

SONG OF SOLOMON: A Love Song and a Hymn

by Ray C. Stedman

I hope you are discovering the magnificent character of the Bible, its keen insights, and how deeply it probes into human life. The Scriptures were given to us so that we might understand ourselves and our God, and the Old Testament books make a tremendous contribution to such an understanding.

The Song of Solomon is regarded today as probably one of the most obscure and difficult books in the Bible. But it may surprise you to know that throughout the Christian centuries it has been one of the most read and most loved books of all. During the dark days before the Protestant Reformation when the Albaneses fled the Catholic church and John Huss led his small bands of Christians up into Bohemia, this was one of the books of the Bible that was frequently read, quoted, referred to, and memorized. It was a great comfort to them. In the days after the Reformation, in the time of the bitter persecution of the Covenanters of Scotland, out of which came the Presbyterian Church under the leadership of John Knox and others, this again was one of the most frequently read and most often quoted books. It brought the Covenanters great comfort and sustained the spirits of those men and women who were hunted like animals throughout the mountains and glens of Europe.

This is the last of the five books of poetry in the Old Testament. Job is the first, then Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and last, the Song of Solomon. Each of these books reveals one of the basic elements of man:

- Job is the voice of the spirit, the deepest part of man's nature, which is why the book of Job is perennially a puzzle to us. In the words of one

of the Psalms, it is one of those books in which "deep calleth unto deep" {Psa 42:7 KJV}, you can't read it without recognizing its profundities. It is almost impossible to exhaust them. Here is the voice of man crying out through pain and struggle for God. Job says, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him," (Job 23:3 RSV)

- The books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes form a trilogy which sets forth the voice of the soul. The soul of man is made up of three parts: mind, emotion and will; and in these books you have the expression of these elements in man's character.
 - Psalms is the book of the heart, of the emotions, and in it you will find reflected every emotion known to man. This is the book to turn to whenever emotion is strong in your life to find an answering psalm that will reflect and meet your mood. That is why the Psalms have always been such loved portions of Scripture.
 - The book of Ecclesiastes is the voice, or expression, of the mind of man. It is a penetrating inquiry into life, searching after answers, and in that book all the philosophies that man has ever discovered find their expression. Ecclesiastes speaks of man searching for answers. And the answer it comes up with, because it approaches life only on the level of the intellect, is that all is vanity and emptiness; futility is stamped upon all things. That is what the mind discovers without Christ.

- The book of Proverbs is the expression of the will in man, summed up in the most quoted of the proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him [that is the choice of the will], and he will make straight your paths,” (Prov 3:5-6 RSV). The mind and the heart together must apply knowledge to the direction of the will to choose the right way. All through Proverbs you will find the emphasis is on the appeal to the will.
- Now if the book of Job is the cry of the spirit, and Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes the cry of the soul, the Song of Solomon is preeminently the cry of the body in its essential yearning. And what is the essential yearning of the body? For love. Therefore, the theme of this book is love. It is an eastern love song, an oriental love poem, and there is no use denying that. It is frankly and fully that. It is a revelation of all that was intended in the divinely given function that we call sex. It is sex as God intended sex to be, involving not just a physical activity, but the whole nature of man. For sex permeates our lives; Freud was right about that.

But sexual response and impulse touches us more than physically. It also touches us emotionally, and even spiritually; God made us that way. There is nothing wrong with this. But this is where Victorianism went astray. It was pushed to extremism by the enemy. (This is always the devil’s activity – to push attitudes toward sex into extreme positions.) So sex went into prudishness, as though it were some unmentionable subject, as though it were something that should be kept locked up in drawers and hidden away behind curtains. But that is not the way you find it in the Bible. In the Bible, sex, like every other subject, is handled frankly and dealt with forthrightly. It is set forth as God intended it to be. So first and foremost, the Song of Solomon is a love song describing with frankness and yet with purity the delight of a man and his wife in one another’s bodies. There is nothing pornographic or obscene about it, nothing licentious. As you read though it, you can see how beautifully and chastely it approaches this subject.

The book comes to us in what we would call musical play form. The characters in this play are Solomon, the young king of Israel – this was written in the beginning of his reign, in all the beauty and manliness of his youth – and the Shulammite. She was a simple country lass of unusual loveliness who fell in love with the king when he was disguised as a shepherd lad working in one of his own vineyards in the north of Israel.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us that he undertook expeditions to discover what life was like on various levels. Once he disguised himself as a simple country shepherd lad, and in that state he had met this young lady. They fell in love, and after they had promised themselves to each other, he went away and was gone for some time. The Shulammite girl cries out for him in her loneliness.

