

**WISDOM FOR LIVING:
(5) WISDOM AND SEX
SONG OF SONGS
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PROLOGUE

Love does funny things. One February, some elementary school students of various ages were asked their thoughts about love:

- Arnold, age 10, said, "People in love are mooshy . . . like puppy dogs . . . except puppy dogs don't wag their tails so much!"
- Wendy, age 8, "When a person gets kissed for the first time, they fall down and don't get up for at least an hour."
- Billy, age 6, "I look at it like this: Kissing is fine if you like it, but it's a free country and nobody should be forced to do it."
- Dave, age 8, "Love will find you even if you're trying to hide from it. I been trying to hide from it since I was five, but the girls keep finding me."
- Jill, age 6, "Love is foolish . . . but I still might try it sometime."

SCRIPTURE

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's...

Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor. {6} Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. {7} Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned (Song of Songs 1:1; 8:5-7 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The Song of Songs, also called "Canticles" or the "Song of Solomon," is a relatively short Old Testament Book that celebrates the love between husband and wife on its deepest, most intimate level. The phrase "song of songs" is a figure of speech expressing a superlative. Therefore the title (1:1) claims that this is the best song on married love ever written. It is the "song of songs" when it comes to love.

It is considered one of the Books of Wisdom because of its association with Solomon. But this is a little difficult to swallow. After all, the Bible tells us that Solomon had seven hundred

wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:1-3). Where's the wisdom in that?

I remember as a kid hearing my Sunday School teacher talk about King Solomon and his three hundred concubines. But I thought she said he had three hundred porcupines! Porcupines are quite common in my home state of Wisconsin. They can be quite a nuisance, especially if they discover you trying to sleep in their woods while you are in a small nylon tent! So, in my mind, anyone keeping three hundred of these creatures couldn't be very bright. When I got a bit older I learned about concubines and their influence on Solomon's reign. It was then I realized, he should have stuck with the porcupines!

Seriously, though, many people have difficulty believing that a guy with 1000 women in his life could have ever written about an exclusive love. But as we read over the rest of the Bible, we see that God often uses the most unlikely people for his work. The result of using Solomon is a story that celebrates the beauty and purity of committed human love.

1. THE POSSESSION OF LOVE

Chapter eight of this book reveals the intensity of such a committed love. Such intensity is seen in the POSSESSION OF LOVE. The bride says:

"Set me as a seal upon your heart" (vs 6a).

The word "seal" in this verse refers to a signet that contained some unique mark which indicated ownership. Seals varied in shapes and sizes. Some were round and were worn around the neck. Others were rings worn on the finger. The mark was made by stamping the seal into soft clay. Possession of another's seal indicated mutual access and possession.

We know little of the life circumstances of the bride in this story other than she was a Shulam(m)ite - perhaps a reference to a small town north of Jerusalem. But we do know a lot about her desires. She wants her husband to feel a total ownership of her in his heart. "Set me as a seal upon your heart" (vs 6a). She is committed only to him; and she wants him to be completely committed to her. As long as she resides in his heart, she feels secure. She knows that a love deeply rooted in a heart commitment is a love that is true.

But it is the unmistakable sexual nature of this love that has caused many interpreters to stumble. Under the influence of ancient Greek philosophy, which maligned the physical body, together with the loss of a biblical view of the created goodness of the human body and human love, many religious leaders have felt compelled to find in the Song of Songs an allegory of the sacred love between God and his people (or Christ and the church, or Christ and the soul).

An allegory is a story where each character and each event represents something not immediately obvious from the story. Jesus used allegories on a couple of occasions: the story of the different soils (Mk 4:1-20); and the story of the wheat and the weeds (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43)). But it is important to note that these were understood to *be* allegories and that Jesus

provided the interpretations.

The problem arises when you take a passage from the Bible not known to be an allegory and then add your own allegorical interpretation. For example, during the Middle Ages the Book of Job was allegorized this way: Job's 3 friends represent heretics, his 7 sons are the 12 Apostles, the 7,000 sheep are innocent thoughts, the 3,000 camels are vain notions, the 500 pair of oxen are virtues, and the 500 donkeys are lustful intentions.

As you can see, an allegorical interpretation can be used to make the Bible say anything you want it to say! A great deal depends on the motivation of the interpreter. If you are embarrassed by sex then the Song of Songs becomes an allegory of spiritual devotion. If you despise a certain political leader then you allegorize the Book of Revelation in order to identify that leader as the Antichrist. Sadly, the allegorical interpretation of the Book of Revelation remains, to this day, the most popular, and most profitable approach.

