

THE
LOVE
OF
LOVES
IN THE
SONG
OF
SONGS

PHILIP RYKEN

“Phil Ryken is a master expositor of the Scripture, and he uses all his ability to beautifully unpack one of the most intriguing and difficult books of the Bible to understand—the Song of Solomon. Historically, interpreters have read the book as either/or. It is either about human romance or about our relationship with Jesus. Ryken reads the book as both/and—both in its immediate historical context (about romance) and its whole canonical context (about the spousal love of Jesus Christ.) And, of course, biblical wisdom about love and sexuality has perhaps never been as crucial and needed by the church as it is today. An important book for us all!”

Timothy C. Keller, Pastor Emeritus, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

“*The Love of Loves in the Song of Songs* is a book that every serious Bible student will want. A thoroughly researched, insightful, and challenging treatment of one of Scripture’s most engaging and relevant books, written by one of our generation’s finest pastoral theologians!”

J. D. Greear, author, *Not God Enough*; President, Southern Baptist Convention; Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina

“Our culture is deeply confused about sexuality and marriage. Not coincidentally, it is equally confused about the God who created humanity for a committed, exclusive, loving relationship with himself. This book shows us the remedy in the Song of Songs, the divine love song that shows us how our human marriages ought to work and how they ought to mirror Christ’s passionate love for his bride. Ryken shows us how the song speaks to everyday relationships and, in doing so, how it points us to the One who made us for himself.”

Iain M. Duguid, Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Song of Songs* (Reformed Expository Commentary)

“Phil Ryken looks at this neglected book of the Bible, Song of Songs, on its own terms and with wonderful gospel awareness. He presents a truly thrilling vision of human sexuality along with the lover’s heart of God himself. It has had a deep impact on me already, and I’d love for you to benefit from it too.”

Sam Allberry, Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author, *Is God Anti-Gay?* and *7 Myths about Singleness*

“After reading *The Love of Loves in the Song of Songs*, I will never read this biblical book in the same way again. Ryken skillfully weaves into each passage God’s wisdom about both the magnificence of human marriage and the romance of our redemption. I can’t think of any Christian—single or married—who wouldn’t benefit from this book.”

Jani Ortlund, Executive Vice President, Renewal Ministries

“Here is a book of costly value for both single and married people! I have been blessed to read this, and through Ryken’s exposition I see how the Word made flesh in the Song of Songs is brighter and more wonderful than I imagined. Ryken’s call for obedience to Scripture’s authority is convicting, but we are given hope and help as we read. He says that this Song ‘operates simultaneously on at least two different levels,’ teaching us about Christ with his bride, which speaks to what a truly godly marriage can be, and how all of us in the body, single or married, are his true bride.”

Valerie Elliot Shepard, author, *Pilipinto’s Happiness* and *Devotedly: The Personal Letters and Love Story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot*

**The Love of Loves in
the Song of Songs**

The Love of Loves in the Song of Songs

Philip G. Ryken

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To Josh and Anna,
whose amazing love story is still being written,
and to the Savior who is also our Lover, our Friend

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Prologue

I Love You Always, Forever

The woman slipped into the pew in front of me and sat down, alone, just a few minutes before the worship service began. I had never seen her before, although at College Church in Wheaton it is common to see people with Down syndrome. She stood up for the opening hymn and so together we sang, “Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature, Son of God and Son of Man! Thee will I cherish, thee will I honor, thou, my soul’s glory, joy, and crown.”

What the woman did next caught me by surprise. She put down her worship folder, a little impatiently, as if somehow it was in the way. Then she sang the rest of the hymn from memory and at the same time used her hands to express its words in American Sign Language. She wanted to praise God with her whole person, body as well as soul.

As I watched, the woman’s gestures made the words of the hymn come alive. I found myself walking through fair meadows and spring woodlands, or looking up at “the twinkling, starry host.” Most of all, I could see the face of my beautiful Savior, Jesus Christ, whose hands were pierced for my transgressions.

As my spiritual sister gave glory and honor to the “Lord of all nations,” her face was radiant, her visible words had a graceful beauty, and I had the unmistakable impression that she was deeply in love. Jesus Christ was the predominant passion of this woman’s life. She was not “disabled,” as some would say, but divinely empowered to worship. Nor was she single, as I had assumed from the absence of a ring on her finger. Rather, she was engaged to be married, for the beauty of her worship came from a heart that was betrothed to the Son of God.

