

Wisdom For Life And Ministry

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:7 ESV)*

*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.
(Proverbs 10:17 ESV)*

*‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’
(Job 28:28 ESV)*

*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.
(Matthew 12:42 ESV)*

The Song of Songs

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Introduction:

Good morning church. I’d like to invite you to open your Bibles with me to the Song of Solomon. Depending on the translation that you are reading from this morning, this Book might also be labelled in your Bible as “the Song of Songs.” Personally, I prefer that title because it reflects just how important this song was to the Israelites, and how important it ought to be to us today. In verse 1, the Book is introduced as:

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. (Song of Solomon 1:1 ESV)

The Israelites often used repetition to describe something’s superior nature. They described the inner sanctuary of the temple as the “Holy of Holies.” This was their way of saying that the inner sanctuary was the MOST holy place. Jesus is described as the “King of Kings” and the “Lord of Lords.” And here, we find a song that is referred to as “The Song of Songs.” There is no song like it! This is THE song!

I'm excited to walk through the text with you this morning because I think we need to be reminded afresh of just how incredible this Song truly is! The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was teaching on a text in the Book of Proverbs, and here's what he said in his introduction:

Very singular it must seem to them that this book of Proverbs should be placed so very near to Solomon's Song -- that sacred canticle which is the centre and climax of inspired Scripture: a book which I do not hesitate to call "the holy of holies" -- the innermost sanctuary of divine love.¹

Isn't that remarkable! Spurgeon worried that his people would be OFFENDED that the practical book of Proverbs could be so close to the JEWEL that is the Song of Solomon! They DELIGHTED in this Book!

We're almost the exact opposite today, aren't we? We love the book of Proverbs, but we don't know what to do with this Song. It makes us blush. We wonder if it's even appropriate to read it aloud from the pulpit.

And yet, here it is. God's Word is before us and the Apostle Paul tells us that it is breathed out by God and PROFITABLE for us. My prayer this morning is that we will learn again how to lay hold of the treasure that is the Song of Songs! I pray that we will see with Spurgeon and the saints before him that this Book represents the holy of holies in Scripture.

Now, before we can begin, we need to address the debate that surrounds this Book. The question is essentially this: Is the Song of Solomon a poem about God's love for the church, or is it a description of the beauty of marital love? I would propose to you this morning that it is BOTH.

This Book IS meant to teach us about the beauty of marital love! I can't see how anyone could read this and deny that. And yet, it MUST also present a picture – a type – of Christ's love for the church because he pointed to all of Scripture and said:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39 ESV)

¹ Spurgeon's Sermons on Proverbs, pg. 129.

“They speak of ME” Jesus said. All Scripture. And so, with the time that we have this morning, we are going to study the greatest Song ever written and we are going to pull out it’s plain teaching, but we are also going to dive into its greater meaning. To that end, let’s look now to the text and ask:

What Does the Song of Songs Teach Us About Marital Love?

The first thing we find in this Song of Songs is that true love sees all.

1. True love sees all

Look with me at chapter one, verse 6:

Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
because the sun has looked upon me.
My mother's sons were angry with me;
they made me keeper of the vineyards,
but my own vineyard I have not kept! (Song of Solomon 1:6 ESV)

Here we find a young woman who is deeply in love, but she feels insecure. You see, in many cultures around the world, having a tan or a sunburn was a sign that you belonged to a lower class. You got that tan or that sunburn because you worked in the fields like a common peasant. This young woman is wondering whether her beloved will still desire her after he has seen the toll that her labor has taken on her.

Hear this: One of the greatest enemies of marital love is shame.

This goes right back to the garden of Eden. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. They were known by God and by one another completely, and they had nothing to hide. But, after the fall, we find them struggling desperately to fasten fig leaves together to conceal themselves. Shame entered into the marriage, and we have been hiding from one another ever since.

But in God’s masterful design for our marriages, we are supposed to know one another completely

and to LOVE what we see. He has designed marriage to be a way in which we can, in a sense, RETURN TO THE GARDEN and be naked and unashamed!

That's EXACTLY what we find here. After she has expressed her fear, her beloved affirms her by reminding her of how beautiful she is in his eyes. He says:

Behold, you are beautiful, my love;
behold, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves. (Song of Solomon 1:15 ESV)

Husbands, hear this: True love speaks to the fearful, insecure spouse and says: "I see that you've been working hard. I see that you've given birth to three children and that you haven't had as much time to care for yourself. I see you trying to hide that – feeling shame and insecurity about that – I see all of that, and behold, you are BEAUTIFUL, my love."

This world needs more of that kind of love.

The second thing we learn about true love in this Song is that true love is jealous.

2. True love is jealous

Flip ahead to chapter 8, verse 6 where the bride says:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the Lord. (Song of Solomon 8:6 ESV)

True love is jealous love! We view that word in a negative light, and we shouldn't. If something or someone attempts to break the bond of your marriage, bare your teeth and chase them away. Let's recapture this! Guard your marriage fiercely!

