

Title: Souls for Glory: Meaningful and Momentary

Biblical Text: Song of Songs 6

Teaching Series: Whom My Soul Loves

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Song of Songs 6

Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? / My beloved has gone down to his garden to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies. / You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me— Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing; all of them bear twins; not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her. "Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?" / I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a prince. / Return, return, O Shulammitte, return, return, that we may

look upon you. / Why should you look upon the Shulammite, as upon a dance before two armies?

Marriage seems less and less central in our cultural moment. While few dismiss the institution entirely, many seem committed to seeking alternatives.

In last month's issue of *New York Magazine*, journalist Allison Davis featured the story of a polycule. Davis explains that Sarah, Nick, Anna, and Alex are individuals who "*each have partners and maintain concurrent romantic or intimate relationships, not just a side of casual sex partners, though they can have those, too. They are part of the same friend group and sometimes wind up at the same parties and have semi-regular one-on-one hangs*" (*What Does a Polycule Actually Look Like?*, January 16, 2024). In principle, it's clear but casual. The motivation for such an open-style relationship, at least for this group, isn't about eliminating boundaries. Instead, Nick says it's about "*designing the bounds of what we want in our relationship and what we're comfortable with.*" Traditional monogamy is too constricting.

Others are less romantically or sexually adventurous. But they still desire intimacy outside the perceived norms of the centrality of marriage. In her forthcoming book, *The Other Significant Others*, Rhaina Cohen inspires readers to reimagine friendship. This past week on Ezra Klein's podcast, Cohen spoke about the oft-

referenced fact that half of first marriages end in divorce, but also how statistically—because of death and marrying later in life—most married people will only be married about thirty years. That means there's a lot of life before and after marriage for us to think about and seek other forms of meaningful human connection.

Last week, we explored the central value of friendship in the Bible. Marriage isn't the only place we can or should enjoy intimacy; *a third party is connected to the couple of Song of Songs from start to finish*. But while marriage isn't supreme, the poem is clear: marriage is powerful. So, *what do we do with this duality?* Marriage isn't ultimate. But marriage isn't obsolete.

Marriage is the Bible's primary illustration of the gospel and God's relationship with humanity from beginning to end. From the Garden of Eden through Israel's history to the cross and the Church, on into the age to come, marriage is the common stroke painting the worth and beauty of God. Marriage is how God reveals his glory. That's the purpose of marriage. Marriage is meant to reveal the glory of God uniquely. When marriage is rightly embraced and seen as revealing God's glory, it neither becomes too important nor too unimportant. And so, to understand marriage, we must understand God's glory. That's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about God's glory. I want to talk about how marriage is meant to show God's glory, why it often doesn't, and how it can be redeemed.

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

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

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Design of Glory (vv.1-3, Psalm 139:6; 145:3, 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, Isaiah 6:3, Genesis 2:24-25, Deuteronomy 6:4;7:9, Ephesians 5:22-23;25, Revelation 19:7; 21:2)

One of the things we've learned to do as a society is split the subject and the objective. Subjectivity is all beauty and no truth. Objectivity is all truth and no beauty. And so we can easily come to this book of the Bible—the Song of Songs, which is a poem, a work of art—and presume the best we can gain from this is a subjective beauty of one couple's love story but not truth for all marriages. In other words, one married couple can't show us God's glory, only their own. However, priest and poet Malcolm Guite challenges this presumption. Recently, when talking with the Trinity Forum, Guite explained, *“Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength, and all your mind. And somewhere in all those ‘alls’ is all your imagination. And in fact, when we look at the teaching of Jesus, it's mostly an appeal to the imagination as a way of*

perceiving truth in a fresh way. He tells stories and parables.” Jesus was speaking truth through beauty and glory through story.

Song of Songs does this, too.

The whole Bible does this.

A theme emerges as the couple continues to indulge and grow in married life. *Read Song of Songs 6:1-3 ... Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? My beloved has gone down to his garden to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.*

The theme that keeps showing up is this tension. It's a back-and-forth between belonging and searching. While the community is asking the bride, *Where is your beloved?* The bride responds, *I am my beloved's and he is mine.*

Searching persists. Yet belonging endures. This has been going on the entire time.