This is the relationship that God wants to have with every one of us, male or female, married or single. He wants us to have an exclusive relationship, like the intense affection a bride has for the man she is preparing to marry, with the abiding security that comes from a groom who promises to be faithful unto death.

Introducing the Song of Songs

One of the best places to see a passionate, permanent love relationship is in the Bible’s most famous love song—the ideal romance that we read about in the Song of Songs.

Admittedly, most books are easier to write about than the Song of Songs. To begin with, it is hard to know exactly how to connect the book’s message with the life of King Solomon, who may or may not have been its author but is clearly mentioned in the first verse. Also, the Song of Songs is unashamed to talk about human sexuality, which some people find a little embarrassing. The book is “naked” in ways that some Christians wish they could cover up. Then there is the vexing question of how to relate the book’s human relationship to the love that God wants to share with his people.

In spite of these difficulties, I have wanted to teach this book for a long time. One of the first sermons I ever preached came from chapter 2, with its thrilling exclamations: “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (v. 16); “He brought me to the banquetting house, and his banner over me was love” (v. 4). I got more serious about studying the Song of Songs when I visited the famous Bodmer Library on the shores of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. The Bodmer boasts one of the world’s most extraordinary collections of ancient religious texts, biblical manuscripts, and other famous books. It is perhaps the best place in the world to see the religious and intellectual history of humanity.

There I saw a stunning manuscript of the Song of Songs from the early Middle Ages—the seventh century, as I recall. The colorful hand lettering was beautiful, but what really captured my attention was the expansive white space around the text. Obviously, the text had been copied by someone who knew how to read poetry. The words were not crammed onto the page the way they are in a two-column Bible but allowed to breathe. The scribe wanted each line of love poetry to be savored before moving on to the next. Seeing the book written out as a beautiful love poem awakened my desire to study it and then to preach it.

Not long afterward, I read the manuscript for a commentary on the Song of Songs by my friend Iain Duguid, who studied Old Testament at Cambridge before becoming my pastor when I was a theology student at Oxford. Professor Duguid has an exceptional ability to understand the Old Testament in connection to Christ and then apply its gospel message for everyday Christianity. The more I read his commentary—to which this little book is deeply indebted—the more I wanted to share the love of loves that we encounter in the Song of Songs.

Our culture needs this book. As a college president, I often hear students ask for more guidance in understanding human sexuality. They are not just looking for a list of biblical do's and don't's (although such a list may have its place); what they want to understand is the stunning beauty of God's design and his higher purpose for our romantic relationships. We live in a world where sexuality is ruined by sin, its beauty obscured by our brokenness. We need a divine vision for the way sex was meant to be, with a gospel that offers forgiveness for sexual sin and an empowering grace to live into the sexuality that God wants to give us. We also need a deeper understanding of the intimacy that God wants to have with each one of us and how that intimacy relates to our singleness or to our status as husbands and wives, as the case may be.

The best way to capture God's vision for anything is simply to work through some relevant part of the Bible, letting God's Spirit set the agenda through Scripture. When we turn to the Song of Songs, we encounter a love story told in the form of a love song that is part of the greatest love story ever told.

The Way We Were and Were Meant to Be

A good place to begin is by setting the Song of Songs in its wider context. I do not intend to treat the book like an allegory, in which everything in the book stands for something else, and in which we start coming up with meanings that the author never intended. But I do want to be faithful to God's purposes for marriage and romance, which the Bible consistently regards as mysteries that point beyond themselves to God's everlasting love. Whenever we talk about the way that a husband loves his wife, we are never simply talking about marriage; we are always talking about Christ's great love for

the church (see Eph. 5:25–32). The sexual union of man and wife is not an allegory, strictly speaking, but it is analogous to the spiritual union that God shares with his people.

Thus the Bible repeatedly uses marriage as a metaphor for the divine-human love relationship. The Song of Songs becomes an important part of this pattern by putting the romance of our redemption into poetry and song. We might think of this book as the soundtrack for our love relationship with the living God.

The love story begins with the first man and the first woman, Adam and Eve. It was not good for the man to be alone. In order to fulfill God's purpose in the world—and for his own well-being—Adam needed an equal partner and complementary companion. So God made a woman. And then, as the father of the bride, he presented her to the man. When he saw her, Adam suddenly became a lyrical poet:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man. (Gen. 2:23)

The first human words in recorded history were expressed in the form of a love song, which the Bible immediately places in the wider context of marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Forsaking all other human relationships—including the precious parental bond that first brought them into the world—a husband and wife are bound together in an exclusive union that is secured by promises of abiding love.