Then comes the announcement that the king in all his glory is coming to visit the valley. While the girl is interested in this, she is not really concerned because her heart longs for her lover. But suddenly she receives word that the king wants to see her. She doesn’t know why until she goes to see him, and discovers that he is her shepherd lad. He takes her away and they are married in the palace.

The play is set in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and a chorus of singers, referred to as the daughters of Jerusalem, asks certain leading questions from time to time during the account of the events leading up to the courtship, betrothal and marriage. The Shulammite girl addresses them on three occasions. It is interesting to note that the word *Shulammite* is the feminine form of “Solomon.” Therefore we would call this lady Mrs. Solomon. She is the bride, and we read of her encounter with this young man their courtship and the strength and the methods and the delights of love.

The language of the book is highly poetical and figurative and there may also be some difficulty determining who is speaking at any one time. But you can distinguish the different speakers in this way: the bridegroom always refers to her as “my love,” and the bride calls him “my beloved.” And as each describes the other you can see the passion and the rapture of love. Here is the language of love as she describes him:

**My beloved is all 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 springs of water,
bathed in milk,
fitly set.
His cheeks are like beds of spices
yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies,
distilling liquid myrrh.
His arms are rounded gold,
set with jewels.
His body is ivory work,
encrusted with sapphires.
His legs are alabaster columns,
set upon bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.
His speech is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.**
{Song 5:10-16 RSV}

And he describes her in similar language:

**You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love,
comely as Jerusalem,
terrible as an army with banners.
Turn away your eyes from me,
for they disturb me –
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.**
{Song 6:4-5 RSV}

Now you can see how figurative this language is. If any young swains were to take this literally today and try to pass this language along I am sure they would be misunderstood. But this is the impressionistic approach and there is beauty of expression here:

**Your teeth are like a flock of ewes,
that have come up from the washing,
all of them bear twins,
not one among them is bereaved.**
{Song 6:6 RSV}

That means that she didn't have any missing. She had a full set and they had just been washed.

**Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.
There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
and maidens without number.
My dove, my perfect one, is only one,
the darling of her mother,
flawless to her that bore her.**
{Song 6:7-9 RSV}

Obviously, this is the language of love.

The book describes married love as God intended it to be. It is important to see that. For the full abandonment to one another in mutual satisfaction which is described in this book is possible only because it is experienced within that total oneness which only marriage permits. That is strongly emphasized throughout this book by a three-fold warning which the bride addresses to the unmarried girls – the chorus referred to as the daughters of Jerusalem. Three different times the bride, turning from her rapture and her delight with her love, gives these girls the secret of this delight:

**I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem ...
that you stir not up nor awaken love
until it please. {Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4 RSV}**

This is the secret of delight like this in marriage. What does she mean? She means, do not prematurely stimulate love. Wait until it develops on its own. Do not arouse it by artificial means before it is ready. Let it begin of itself in its own good time.

It is monstrous to watch foolish and even fatuous mothers who encourage their children to ape adults in dancing and dating and petting even before they enter their teens. Why? Because they are trying to stir them up to adult activities, the activities of love, before their time. It is like trying to open the bud before it is ready to open; you simply destroy it.

We are seeing the results of much of this in our own society. For the young people who want the best in love, the greatest, the most, this book teaches them to leave off petting and necking and so forth until they can say, as this bride says,

**He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his banner over me was love.**
{Song 2:4 RSV}

Or as the bridegroom says:

**Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.**

{Song 8:6-7 RSV}

God has ordained that all these delights reflected here be a part of the experience of men and women, but only in the relationship which makes it possible, which is marriage. Therefore, this book is a powerful plea for chastity and purity in life until the time of marriage comes.

But of course we have not heard the deepest message of this song until we pass behind the description of this purely physical human love, perfect as it is, to read it as an expression of communion between man and God, between Christ and his church. From the very earliest Christian centuries, this book was taken in that way. Even the Jews took it allegorically in that sense. The preface to this song in one of the Jewish books, or Targums, reads something like this:

This is the Song of Solomon, the prophet king of Israel, which he sang before Jehovah the Lord.

You see, he wasn't singing just a purely human love song. He sang this before Jehovah. This was a song about his own relationship to his God, and the early church fathers took it in that light. It was because of this interpretation that this song was such a comfort to the persecuted saints of the Reformation and the post-Reformation periods.

