the groom makes her feel as she moves from

his eyes downward. It's sexual. It's charged. And yet, it ends with an odd juxtaposition. She tells her friends, *this is my beloved and my friend*.

The groom used similar language. In v.1 (and 4:9,12), he calls her "*my sister*," meaning darling or companion. It conveys an intimacy beyond sex. And by the end, the bride calls him "*my friend*" (v.16) ... a term with a similar connotation. You see, they're not just lovers. Fundamentally, they're self-givers. Their intimacy is built on friendship, not sex. But we've noticed they're surrounded by friends too, *aren't they?*

Much is made about the intimacy of two becoming one flesh in marriage (see Genesis 2:24). And it is a big deal. But that's not the only "one-body" ethic in the Bible. When writing to Rome, Paul says *Read Romans 12:4-5 ... For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another*. While husbands and wives become one flesh through marriage, you and I become one body through salvation. And each type of oneness tells us the truth about God's nature and character. Author Rebecca MacLaughlin explains, "*friendship is not the consolation prize for those who fail to gain romantic love ... [friendship] is another way in which God manifests an aspect of his love for us*" (*Confronting Christianity*, 156). She goes on to say that sexual oneness conveys the *exclusivity* of God's love, and Christian friendship demonstrates the *inclusivity* of God's love. Both foster a deep and meaningful intimacy, easing loneliness ... at least in part.

One of the most startling distinctions of people in the Bible is being friends with God. Israel's spiritual father, Abraham, was the first to bear this distinction. God said, *Read Isaiah 41:8 ... But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend.* However, because of sin, we willfully and unwittingly isolate ourselves from our Creator and our fellow creations. We're wrapped up in a destructively codependent relationship with this world. We know and love the world. We don't know and love God. And the Apostle James explains that, *Read James 4:4 ... "friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."* The story of the gospel is the story of friends becoming enemies and enemies becoming friends again. You see, while we were enemies of God, God in Christ fully saw and loved us. He befriended us.

Jesus carries the language of friendship into his earthly ministry and his explanation of the cross. *Read John 15:13-15 ... Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.* Notice, Jesus' friendship is a real friendship ... it's self-giving. And it's friendship with Jesus that brings real and complete healing. That's because while we ought to pursue intimacy in marital friendships and friendship within our church community, only one friendship will



never leave us isolated and lonely. Because only one person knows everything about us and still loves us completely and wholly.

When friendship with Jesus is central, we're freed from the fear of self-giving. We're also released from the pressure to seek intimacy where it can't be found. Friendship with Jesus makes us genuinely great friends.