We are so familiar with this passage that sometimes we fail to see how astonishing it is. The Bible begins with the story

of creation. God has been at work making a universe. Light shines in the darkness. Stars are scattered across immensities of space. Galaxies spin into place. Then, against the vast backdrop of a cosmos that is consecrated for the worship of God, we are introduced to one man and one woman who are joined in one marriage.

Adam and Eve are so small and insignificant that they are beneath anyone's notice—unless somehow their mutual love relationship is at the very heart of what God is doing in the entire universe. Ray Ortlund writes:

The attention of the text shifts from the heavens and the earth coming together in cosmic order to a man and a woman coming together in earthly marriage. . . . There it is, this peculiar thing we call marriage, tenderly portrayed in its humble reality and delicate innocence against the enormous backdrop of the creation.¹

In some mysterious way, with the union of this man and this woman, the curtain rises on the redemptive purposes of God.

What we discover as the story unfolds is that the one-flesh relationship of Adam and Eve is the divinely ordained pattern for marriage and also one of the Bible's primary pictures for God's relationship with his people. Isaiah said it as simply and as directly as he could. "Your Maker is your husband," spoke the prophet. And, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isa. 54:5; 62:5). Similarly, in the book of Jeremiah God identifies himself as Israel's husband, going back to the time of the exodus out of Egypt (Jer. 31:32).

This comparison is multidimensional, because divine and human marriage hold many things in common. Both relation-

ships are based on love. Husbands and wives share mutual ties of intimate affection. So, too, God is in love with us, and we are in love with him, or at least we ought to be. Both relationships are bound by promises. Human marriage is rightly understood as a covenant, which is why every wedding has vows. The Bible uses similar language to describe our relationship with our Redeemer. God has made a covenant with us—a covenant of everlasting love (e.g., Deut. 7:9; Jer. 31:31–33). So we are betrothed to the God who says to us, “I love you always, forever.”

Here is another similarity between divine and human marriage: both relationships are meant to be exclusive, inviolable. There are bonds of intimacy—especially sexual intimacy—that husbands and wives should never share with anyone else. In the same way, God rightly claims all of our honor, affection, and worship. When he says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), he is saying, in effect, “Repeat after me: ‘I, believer, take thee, Yahweh, to be my lawful wedded husband.’”

The exclusivity of this relationship explains why it is right and good for God to be jealous. *Jealousy* sounds like a bad word, but when it comes to marriage, jealousy has its place. When God says, “I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (e.g., Ex. 20:5), he is taking the part of a faithful husband who longs for his wife’s loving embrace and thus refuses to share her love with anyone else. The Old Testament is the story of an exclusive love, in which God styles himself as the husband of his people.

When we turn to the New Testament, suddenly the groom walks into the room. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, also called the Christ, the Son of God. So when John the Baptist explained who he was in relation to Jesus, he called himself “the friend of the bridegroom, who . . . rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s

voice" (John 3:29). This makes Jesus the bridegroom—the one who gives himself to the bride. Jesus sometimes used the same imagery to explain his saving work. He compared his kingdom to a king who throws a wedding feast for his son (Matt. 22:2) or to maidens waiting to meet the groom (Matt. 25:1).

Later, when the apostle Paul wanted to explain what Jesus had done to save his people, he said it was like a husband who loved his wife so much that he gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25–27). Jesus is so in love with us that he was willing to do whatever it took to make us his bride. Like a valiant prince, he went out to slay that old dragon, Satan, which he did by dying a bloody death on the bloody hill of Calvary. By this reasoning, the cross is an expression of matrimonial affection—the sacrificial love of a doting husband for a beloved bride. Taken together, these passages show that marriage is not a superficial metaphor, but a sacred mystery that is introduced at the beginning of the world and lies close to the heart of the gospel. To quote again from Ray Ortlund, "Marriage from the beginning was meant to be a tiny social platform on which the love of Christ for his church and the church's responsiveness to him could be put on visible display."² Thus a faithful marriage is the gospel made visible to the watching world.

If we were to trace the full trajectory of this love story, we would arrive at a match made in heaven, celebrated at the last of all weddings (Rev. 19:7–9), when "a bride adorned for her husband" will come down from heaven and become "the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:2, 9). We were made to be married to the Son of God—the fair prince who is waiting for us at "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). Think of it this way: the Bible begins with a blind date (when Adam opens his eyes to

see Eve) and ends with a wedding reception (where all of us get to dance with Jesus).

