

Chapter Sixteen

The Urges of Love: Song of Solomon

Love songs are always popular, and this one is called in the Hebrew "The Song of Songs," which is a Hebrew expression for the best or finest of all. It is the last of the five books of poetry in the Old Testament. Job was the first; then Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes form a trilogy; the last is the Song of Solomon. As we have seen, these books reveal the basic elements of humanity. The most profound of the five is Job which represents the voice of the spirit in man, the deepest part of our nature. The trilogy of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes expresses the voice of the soul in its three parts--emotion, will and mind. Psalms is the book of the heart. Proverbs is directed to the will, making its choices in life. Ecclesiastes is the penetrating inquiry of the mind, searching for answers.

What then is the Song of Solomon? It is preeminently the cry of the body in its essential yearning. That essential yearning is for love. From its birth our bodies cry out for love. They are made in such a way as to enjoy being touched, patted, caressed and embraced. Climaxing this capacity of the body for sensuous delight is the thrill sexual intercourse. Therefore, the theme of this book is sexual intercourse between a man and his wife as the ultimate and purest expression of the divinely given function that we call sex. This book describes sex as God intended it to be, involving not merely physical exchange but touching the whole nature of two lives.

Freud was right about one thing--sex permeates our lives. He saw it as primarily physical and psychological, but it is even deeper. It is part of the expression of the human spirit as well. Someone has described the basic definition of sex as "the urge to merge." That urge finds its intended culmination with respect to the body in sexual play in marriage; with respect to the soul it finds delightful expression in friendship and social interchange; and with respect to God the "urge to merge" appears as worship, for the deepest desire of the heart is to be possessed by God and to possess Him. Surely this is what Jesus had in mind when He said in John 15 that the highest relationship He could have with His disciples would be "you in me and I in you" (see v. 4).

Because the Song of Solomon is about sexual love, it has been mistreated and often neglected. Victorian prudishness regarded sex as something dirty and not to be mentioned in polite company but kept locked in drawers and hidden behind curtains. That represents an extreme distortion of sexuality which has produced widespread hurtful responses in social life. The opposite view treats sex as something so commonplace it should be displayed without qualm and openly enjoyed whenever desired, with whatever partner is available. This too is extremely hurtful and produces social disaster.

But sex is not treated in either of these ways in the Bible; it is handled like every other subject, with frankness and forthrightness, yet with purity and restraint. Sexual love is never seen as pornographic or obscene in itself, but removed from the protection of marriage it becomes abused and ultimately emerges as something sordid and licentious. In the Song of Solomon we find the subject treated with delicate beauty and reflecting a wholesome delight in the joys of married sex.

The book comes to us as a musical play. The characters are Solomon, the young king of Israel, who at the beginning of his reign certainly must have manifested the finest qualities of the beauty and manliness of youth. In the complementary role is the Shulamite (the name is the feminine form of Solomon and we would translate it in modern language "Mrs. Solomon"). The play is set in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and is acted out before a chorus of singers referred to as "the daughters of Jerusalem." They ask certain leading questions from time to time, and on three occasions the Shulamite addresses them directly.

The book consists entirely of dialogue between the man and the woman with occasional side remarks directed to the chorus. This makes it difficult to piece together the background story, but certain verses give clues from time to time as to what the setting of the book is. At the end of the play in 8:11 we are told: "Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he let out the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver." This suggests that the family of the young woman who is called the Shulamite evidently rented a tract of land from King Solomon located in the north country of Israel. The Shulamite is the Cinderella of the family. She has two brothers and two sisters but has been left to tend the flocks and to work in the vineyard herself. She spends her time out in the open sun all day, so that she becomes quite sunburned. In fact the book opens with her acknowledgment: "I am very dark, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me. My mother's sons were angry with me, they made me keeper of the vineyards; but, my own vineyard I have not kept!" (1:5-7).

As she works in the fields she watches the beautiful ladies of the court riding in their carriages up and down the road and envies them, but is quite content to remain in her humble life. One day she looks up to see a handsome stranger, a young shepherd lad looking at her very intently. She is disturbed by his gaze, but he says to her: "You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you" (4:7). That goes a long way in establishing a friendship, and they soon draw closer to each other.

As love dawns between them, they describe the beauty of each other in exquisite yet chaste language. Suddenly the young shepherd leaves, but before he goes he promises that he will return. Through the night she dreams of him and wishes for him, remembering his appearance and describing him to her friends.

Then one day there is a great commotion in the valley. The latter part of chapter 3 describes how excited the countryside is as King Solomon himself, with a company of sixty men of war, is seen coming up into the valley, riding in his royal carriage. To the amazement of everyone the king sends his riders to her house with the message that he desires to see her. She comes out shy and afraid and is brought to the royal pavilion. To her amazement she discovers that King Solomon is none other than her shepherd lover. He carries her away to his palace and they enter into a blissful state of communion and consummation together.

The language of the book is highly poetical and figurative and there may be some difficulty in determining who is the speaker, but it is helpful to remember (in the version we are following) that the bridegroom always refers to his bride as "my love" and she, in return calls him "my beloved." Here is her description of 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" (5:10-16).

He describes her in similar language: "Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved. Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an arsenal, whereon hang a thousand bucklers, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies" (4:1-5).