Because marital love is exclusive. It is not be shared with others. Look with me at chapter 2, verses 2-3.

He

² As a lily among brambles,
so is my love among the young women.

She

³ As an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
so is my beloved among the young men. (Song of Solomon 2:2-3a ESV)

The young man says: “There is no other woman like her!” and the young woman says the same.

THAT is the place where love and security can be nurtured. If a wife is making an internal list of all of the other men that she wishes she had married, then how can her husband ever be secure? If a husband is looking at pornography or fantasizing about his secretary, then how can she ever feel safe with him? This isn't rocket science! And yet, I would hazard a guess that many people need this rebuke today.

For marital love to thrive it must be exclusive. No more fantasies. No more flirting. No more pornography. No more plan B's. Your spouse needs to know that they are the ONLY one for you. Forever.

As an aside, I think this might be an appropriate time to consider the warning that is littered throughout this Song. Four times this warning is issued in the text:

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. (Song of Solomon 2:7 ESV)

Once you let this horse out of the gate – once you feel the pull of fierce, jealous, exclusive love – it is nearly impossible to get that horse back into his stall.

I want to take a quick moment here to address those of you who are single. While the Bible unashamedly celebrates marriage, it also celebrates singleness. The Apostle Paul was not married during his ministry, and he wrote that he wished others would be able to do the same! There's a lot that you can accomplish when you don't have the pressures and obligations that come with marriage! The Bible is clear about that.

That being said, for as long as you remain single, you will be faced with the very real temptation to entertain the desire that Solomon is writing about here. Heed this warning: Don't play with love.

For as long as you're single – and that might be a lifetime – enjoy the freedom for ministry that comes with singleness. But don't try to have your cake and eat it too. Don't awaken love before its time.

Next, we learn in this Song of Songs that true love responds.

3. True love responds

Consider the scene described in chapter 5:

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.”
³ I had put off my garment;
how could I put it on?
I had bathed my feet;
how could I soil them?
⁴ My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.
⁵ I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
on the handles of the bolt.
⁶ 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. (Song of Solomon 5:2-6 ESV)

The man attempted to initiate a time of intimacy, but he was met with excuses. She was already in bed. She just bathed. Not right now. A moment later she changed her mind and she went out to meet him, but it was too late. The spurned husband was already long gone.

This is an area where we have been shaped by Hollywood far more than we have by the Word of God. And it is hurting our marriages. The Apostle Paul explicitly writes to the church in Corinth:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴For 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. ⁵**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. (1 Corinthians 7:3-5 ESV)

Do not deprive one another! Hollywood tells us that we should only have sex with our spouses when we're both "in the mood." And in the movies, that seems to happen all the time. But in life, where children refuse to fall asleep, dishes are piled high and work stress is carried on heavy shoulders, the time when both a husband and wife are simultaneously "in the mood" is about as rare as a four-leaf clover.

As a result, there is a great deal of rejection in the bedroom. This happens all the time and we fail to think about it biblically. Hollywood has convinced us that this is how it OUGHT to be. Some of us are offended right now that I would even dare suggest otherwise. But I DARE, because I see this in Scripture.

Wives, hear this: We are called to RESPOND to our spouses generously. Is that true of your marriage?

I think there are at least two things that need to be said here:

First, if you are the partner that is continually spurned, it is still NOT acceptable to sin. Two wrongs don't make a right. Just because your spouse is ignoring your advances and withholding from you, that doesn't give you permission to satisfy your desires outside of God's design of marriage.

Second, if you are the partner that is continually withholding, you need to see that what you are doing is actually sin. Full stop. Unless the two of you have agreed to abstain for a brief time for the purpose of prayer, then you are acting in disobedience to God's command. Maybe your spouse

IS being a jerk. But that doesn't mean you can disregard God's clear instruction and weaponize sex.

We need to get this right. True love is generous.

Finally, we learn in the Song of Songs that true love should be guarded.

4. True love should be guarded

Listen to this beautiful imagery in chapter 2, verses 14-15:

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.
¹⁵ Catch the foxes for us,
the little foxes
that spoil the vineyards,
for our vineyards are in blossom.” (Song of Solomon 2:14-15 ESV)

The young couple retreats into the clefts of a rock for some time alone where they can enjoy one another uninterrupted. The season of love has arrived but there are foxes that would threaten to spoil the vineyards before love could blossom. The couple asks for the foxes to be caught before they ruin something special.

If we are going to maintain the marital love that we have been blessed with then we are going to need to be intentional. As a couple, you need to talk about how you can “hide yourselves in the cleft of the rock” from time to time. That's going to look differently for each of us, but I imagine it will include some parameters about never entering mommy and daddy's room without knocking and being invited in. It's likely going to look like a holiday from time to time that doesn't include the kiddos. It's likely going to look like a date night blocked out each week so that you and your spouse can reconnect.