So the relationship that God wants to have with us is like the mutual affection of a man and a woman who are so deeply in love that they promise not to love anyone else but stay together for the rest of their lives. Whether we are married or single, all of us are invited into this spiritual marriage. This is why Adam and Eve were there at the beginning and why the Bible says that marriage should be held in honor by everyone (Heb. 13:4). We are all lovers—lovers who were always meant to be a pure bride for one husband (2 Cor. 11:2).

One of the most famous lines in English literature is the aside that Jane Eyre makes at the climactic moment of Charlotte Brontë's novel of the same name. After many disappointments in life and love, Jane is finally united with the man she loves, Edward Rochester. The final chapter thus begins with her immortal words: "Reader, I married him."³ The storyline of the Bible comes to a similar climax in its closing chapters, when the Son of God finally is able to say this about the church: "Reader, I married her!"

But It's All Over Now

I wish I could say that in the romance of our redemption we have always had a perfect relationship, but we haven't. It is sad to say, but the majority of the passages in the Old Testament that use marital imagery to describe our relationship with God talk about marital failure. Again and again, God accuses his people of being unfaithful, of having casual idolatry and committing spiritual adultery, of "play[ing] the harlot" (Ps. 106:39 NKJV), of worshiping other gods in every city square (Ezek. 16:31), "on every high hill, and under every

green tree" (Jer. 2:20). The Bible is not afraid to say that the wife of God has become a whore.⁴

What happens in Jeremiah 2 and 3 is especially shocking, for in these chapters God actually files for divorce. Giving legal testimony in a court of law, he starts at the beginning and goes back to their honeymoon, when Israel was young and in love: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride" (Jer. 2:2). This was in the days when God rescued Israel from Egypt and led his people through the wilderness.

That was then, but this is now, and Israel is guilty of the great sin of spiritual adultery. So God files a covenant lawsuit: "I still contend with you," he says, using legal terminology (Jer. 2:9). Then he brings exhibit after exhibit of his people's unfaithfulness. One image is especially disturbing. God compares his people to "a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her" (Jer. 2:24). God's people have such a voracious appetite for worshipping other gods that they are like a donkey in heat, sniffing the wind, hoping to detect the scent of another sexual partner. This is what it is like when we say that God is not enough for us. Instead of walking with Jesus, we run to money, sex, and power or to cynicism and criticism and all the other idols that seduce us with the promise to satisfy us—a promise they will never keep.

What makes the Bible's sexually charged imagery especially apt is that Canaanite religion—such as Israel was tempted to practice—often was characterized by ritual prostitution. People went to the hilltop shrines of the pagan gods not merely to worship but especially to have sexual inter-

course. Listen how graphically the Bible describes what God's people were doing:

You have played the whore with many lovers. . . .
Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see!
Where have you not been ravished?
By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers. . . .
You have polluted the land
with your vile whoredom. (Jer. 3:1-2)

Simply put, God's people have been sleeping with other gods.

We find similar imagery in the book of Hosea, which begins with perhaps the strangest command that God ever gave to one of his prophets. He told Hosea to marry a prostitute. Why on earth would God do this? Because he wanted to give Israel a living object lesson of spiritual unfaithfulness. So he said: "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD" (Hos. 1:2). The point was that Israel was like Gomer: although God was her faithful husband, she wanted to be with other lovers.

Jeremiah and Hosea wanted people to see how disordered our desires are, how serious sin is, and how much damage this does to our love relationship with the living God. Every sin is a kind of spiritual adultery. Understand that any time we sin against God—whenever we are proud of our intellectual accomplishments, or worry about things that he tells us not to worry about, or minimize others so we can maximize ourselves, or give in to secret sexual temptation, or rely on our own strength rather than acknowledging our weakness, or commit any other sin—we are unfaithful to God. In every case, we are choosing not to love God but to love something

else instead, which is the same thing as cheating on our divine spouse.

The Love That Will Not Let Us Go

Here is where the love story gets truly amazing, because you would think that God would walk away from us. Why would any husband put up with repeated unfaithfulness? If he knows that his virgin bride has become a brazen prostitute, then obviously he will follow through with the divorce, right?

Except that he doesn't. What God does instead is to go back to his people again and again. As an ardent lover, he tenderly wins us back to his love. He is always ready to renew his vows to us and for us to renew our vows to him.