The woman searches for the man through the wilderness and then through the city twice (see 1:7, 3:1-5, 5:2-7). The man described the woman as locked and closed off (see 4:12). In each case, the search is not eased until the other allows themselves to be found or open. Self-giving is the essence of belonging and marriage. That's the essence of God's glory. It's a divine self-giving.

God is unknowable. We may search for God, but he's never discovered through research, effort, or desire. We might look for him, but he's an empty city, a locked garden, closed to our minds and imaginations. King David wrote a song about it.

He sang, *Read Psalm 145:3 ... Great is the Lord ... his greatness is unsearchable.* He also wrote, *Read Psalm 139:6 ... Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.* God is everything we're not. He is infinite. We are finite. He is flawless. We are flawed. He is whole. We are fractured. He is unknowable. Unless, like in Song of Songs, he makes himself known. Unless he allows himself to be found and open. You see, he can only be understood if he reveals himself or gives himself to us.

That's the *design* of glory.

Pastor John Piper has famously defined God's glory as *the visible display of his worth and beauty*. It's God's nature and character made known. It's his cosmic fame. Paul tells Corinth that God is a God who makes himself known. *Read 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 ... “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.* Through relationship, God displays what can't be otherwise seen. The prophet Isaiah envisioned the angels overwhelmed as they surrounded God. They shouted back to each other day and night, *Read Isaiah 6:3 ... “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”* As Creator, he's stamped his nature and character everywhere.

This is especially true of marriage. Throughout the Bible, we learn truths about God through the beauty of marriage ...

- God shows us his *oneness* at Creation through marriage. The story of Genesis finds a crescendo when Adam and Eve come together. ***Read Genesis 2:24-25 ... 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.*** God's telling us something about marriage. But he's telling us more about himself. He's revealing his nature. You see, the term for "one" here in the Hebrew language is the same word employed in what Jews call the *Shema*. It's a verse they recite every day. ***Read Deuteronomy 6:4 ... Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*** Theologian James Hamilton explains, "*The transcendent reality that God exists as a Trinity, as one God who is three persons, is embodied in a profound way when two of God's image bearers--a man and a woman--are united to become one flesh in the holy covenant of marriage*" (*The Mystery of Marriage*, July 12, 2010). The glory of God's oneness is uniquely revealed through marriage.
- God shows us his *faithfulness* through history using the language of marriage. God institutes the nation of Israel as his covenant people. When he talks about their relationship, it sounds like they're married. ***Read Deuteronomy 7:9 ... Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.*** God's vowing his fidelity. And when Israel is not faithful to the Lord, the language

of this betrayal is the language of marriage. Because of their sin and idolatry, God said of Israel ***Read Hosea 2:1-2 ... she is not my wife, and I am not her husband— that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts.*** Sin and idolatry are described as marital unfaithfulness. God takes on the identity of a husband (see Isaiah 65:5).

Which gives us a lot of hope, *doesn't it?* Because none of us, individually or collectively, is a spotless bride. *What addiction are you carrying? What pain or shame has your body absorbed? What hatred festers in your heart? What arrogance, greed, or selfishness dwells in you? What faithlessness or disbelief?* Take heart, God will be faithful. Despite humanity's faithlessness, God persists as a devoted spouse. He reveals his glory through marriage.

- God shows us his love through the cross through the lens of marriage. When Paul shapes the marital imaginations of his readers in Ephesus, he points them to the cross of Christ. Specifically, he connects with Christ's sacrificial love for the Church. ***Read Ephesians 5:22-23,25 ... Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior ... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*** Paul draws a line back to Creation and calls marriage a mystery that refers to Christ and the church (see v.32). On the cross, Jesus gives himself wholly and completely. Jesus was in eternity with the Father and Spirit ... unknowable ... untouchable ... unkillable. And yet, he shows great love for us, like a husband should love his wife, leaving his Father and

holding fast to his Bride by giving himself to us on the cross. The glory of God's love is uniquely revealed through marriage.