One of the many benefits we have gained from Reformers like John Calvin and Martin Luther is the downplaying of allegorical interpretation in favor of a more plain sense approach. Three key questions are asked: 1) What kind of literature is this? 2) What did it say to the original readers? 3) How does it fit with the rest of Scripture? In other words, we look for the *plain* text, the *original* text and the *context*.

So here is an irony, of sorts, from the Song of Songs. The first lesson is not about love or marriage but on how to approach the Bible. We need to let the Bible speak for itself rather than through our prejudices. The Bible is often more wholistic and more down to earth than we are prepared to accept.

We can speak of the possession of love without embarrassment. After all, God made us and is very much concerned with the physical side of our existence. But we must follow his timing (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) and recognize the kind of commitment this requires. Using the imagery from the Song of Songs we would say that each partner must remain as a "locked garden" and a "sealed fountain" (4:12). Each one's life is a private "vineyard" for the other (8:12). Neither is meant to be an open market.

2. THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

The intensity of committed love is seen in the PERMANENCE OF LOVE.

"For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave" (vs 6b).

This love is so total and so strong that the couple wants their mutual possession of each other to be as lasting as life. It is a strongly poetic demand for "until death do us part." Better to die than to experience the failure of love that produces jealousy.

This is in contrast to the disposable attitude that so many have today. Former Education Secretary William Bennett tells about being invited to a wedding and not knowing what to get

for a wedding present until he heard the couple recite their vows. The bride and groom pledged to stay together “for as long as love shall last.” He sent them paper plates.

The Song of Songs is a celebration of the love between a man and a woman committed to the life long bonds of marriage. It is not surprising, then, that the Song of Songs would be used as an illustration of the love between God and his people, nor is it wrong to do so, provided we recognize this is as a secondary meaning.

But marriage is not the only metaphor that can be used. Marriage may illustrate the committed nature of God’s love but singleness is also a powerful metaphor of that aspect of God’s love that extends to everyone. Also, singleness can be a better testimony to the life of faith than marriage as it reminds us that our ultimate fulfillment is in God. Both married couples and singles need to find their fulfillment in God but marriage sometimes obscures this truth. Marriage may last a lifetime but our relationship with God and his people lasts forever.

3. THE POWER OF LOVE

The intensity of committed love is seen in the POWER OF LOVE.

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned" (vs 7).

Its passion is like flames of fire that cannot be quenched. External forces cannot drown it. Its value is greater than all the possessions one might ever possess. True love cannot be destroyed, and neither can it be purchased.

But this presents us with a difficulty. How can sinful human beings who have rebelled against their Creator ever demonstrate true and lasting love? How can any of us know the possession, permanence and power of such love as is described here? A cynic once remarked that marriage is a three-ring circus: the engagement ring, the wedding ring, and then the suffering. But it need not be this way.

The answer lies not in a song of Solomon but a son (descendant) of Solomon, one Jesus of Nazareth whom we know as the Christ, the Son of God. John puts it this way:

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10 NIV).

Jesus Christ gave himself for us so that we may be redeemed from sin and selfishness and be capable of love in the fullest sense. Through Christ we can receive forgiveness of our sins, including our sexual sins. We receive the benefits of Christ’s death by faith and are declared not guilty. We receive the benefits of his life and are declared righteous. We are not yet righteous but we are treated as though we are righteous. By faith we also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who enters our existence and begins the transformation into actual

righteousness. In other words, God may accept us as we are but he does not leave us as we are.

The Holy Spirit frees us from bondage and enables us to choose (see 1 Thess 1:1-8). The capacity to choose is what makes love possible. Love is a decision before it is an action. The more you cooperate with the Holy Spirit the greater your capacity to choose, the greater your capacity to love. The Holy Spirit enables us to choose to love God and helps us to be loving persons, all in response to God's love for us. The power of love is the power of God.

CONCLUSION

Sexual love is grounds for the greatest pleasure and the greatest pain. Because of this many Christians have concluded that sexual love is evil. This, in turn, has been the chief motive for allegorizing the Song of Songs. But the biblical record tells a different story. In Genesis we read that when God created man and woman he said it was very good (Gen 1:27, 30). And the more that biblical teaching concerning physical love is freed from non-Christian philosophies, the greater our appreciation will be of the beauty and purity of human love. The Song of Songs provides a much needed balance between the extremes of sexual excess, on the one hand, and a puritanical denial of the essential goodness of physical love, on the other. I like the way E. J. Young puts it:

“Not only does it speak of the purity of human love, but by its very inclusion in the [Bible] it reminds us of a love that is purer than our own.”