God's love comes with a grace so powerful that it cleanses his people's sin and makes them pure again. Remember the wild donkey, sniffing the wind for another partner? Later in Jeremiah, God uses a very different image for his people and calls Israel a virgin. Humanly speaking, once you lose your virginity, you can never get it back. But the sanctifying power of God's forgiveness restores his people to perfect purity. By "the chemistry of grace,"⁵ the faithless people of God are fully entitled to wear pure white on their wedding day (see Isa. 61:10; Eph. 5:26-27; Rev. 21:2). Such is the obvious symbolism of Christian weddings in the Western tradition; a white dress is a sign of virginal purity. Such purity is nothing that we can preserve; it is something that only God can produce. And he does:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel! (Jer. 31:3-4)

“Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.
(Rev. 19:7–8)

Even when we do not love God, he is still in love with us. Even when we are guilty of sexual sin, there is grace for us. Even when we are unfaithful to God, he remains faithful to us. Thus Karl Barth rightly observed that in the Bible, “we have to reckon with the unfaithfulness of the wife, but never with the unfaithfulness of the Husband.”⁶

We see the contrast between God’s faithfulness and our unfaithfulness perhaps most graphically in the book of Hosea. The prophet marries a prostitute. Then she goes out and does what prostitutes do: she pursues other lovers (Hos. 2:7, 13). But God tells Hosea to go find her and bring her back home: “Go again, love a woman who . . . is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods” (Hos. 3:1). By this point, Gomer must have been sold into slavery, because in order to bring her back home, Hosea has to buy her back. He ends up paying “fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley” (Hos. 3:2), a price which suggests that he purchased her at auction. Gomer was sold to the highest bidder, who turned out to be the husband that she betrayed. Imagine paying the price for someone else’s spiritual adultery!

But that is what this love story is all about. Look at Christ on the cross, and count the cost of your redemption. When Jesus

died at Calvary, he was the Bridegroom paying the bride price. He was a wounded lover, pierced for our adulterous transgressions. He was dying to win us back to his love so that he could say the same thing to us that he said to Israel in the days of Hosea and Gomer: “I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD” (Hos. 2:19–20).

The Song of Songs is part of this remarkable story. The song that is sung in its pages “echoes the melody of another deeper and richer song, a song about a true and faithful Lover who is not like Solomon, with his massive harem of disposable women, but rather One who loves and gives himself for his bride.”⁷

We have been unfaithful in every way. This is true individually and also corporately. Is there any sin we have not committed? Pride, jealousy, slander, selfish ambition, lust, adultery, greed, racism, anger, idolatry—the list goes on and on. Every one of these sins is a form of spiritual unfaithfulness to the Son of God.

We are so unfaithful. But God loves us with an everlasting love. Therefore, he continues his faithfulness to us. Jesus Christ is the loving groom who takes us into his loving arms and says, “I love you always, forever.” This undeserved romance is the ultimate reality. Even after everything we have done wrong, we are still betrothed to the Son of God. So we should love accordingly, pursuing spiritual chastity as we wait in hope for the return of our beloved Bridegroom.

One college student experienced God’s holy love in a deeply personal way when she stood up to give her testimony at an impromptu evening worship service where many students were

confessing their sins. She told the Lord that she was fully present and then felt prompted to confess her guilt and her hope before what she described as “a crowd of faces both recognizable and unrecognizable.” As she encountered the Lord that night, she heard the words tumble out of her mouth: “When we say yes to an exclusive relationship with God, we, by default, say no to every other lover.” She continued, “I am guilty of idols; I am guilty of sexual sin.” In that moment of genuine contrition she was overcome by the Lord’s glory and sensed his loving mercy speaking to her broken heart, “I am pleased with you. I love you.”

What God said to that college student is what he says to all of his beloved, broken people: “I love you always, forever.”

You're the One That I Want

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine;

your anointing oils are fragrant;

your name is oil poured out;

therefore virgins love you.

Draw me after you; let us run.

The king has brought me into his chambers.

We will exult and rejoice in you;

we will extol your love more than wine;

rightly do they love you.

I am very dark, but lovely,

O daughters of Jerusalem,

like the tents of Kedar,

like the curtains of Solomon.

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!

Tell me, you whom my soul loves,

where you pasture your flock,
where you make it lie down at noon;
for why should I be like one who veils herself
beside the flocks of your companions?

If you do not know,
O most beautiful among women,
follow in the tracks of the flock,
and pasture your young goats
beside the shepherds' tents.

