

GOD WITH US
Part 4: The Life and Writings of Solomon
Love and Longing – Song of Solomon

Message 11 – The Courtship
Song of Solomon 1:1-3:5

Introduction

The Song of Solomon (literally “Song of songs” or “Most excellent song”) occupies a very unique place in the Bible. It is the only book devoted entirely to the subject of love between a man and a woman. The book affirms God’s plan for marriage between a husband and wife and celebrates the gift of sexual union in marriage. (Solomon wrote 1,005 songs [see 1Kings 4:32]. And this one was his “song to top all songs!”)

Due to the graphic (though figurative) descriptions of physical love, in ancient Jewish culture young boys were not permitted to read the Song of Solomon until they were ready to be married. Throughout history, many have struggled with the idea that God would inspire a book dealing so directly with sexuality. Thus, allegorical (symbolic) interpretations have abounded (from AD 200 onwards) viewing it as a love story between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church. However, while there are definitely parallels that may be drawn in the direction of divine-human love, the primary meaning has to do with love between a man and a woman. God is not ashamed to address the issues of love and sexuality. After all, these are special gifts that He gave to human beings to be cultivated and enjoyed.

There is a valid concern as to how *Solomon* could author a book on love, given the fact that he ultimately had 700 wives and 300 concubines. (60 queens, 80 concubines and virgins beyond number are mentioned in 6:8, indicating that the book may have been composed earlier in Solomon’s reign. The Shulamite woman was queen #61!) Solomon was hardly an example of monogamous love. However, it is the Shulamite, rather than Solomon, who is the main speaker and ultimate heroine in this book of love. She sees deeper into the meaning of love than Solomon does. While the king’s poems focus entirely on her physical beauty, the poems of the Shulamite go beyond admiration of Solomon’s physical traits, touching upon the deeper things that are required to build a

strong, happy marriage. The following excellent comments are from the great German scholar, Franz Delitzsch, concerning the Shulamite heroin in this story:

Shulamite is not Pharaoh's daughter. The range of her thoughts is not that of a king's daughter, but of a rustic maiden; she is a stranger among the daughters of Jerusalem, not because she comes from a foreign land, but because she is from the country; she is dark-complexioned, not from the sun of her more southern home, but from the open sunshine to which she has been exposed as the keeper of a vineyard; in body and soul she is born to be a princess, but in reality she is but the daughter of a humble family in a remote part of Galilee; hence the child-like simplicity and the rural character of her thoughts, her joy in the open fields, and her longing after the quiet life of her village home. Solomon appears here in loving fellowship with a woman such as he had not found among a thousand (Ecc. 7:28); and although in social rank far beneath him, he raises her to an equality with himself. That which attached her to him is not her personal beauty alone, but her beauty animated and heightened by nobility of soul. She is a pattern of simple devotedness, naive simplicity, unaffected modesty, moral purity, and frank prudence, - a lily of the field, more beautifully adorned than he could claim to be in all his glory. We cannot understand the Song of Songs unless we perceive that it presents before us not only Shulamite's external attractions, but also all the virtues which make her the idea of all that is gentlest and noblest in woman. Her words and her silence, her doing and suffering, her enjoyment and self-denial, her conduct as betrothed, as a bride, and as a wife, her behaviour towards her mother, her younger sister, and her brothers, - all this gives the impression of a beautiful soul in a body formed as it were from the dust of flowers. Solomon raises this child to the rank of queen, and becomes beside this queen as a child. The simple one teaches the wise man simplicity; the humble draws the king down to her level; the pure accustoms the impetuous to self-restraint. Following her, he willingly exchanges the bustle and the outward splendour of court life for rural simplicity, wanders gladly over mountain and meadow if he has only her; with her he is content to live in a lowly cottage (Keil-Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol.6).

In short, the Shulamite is a real-life example of “Lady Wisdom” from the book of Proverbs, who called out to all who would learn from her teachings.

The book consists of a series of poems composed by Solomon and his bride, the unnamed Shulamite woman from the northern

countryside. There are occasional interjections from a ‘chorus’ of friends or onlookers (“the daughters of Jerusalem” - 1:5; 2:7; 3:5,10; 5:8,16; 8:4). It is possible that this chorus was the other women in Solomon’s harem, though we are not certain of their identity. While it is difficult to detect a clear storyline, the highly lyrical poems can generally be divided into three sections: the courtship (1:1-3:5); the wedding (3:6-5:1); and the maturing marriage (5:2-8:4). A conclusion summarizes key lessons (8:5-14).

Love in the countryside: 1:1-2:7

The opening section describes a meeting between Solomon and the Shulamite in the northern countryside. They are reveling in their love for one another while anticipating their marriage day.