Tie up those little foxes that would spoil love in its season. Babysitters are excellent fox-catchers! But this imagery can stretch far beyond our children. Have an honest conversation with your spouse and discuss what it is that would threaten the flourishing of love and romance in your marriage.

Capture the foxes! Hide yourselves in the cleft of the rock. Guard the exclusive, generous love that you have received.

Now, if we were to stop here then we would miss half of what Solomon meant for us to see in this Book. While it is undoubtedly a Song about the wonder of marital love, we are meant also to see a beautiful image of God's love for His people. That's why Charles Spurgeon could refer to it as the "holy of holies in Sacred Scripture." He wasn't just excited about marriage! When he read this Book, he saw his Savior. To that end, let's ask the question:

What Does the Song of Songs Teach Us About God's Love for His people?

In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul had no problem using marriage as an illustration for God's love for His people. Christ is pictured as the groom and we are his bride. Therefore, the love that we as sinful creatures display in our marriages is merely a glimpse into the pure love which God has shown to us in Christ. The first thing we learn about God's love is that:

1. God's love sees all

Please understand this morning that God's love for us is the most comprehensive love imaginable! He knows us completely. He sees every hidden sin, every evil thought, and every aspect of our character that we want to hide from Him. He is the only one who sees us as we truly are! And, the Bible says:

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 ESV)

We are the bride in the Song of Songs. We wallow in the field, looking at all of our imperfections and wondering if the groom will see anything lovable in us. He is the King of Kings and we are

mere peasants – and rebellious peasants at that.

Look honestly at the mess that you have made of your life. Remember all of the times that you have sinned and fallen short. Remember all of the hypocritical prayers you have prayed; all of the things that you have done in the secrecy of the night. Do you see all of that?

So does He.

And He loves you.

You are fully known, and fully loved.

2. God's love is jealous

In the same way that I would chase away any man that attempted to steal the affection of my wife, God refuses to share us. Exodus 34:14 says, for example:

for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14 ESV)

Why does God make such exclusive demands on our affection? Why does He describe our love for other things as “whoring” and “adultery?” It is because He loves us with a FIERCE, JEALOUS, and EXCLUSIVE love! And that is a very good thing!

Can you imagine what it would be like if God were indifferent towards us? What if His love for us was like our love for Him? “Yeah, I know that I loved you yesterday, but today I’m focused on other things. I’m doing some renovations on the house, and the baseball season is in full gear, but I might have time for you again on Sunday... Unless the weather’s good, in which case I will be giving that time to my other loves.”

We are so fickle and flippant with our love for Him but He responds to us with a jealous, fierce, unwavering love that we cannot even begin to wrap our mind around. The Apostle Paul’s prayer for his church was:

that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:17b-19a ESV)

Oh that we would be enabled to see even an inch of this incredible love! And as we do, we will respond.

3. We should respond

We have spurned His advances so many times. We have rejected His love, and we have resisted Him as He has drawn us to Himself. We are the bride who stayed in bed and made excuses.

But how can we possibly hold anything back from Him when we consider that He has held NOTHING back from us!? We could never reciprocate the gift that we have received! While we were entirely without merit God gave to us the most precious gift in the universe. He sent His own Son to live for us; to heal us and teach us; to suffer and die for us; to pave the way to glory for us.

This is why we describe the Christian life as one of GRATITUDE! Our entire relationship with God is one of RESPONSE.

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19 ESV)

How are you responding to the Groom today, Christian? How are you responding to the immeasurable love that you have received in Christ? He stands at the door and He knocks.

How can we possibly turn our backs on Jesus Christ?

If we didn't know his love, perhaps we could be excused, but we have KNOWN him and we have been KNOWN BY him! We say with the bride:

I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me. (Song of Solomon 7:10 ESV)

Finally,

4. We should guard this love

Has your love for Christ grown cold, Christian? Guard that love!

Find a way to hide yourself in the cleft of the rock once again. Maybe that looks like waking up before the little ones begin running around the house so that you can have some quiet time in prayer. Maybe that looks like scheduling a walk with some worship songs in your headphones. Whatever that looks like, MAKE TIME for it!

If your relationship with the Lord has gone stale, don't assume that it will simply correct itself. Steal away with the Lord and bring it to him. Perhaps you will discover that the little foxes have made their way into the vineyard. Perhaps you have allowed pet sins to take root in your hearts. Perhaps you have cultivated bad habits and allowed good things to become god things.

Catch the foxes!

Let this be a place where our marriages thrive! Let this be a place where the love that we have for our spouses is surpassed only by the love that we have for our Saviour! This is God's design for us. This is His desire for us. For the glory of God, and the good of His people. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.