- God shows us his joy through the celebration of a marriage. John's vision of Revelation describes the return of Christ like a wedding party. **Read Revelation 19:7 ... *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.*** Jesus is the Lamb—the one who was slaughtered and came back to life. We are the Bride—the people of God (in all times and places) who have been made whole, complete, and forgiven. Part of this celebration is also about heaven and earth being joined as one, in the same way a husband and wife are joined together. **Read Revelation 21:2 ... *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*** Christ joyfully receives his ready people. Heaven joyfully comes down to earth to become something brand new. God is joyful. He's especially glad to see the creation he made to be very good, *Shalom*, again. The glory of God's joy is shown through marriage.

That's the *design* of glory. Glory is all about the revelation of God's nature and character. Marriage shows us God's oneness, faithfulness, love, and joy. Beauty tells us the truth. That's the purpose of marriage ... to make God known.

However, we've *distorted* marriage, *haven't we?* That's because, first, we distort God's glory.

Movement 2: The Distortion of Glory (vv.4-10,

Deuteronomy 17:16-17, 1 Kings 11:3-4)

In Song of Songs, we're given a window into this *distortion*. Look at v.4. *Read Song of Songs 6:4-10 ... You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me — Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing; all of them bear twins; not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her. “Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?”* While this might seem like the groom is just describing his bride again—like he did in Chapter 4—there's more here this time. First, there's development. Maturity seasons his description this time. We'll get to that shortly. The second nuance is comparison. I haven't been married that long, but comparison never seems like a good idea.

This comparison exposes one of the most problematic issues with the Song of Songs. Many of you have been wondering about this point the entire series, which I promised to address. So, here we go ...

Notice that the man seemingly compares his wife to his harem—his polycule, if you will. Look again. ***Read Song of Songs 6:8-9 ... There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her.*** Long story short, some commentators think King Solomon wrote this book and wrote it about himself and his wife (or rather, *one* of his wives). Others think Solomon wrote the Song, but it's not autobiographical—it's about another couple, perhaps even a fictional couple. Others still believe there's no way Solomon could have written the Song since he had no integrity to write a love poem about the beauty of monogamous marriage. (Candidly, I've gone back and forth nearly every week through this series.) Much of this debate swirls around this verse because it's here that an ancient *distortion* of marriage and God's glory is revealed.

While marriage was always meant to reveal the glory of God, it's often where we chase our glory.

This was particularly problematic for men in positions of power, like kings. And so, when Israel demanded a king, God allowed it but with conditions (see 1 Samuel 8:4-9). He told them in Deuteronomy, ***Read Deuteronomy 17:16-17 ... Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never***

return that way again.' And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. Kings weren't supposed to collect horses, wives, or gold. *What's this about?* Well, these are the age-old gods of this world, *aren't they?* Money, sex, and power. Notice that the reason God doesn't want kings to accumulate is "*lest his heart turn away*" (v.17). It will distort their vision and understanding of themselves and God himself. A king who acquires is a king who is about his glory, not the glory of God. You see, in the ancient world, the more horses you had, the more fierce you seemed ... the more wives you had, the more desirable you seemed ... the more money you had, the more limitless *you* appeared. It's all about you. Each was about revealing self to the world, not God.

Fast forward to the reign of King Solomon. Like his father before him (and King Saul before him), he acquired all these things (see 2 Samuel 12:8). Including wives. Solomon *Read 1 Kings 11:3-4 ... had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.* Solomon sinned against God in his marriage (in his marriages) ... and it didn't go well. Solomon was about his glory and not God's.

Israel wanted a king because they wanted to be like other nations. They wanted a means to seek glory. And so it shouldn't be surprising that a role they desired for their glory became a man who desired his glory.

This same is true of you and me. It may not be polygamy or polyamory. Yet, whether we're married or not, in our sin, we're all tempted to make marriage about our glory rather than God's glory. That's the *distortion*.