1:1-4. She begins by affirming that Solomon is a very desirable man. He is not only physically attractive, but his *name* (reputation) has gone forth like perfume that has been poured out. She notes that it is no wonder that *all the women adore him*.

1:5. She comments on her own physical uniqueness, saying that she is *dark but lovely*. She explains to *the daughters of Jerusalem* that her skin was darkened due to long hours working in the sun.

“Dark am I, yet lovely, daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun” (1:5).

You could say that the Shulamite woman was “comfortable in her own skin.” She knew she was different; but the stares of onlookers did not undo her. A healthy sense of self-esteem is important in a relationship. While we can surely affirm the self-worth of another, we cannot give another person self-esteem. A healthy sense of self-worth is first formed (ideally) in our family of origin, as parents and siblings pour love and affirmation into us. The Shulamite knew that she was special to her mother (6:9). As we mature, our self-worth must continue to grow based on our understanding of our value in God’s eyes, as His special sons and daughters.

1:6. She further remarks that she was forced to work and, as a result, did not have adequate time to care for herself.

“My mother’s sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I had to neglect” (1:6).

The reference to her “*mother’s sons*” makes it likely that they were stepbrothers who, uncaringly, forced their “sister” to do their hard work. Her “father” is never mentioned in the story.

The Old Testament narrative is full of blended families (eg. Jacob's 12 sons and daughter; or David's sons and daughters). In every case, there were examples of hatred, jealousy, abuse, neglect and lack of love. It takes an enormous amount of time and dialogue, along with the determination to be kind and respectful, to get to really know new siblings and grow to love them. Anger and harshness must be absolutely forbidden. Parents must be vigilant and patient. Often, there is need for outside counsel and help to "blend" the family effectively.

1:7-8. **She** inquires as to where she might find Solomon on this particular day.

"Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?" (1:7).

She desires to be open and expressive of her beauty in the presence of the man she loves and feels safe with, rather than hiding her beauty among strange and unsafe men.

1:9-2:6. The lovers meet and exchanges words of affection. They may be resting upon grass underneath beautiful trees. ***"Our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs" (1:16,17).***

He compares her to prize mare among Pharaoh's chariot horses. She is *beautiful*. Her eyes are like doves.

She compares him to a sachet of myrrh resting between her breasts . . . a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi. He is handsome and charming.

She compares herself to a lily among a valley full of lilies. But **He** responds saying that she is a lily among thorns (unique and one-of-a-kind).

She returns the compliment, telling him that he is like an *apple tree in the forest* (a rare find, indeed). **She** enjoys being alone with him and is overcome with emotions of love.

"I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love. Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me" (2:3-6).

Solomon and the Shulamite were not shy about using WORDS in order to make one another feel special rather than ordinary. Their “romance vocabulary” became a very powerful tool in fostering their deep affection for one another. Such affirming words breathe courage into us and make us feel desirable. When we feel desirable, we are more willing to be naked and unashamed in the presence of another (Gen.2:25). Words of praise may be spoken or written; but the important thing is to make sure they are sincere and spoken from the heart.

The refrain: (2:7 also repeated at 3:5 and 8:4).

“Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (2:7).

She admonishes the “daughters of Jerusalem” not to do anything that would force their love relationship to move at an unhealthy pace. Love must be given adequate time and space to blossom appropriately and fully.

It is important to note how the Shulamite is described, later in this book, with terms that show her self-restraint and modesty – one who protected her heart and her body. She was *a garden locked up, a spring enclosed, and a sealed fountain (4:12)*. She was *a wall (8:10* - as opposed to a door that swings open to any and all). She knew that *her own vineyard (her body) was hers to give (8:12)*. The Shulamite was a strongly emotive woman, but she was also self-controlled. She allowed her lover to enter her *garden (body)* only when the time was right, on her wedding night (4:16b).

Love between a man and a woman has a ‘speed’ of development. Sometimes our own desires will cause things to move too fast; at other times friends or relatives may try to push things along too fast. One of the most common mistakes is to rush into physical intimacy too soon. Physical (sexual) love must be built on other aspects of love, otherwise it will fail and disappoint us. The Greeks had several words for love, three of which are used in the New Testament. AGAPE is unconditional, committed love. This kind of volitional love must form the foundation of a relationship. PHILEO is emotional, friendship love. This companionship love is formed as a couple learns to do things together, and to appreciate more fully one another’s personalities and interests. Finally, EROS is physical, sensual love. This kind of love is reserved for the marital bed. It is the capstone and fruit of the other forms of love.

An invitation to come away: 2:8-17

In the second section, the Shulamite describes a time when Solomon came to her home and invited her to a getaway.

She depicts him *like a gazelle bounding over mountains and hills* to make his way to her house. Suddenly he is at her window tenderly speaking to her, wooing her away for an adventure.