It is important to see that the book describes married love as God intended it to be. The full abandonment to each other in mutual satisfaction which is described in this song is possible only because it is experienced within that total oneness which marriage alone permits. This is strongly emphasized throughout the book by the threefold warning which the bride addresses to the unmarried girls in the chorus, referred to as "the daughters of Jerusalem." Three times, in 2:7, 3:5 and 8:4, the bride turns from her rapture and delight with her lover to give the secret of this delight: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the hinds of the field, that you stir not up nor awaken love until it please." What does she mean? She means do not

prematurely arouse love. Wait until it develops naturally in its own time. Do not stimulate it artificially before one is ready. Let love dawn of itself at its own unhurried pace. Surely much of the problem in today's broken marriages is a result of failing to heed this admonition. Fatuous mothers often encourage their small children to ape adults by teaching them to dance and even to date one another before they enter their teens. Without realizing what they are doing, they are awakening love before its time and it is no wonder that teenagers often enter into marriages for which they are almost totally unprepared. It is like trying to pry open a flower bud before it is ready to bloom. One simply destroys it.

The same is true of the practice of petting and necking. These too are ways of stimulating love before its time, and without doubt it has created serious problems of adjustment for young people entering into marriage. To young people, who truly desire the best out of love, this book teaches them to leave off such premarital stimulants and wait for the dawning of love in its own time. The Shulamite is able to say: "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love" (2:4). For her the consummation of love in marriage was like a banquet for which she had long been eagerly waiting and which fulfilled her anticipations to the very fullest degree.

Because the language of the book is strongly figurative, it is sometimes difficult for the Western mind to see the meaning of the figure employed. For instance, when the bridegroom says to the bride, "Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from their washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved," he means that her beautiful teeth are full and complete and not one of them is missing. The actual act of sexual intercourse is referred to delicately by several euphemisms. One is that of coming into a garden. For instance: "Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its fragrance be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits. I come to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk. Eat, O friends, and drink: drink deeply, O lovers!" (4:16--5:1).

Still another description of the act of love is climbing a palm tree; "How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches. Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth" (5:6-9).

God has ordained that the delights reflected here be a part of the experience of man and woman in marriage. To ignore this is to cheapen these delights and to make sex as commonplace as cutting one's fingernails. That which, with due restraint, is intended to be a rushing torrent of sensuous delight becomes instead a spreading flood in which one wades continually without pleasure.

This is clearly indicated toward the end of the book where reference is made to a sister of the bride: "We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister, on the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar" (8:8,9). The little girl may be like a wall, that is, closed to easy friendships, resistant to the approaches of others. Her family then will respond by "building upon her a battlement of silver." A battlement is a sloping ramp by which a wall may be surmounted. In this case it was to be made of silver, which in Scripture is always a picture of redemption. The suggestion is that by teaching her the value of redemption by the love and grace of God she will be enabled to find a security that will safely accept the approaches of others and make her more open to communication.

However, "if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar." She may be like a door--open to all who come and far too easily influenced by others. In that case the role of the family is to protect her and enclose her with loving guidance that will enable her to grow and fully develop before she enters into marriage.

But of course we have not heard the deepest message of this song until we pass behind the description of purely physical love, perfect as it is, to read this as an expression of communion between man and God, between Christ and His church. From very earliest Christian centuries, this book has been taken in that way. Even the Jews took it allegorically in that sense. The preface to this song in one of the Jewish Targums reads like this: "This is the Song of Solomon, the prophet king of Israel, which he sang before Jehovah the Lord."

This was not for them a purely human love song, but one to be sung before Jehovah. It was a song about one's own relationship with God. Certainly the early church fathers took it in that way, and throughout the Christian centuries this little book has been one of the most read and cherished books of all the Bible.

During the dark days before the Protestant Reformation, when the Albigenses fled the Catholic church and John Huss led his small band of Christians in Bohemia, this was one of the books of the Bible frequently read and quoted and memorized. It was a great comfort to the persecuted saints. After the Reformation, in 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 quoted books. It brought the Covenanters areas comfort and sustained the spirits of men and women who were hunted like animals throughout the mountains and glens of Europe.

Someone has well said, "If you love Jesus Christ, you will love this song, because here are words which fully express the rapture of the heart that has fallen in love with Christ." The message of the Song of Solomon is, metaphorically, that Christ is so wonderful, so magnificent, and the heart has so fallen in love with Him that it will never be possible to plumb the depths of Christ's love and concern and care. Every passage of this song can be reverently elevated to this higher level and seen as the expression of the heart enraptured with the Lord. Taken thus, it reveals a highly significant truth. As we read of the rapturous delight that the bride and the bridegroom expedience in each other, we are also reading a magnificent and beautiful description of what God intends the relationship to be between Himself and each individual. Thus 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). Out of that love will flow every other love, including loving your neighbor as yourself.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he describes Christ as the true Bridegroom and His church as the bride, and says: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." And then he goes on to add: "This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:25,32). So the love of a husband and wife pictures the love of Christ and His church. This in turn is a representation of the deep love God intends to exchange with each individual in a personal relationship together.

Listen, then, 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 of Sol. 2:11-13)

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

[Proceed to Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

First published in book form (2 paperbacks) by Regal Press of Ventura California in 1980-81. [Copyright \(C\) 1997 Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#)

Originated April 2, 1997. Corrections? Email [Lambert Dolphin \(dolphin@best.com\)](mailto:dolphin@best.com)