Theologian Christopher Ash observes that the mandate of the first married couple was to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth (see Genesis 2:28). It was to be a "tasked-oriented" covenant with God's desires, will, and glory being central. Yet, at the Fall, they become preoccupied with themselves (see Genesis 3:8-19). They shift from a "tasked-oriented" covenant to a "couple-focused" marriage. Ash explains that "*unbridled relational primacy is not only wrong; it is also foolish. The couple working at the project of coupledness for its own sake face the problem that introspection is stifling and self-destructive*" (*The Purpose of Marriage*). It's the ancient Greek tale of Narcissus ... who dies by a pool, staring at his reflection. When self-actualization becomes the goal of marriage, we will end a marriage for the same reason we began it—our glory.

That's the *distortion*.

Movement 3: The Healing of Glory (vv.11-13, Ephesians 5:25-27)

This *distortion* is so damaging because the man-woman relationship can't stand the weight of making you your best self. (And yes, the same is true of the man and

multiple women relationships.) It's okay to want to become whole or reach your full potential. This is one reason C.S. Lewis explained that real intimacy or friendship isn't about what we see when we look at each other but rather what we see together on the horizon. It's a shared focus outside ourselves. He explains in his book *The Four Loves*, "***Friendship arises ... when two or more ... discover that they have in common some insight or interest ... Friendship must be about something ... Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow-travelers***" (ch.4). Another writer says friendship happens the moment someone says ... *Really? You too?! I thought I was the only one.* That's friendship. That's marriage as "task-oriented." It's a marriage focused not on itself but on the glory of God.

So, if we're trapped in a pursuit of our glory in polygamy, polyamory, or simply expecting marriage to complete us or our spouse to be our healer, lover, best friend, and everything ... *how are we reoriented to the glory of God? How are we healed?*

We spoke about two differences in the man's description of his bride. The second was the comparison. The first was a development. One of the primary things we notice is the shift in metaphors. The woman was a locked garden. Now, she's compared to a city and armies (see v.4). She's different. He's different. The blossoming of the final scene furthers this development. ***Read Song of Songs 6:11-13 ... I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a***

prince. Return, return, O Shulammite, return, return, that we may look upon you. Why should you look upon the Shulammite, as upon a dance before two armies? Their transformation doesn't change their seeking and finding. They continue searching for one another, but the seeking and finding are now open, playful, and permissive. Fear is thin. Joy is full. There's respect and dignity, openness and permission.

Marriage is changing them. It's growing and maturing them. Marriage always changes us. God's glory always transforms us. One of the myths of marriage is that we marry the right person. In truth, we always marry the wrong person. We always marry a person in process. Ethicist Lewis Smedes observed after 25 years of marriage, "*My wife has lived with at least five different men since we were wed—and each of the five has been me*" (*Controlling the Unpredictable—The Power of Promising*, January 21, 1983). *How does this happen?* Well, seeking God's glory changes us. In seeking the Lord, we don't become our best selves; instead, we become more and more like him.

Marshall McLuhan famously said that *we become what we behold*. The question isn't whether or not we change. *But what is transforming us? What are we beholding? What are we asking those around us to behold?* Seeking our glory makes us frustrated and dissatisfied. Seeking God's glory makes us whole and healed. This is the point of Paul's mysterious connection between marriage and Christ and the church. *Read Ephesians 5:25-27 ... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her,*

having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. The connection between marriage and the gospel isn't simply union; it's transformation. Glory transforms us.

Okay, so back to our curiosity. *What's vv.8-9 about? Is it Solomon? Is this hypocritical? What do we do with his words of monogamy when he was anything but monogamous?*

Well, (if this is Solomon), we can receive his words as a man in process. We can accept his words as inspired, beautiful, and truthful, even if his life wasn't. Though, many see Ecclesiastes as Solomon's act of repentance. The same is true of nearly every biblical author. Paul was a murderer. I'm sure his first letter was received with confusion. David wrote about sorrow and vulnerability, even though he took advantage of the weak. Peter was a betrayer. Every writer makes us long for a better author. Every voice makes us long for a truer messenger. Every spouse will make you long for a more faithful lover. And what we're supposed to learn from every marriage and story of the Bible is that those longings are all satisfied in Christ himself. After all, marriage is meaningful, but it's momentary. Every whisper of beauty is meant to point us to the truth ...

... to the only one who brings lasting oneness, faithfulness, love, and joy.