He tells her that winter has passed and *spring has sprung*. It is time for them to get away together in order to allow their love to further blossom. He uses very endearing words to invite her to be with him.

“Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me. My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely” (2:13-15).

Men tend to be great at initiating romance before marriage. This tendency to initiate during courtship comes intuitively. Later in marriage, however, men often become “responsible” but less “romantic” and adventurous. As a marriage moves through the years, it takes intentionality to initiate romance. There is no rule against the wife initiating romance (see Song of Solomon 7:11-13). For the most part, however, women are wired to be responders and men are called to be initiators. Take a cue from Solomon. Surprise your woman with a romantic adventure she can’t refuse.

She responds to his invitation, and appeals for the protection of their love from unwanted intruders and distractions.

“Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom” (2:15).

Solomon lived a very complex life. He not only had many pressing duties; he also had many other women in his life that would demand his attention. The Shulamite wisely realized that it would take serious determination and protection in order to keep their love as passionate and pure as it was in this moment.

She basks in the warmth of their unique love for one another. Nothing quite compares to a day out in the fields with your lover!

“My beloved is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies” (2:16).

“Catch the little foxes that are ruining our vineyard.” There are so many things that can rob love of the opportunity to thrive and grow. What are the little foxes that challenge the growth of love today? An unforgiving spirit, mistrust, jealousy, pride, busyness, exhaustion, other people, hobbies, children, social media, television, fantasies, addictions, health issues, wounds hidden deep in our hearts, lack of self worth . . . Only YOU can determine what the little foxes are in your relational life. But it is important to identify these love-busters and to create healthy boundaries so that your love can grow appropriately. Only then will you reap the full enjoyment God designed for you to experience. Don’t let the foxes eat all your grapes!

Longing for the beloved: 3:1-5

The Shulamite had two dreams, one before the wedding and one after. Both dreams reflect tension in the relationship. In the first dream, she longed to be with her beloved, but could not find him.

“All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will search for the one my heart loves. So I looked for him but did not find him. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. ‘Have you seen the one my heart loves?’” (3:1-3).

She is experiencing the longings of a woman in the full bloom of romance, but not yet able to consummate her feelings of intimacy in the context of marriage. She has had enough of the courtship phase. She wants to be with Solomon *all* of the time!

Her dream concludes only when she finds him. She would not let him go until she had brought him in to her mother’s bedroom (the room they would share on their wedding night)!

“I found the one my heart loves. I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother’s house, to the room of the one who conceived me”(3:4,5).

The refrain: (3:5 also repeated at 2:7 and 8:4).

“Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.”

How fitting that the refrain should appear here again. Her strong physical desires must be restrained until the right time – the wedding night (which follows in the next section of the narrative).

Parallels between Solomon/Shulamite and Christ/Church

While the Song of Solomon is not an *allegory*, we do recognize that *an ideal human-human love can (and should) be a reflection of divine-human love*. In the Old Testament, Yahweh describes Israel as His bride, while in the New Testament the Church is the bride of Christ. Further, the way that husbands and wives love one another is supposed to be a reflection of the love between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Thus, it is valuable to ask the question: What *parallels* can we draw between the relationship Solomon had with the Shulamite and the relationship Christ has with His Church? Here are a few parallels to ponder:

1. Just as *Solomon's love* for the Shulamite was more delightful than the best wine (1:2,4), so *the love of Jesus* for us is sweet beyond measure, and deeply satisfying to our souls. The Shulamite truly felt that no one could ever love her more perfectly than Solomon did, even with her dark complexion and rustic nature. *His banner over her was love* (2:4). *She responded* to his lavish love and went with him *into the banquet hall*. Ultimately, no one ever has or ever will love us more perfectly than Jesus does, even with our flaws and our sins. Yet, we *must respond* to the love of Jesus by opening up our hearts to Him. When we do, He leads us toward the wedding supper of the Lamb in the banquet hall of heaven (Revelation 19).

2. Just as *Solomon came to* the Shulamite and *invited her* to come out to be with him (2:10-14), so *Jesus comes to us* and *invites* all people to find true life in a love relationship with Him. God is an initiating God; but we must respond to His invitations in order to experience the joys of life with Him.

3. The Shulamite had a troublesome dream in which she ran through the city *searching for the one her soul desired* (3:1-5). For some time, she searched in vain before she finally found "*the one my heart loves*." Similarly, many people are out in the world desperately searching for that person or thing that will fill the void in their souls. *There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of every person, and only God can fill it*. Whether we are single, married, or re-singled, we must remember that God has made us, foremost, for a relationship with Himself. Human love will always fall short in trying to fill our deepest desires. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: *It is ME you are searching for* (see John 4). Only *He* has the *water that quenches our deepest thirst and gives us life!*