Someone has well said, "If you love Jesus Christ, you will love this song because here are words that fully express the rapture of the heart that has fallen in love with Christ." When you read the book of Ecclesiastes, you read of man's search throughout the world for something to satisfy his heart, and the message of that book is simply that if a man gains the world it isn't enough. His heart is still empty because the heart is greater than its object. But the message of the Song of Solomon is that Christ is so tremendous, so mighty, so magnificent, that the heart that has fallen in love with him will never be able to fully plumb the depths of

his love and his concern and his care. The object, Christ, is greater than the heart.

Every passage in this song, therefore, can be reverently lifted to this higher level of a heart enraptured with its Lord. Taken thus, it reveals a highly significant truth: It reveals that marriage is the key to human life. This is not to say that those who are not yet married should be discouraged by that. For, regardless of whether you find marriage or not on the physical level, this is still true.

What is marriage? Have you ever thought about marriage? About what lies behind the institution of marriage? It has been my privilege many times to marry people, and I have to deal with certain state laws. Marriage is not the product of human society. It is not something that people invented after they began to live together. Marriage goes back to the very dawn of the human race. Marriage is an absolutely integral part of human life, and physical marriage, between man and wife, is simply a picture of a deeper relationship that is true of everyone.

This principle is discussed in Romans 7, as the Apostle Paul opens that great argument with an illustration of a married woman. While she is married, she is bound by the law to her husband. And if, while she is married to him, she falls in love with another man, she will gain the stigma of an adulteress, that is, she will expose herself as breaking the basic law of life. But if the husband dies, then she is free to be married to another man {cf, Rom 7:1-3}. Why does he say all this? Because it is an illustration of what happens in the life of every one of us. Paul says we were married to the old life, to the old Adam. We were joined to an evil man. And that is the problem with human life. Man was made to be mastered and he simply cannot exist without a master. Every one of us has a master whether we like it or not. The whole story of the Bible is that it is either God who masters us or it is the devil. It is one or the other. Both Christ and the apostles make it very plain that the whole world, every man and every woman, is mastered by another force, either God or the devil. This is why Jesus said that no man can serve two masters {cf, Matt 6:24}. You can't give yourself to both of them. There must be a choice in life. Either you hate the one and love the other, or cling to one and separate from the other. You can't do both.

So man must be mastered. In other words he is made for marriage since marriage is a picture of the

mastery of one life by another. And this book says that the master who was made for man, the master that God intended for man to have, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Man mastered by Jesus enters into his fullness and glory, all that God intends for man.

As you read in this book of the rapturous delight that the bride and the bridegroom experience in one another you are reading a magnificent and beautiful description of what God intends the relationship to be between himself and each individual. That is why the great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," (Matt 22:37 RSV). That is the first and greatest commandment, for out of that flows everything else, including loving your neighbor as yourself. So this book is very important in that it deals with a very important relationship. In Christ we have the true bridegroom, and the church is his bride, as Paul puts it in Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, {Eph 5:25 RSV}

He goes on to describe the work of Christ for his church and then he says again:

This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church; {Eph 5:32 RSV}

So the love of a husband and wife is a picture of the love of Christ and his church. In other words, the love of a husband and wife is simply a manifestation and a picture of that deeper love which is God's intention for human life.

So in this book we have a picture of what God will fulfill in the heart and life of one who loves him. Listen to these beautiful words of the bridegroom to the bride:

**"... for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away." {Song 2:11-13 RSV}**

There is the springtime of life. But it doesn't lie in the past. It lies in the future. One day this whole world will experience a springtime like that. The Lord Jesus Christ, returning at last to claim his waiting bride, will greet her in words very much like those. The springtime will come, the time of singing, the time when earth shall blossom again and the curse will be lifted and the flowers will appear on the earth. This is a picture of what can take place in the heart of one who falls in love with Jesus Christ and enters into springtime. The cold winter of loneliness, misery, and selfishness is past and the time of singing has come.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this beautiful little passage that sets forth so magnificently all the possibilities of satisfaction that are your intention for the human heart. Oh Lord, that we might enter into this kind of a relationship with you, that our hearts might sing like this concerning you who have come and won us, who have overcome all our prejudices and our wrestlings against you, so that we cry out, "Nay but I yield, I yield, I can hold forth no more; I sink by dying love compelled and own thee conqueror." In your name we pray. Amen.

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