I compare you, my love,
to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.
Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,
your neck with strings of jewels.

We will make for you ornaments of gold,
studded with silver.

While the king was on his couch,
my nard gave forth its fragrance.
My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh
that lies between my breasts.
My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
in the vineyards of Engedi. (Song 1:1–14)



Picture the scene. A teenage girl is engaged to be married to a young man from her village somewhere on the outskirts of Jerusalem. After a period of formal betrothal, the bride price has been paid, and the couple is eager to join in holy matrimony. The smell of fresh meat rises from an open flame—goat meat,

perhaps, or maybe even a fatted calf. The entire community comes out to witness the sacred vows and then to celebrate with the happy couple and their proud families. The wedding feast will last for an entire week—seven days of singing and dancing.

As the festivities begin, skilled musicians tune their instruments, and a soloist begins to sing a familiar melody. Her voice gives public expression to the bride's passionate love, soon to be consummated in the privacy of the wedding chamber:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine;
 your anointing oils are fragrant;
Your name is oil poured out;
 therefore virgins love you. (Song 1:2–3)

A bridal chorus takes up the happy refrain: “We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you” (Song 1:4). Then a male voice returns to the melody and sings, “O most beautiful among women. . . . Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels” (Song 1:8, 10).

The scene we have just imagined is the most likely setting for the Song of Songs. Weddings in ancient Israel lasted as long as a week, and singing was always part of the festivities. From its presence in Holy Scripture, we may infer that the Song of Songs was at the top of the charts in those days. What wedding would be complete without it? For the people of God, singing these popular, emotional songs expressed a communal vision for marriage.

Prelude to the Song of Songs

These superlative lyrics were written by King Solomon—or were they? The phrasing of the title, which reads, “The

Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (Song 1:1), may indicate that Solomon is the author, but it might just mean that the song was dedicated to him or in some other way associated with him.

If Solomon is the author—after all, we know that he wrote more than a thousand songs (1 Kings 4:32)—then he must be telling us to do as he says, not what he did. I say this because the Song of Songs is all about an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman, yet we know that King Solomon married seven hundred wives and had three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). So if this is his book, he must have been writing with the chastened wisdom of his later years, when he finally realized what a massive mistake he had made by not being a one-woman man.

The perspective of this book contrasts sharply with Solomon's life experience in many ways. Rather than seeing sex as a conquest and marriage as a political alliance (see 1 Kings 11), the Song of Songs views marriage as a romance and sex as the seal of a sacred covenant. The author—whoever he was—dedicated his song to Solomon in order to cast a divine vision for marriage that stood against the idolatries of his contemporary culture.

This biblical song can do the same thing for us. We live in a culture that believes every desire should be satisfied. The Song of Songs aches with sexual desire, but it surrenders sex to the glory of God by securing the satisfaction of its desire within the bridal chamber. Pico Iyer was right when he said that this book "presents us with the taste of love, unfootnoted—and asks us to unlock the door according to our purity."¹ Our culture impatiently pushes past the erotic to experience the pornographic. By contrast, the Song of Songs presents adult themes

with parental guidance. Its language is often sexually provocative but never spiritually impure.

To preserve this purity, we need to read the book in its proper context: covenant matrimony. The Song of Songs is not just *Solomon on Sex*, to borrow the title of one recent commentary. Instead, it is about sacred marriage and therefore about chastity, from beginning to end. We will encounter bridal imagery and marital vocabulary frequently in this book, especially in chapters 4 and 5. We will also hear people recite wedding vows (e.g., Song 2:16; 8:6). Understand, too, that marriage is the only context in which God-fearing people would have celebrated sex in ancient Israel. They understood—as not everyone in our culture does—that only covenant matrimony provides enough relational safety for our sexuality to be released in all its soul-bonding power. All of this leads Doug O'Donnell to conclude that the Song of Songs is “erotic poetry set within the ethical limits of the marriage bed.”²

The word *poetry* is also important for knowing how to approach this book. A love song is simply a love poem set to music. So we need to read the Song of Songs poetically. This may seem intimidating to people who think they don't like poetry and say they have a hard time reading it. But in fact most people encounter love poems every day through listening to popular music. The love songs we listen to are really poems set to music. Like the Song of Songs, most of them have something to do with love, and sometimes sex. Their words have a way of getting inside us and connecting with our life experience, which explains why people often put song lyrics on their profile pages.

Thinking of the Song of Songs as a love song makes the book more accessible than we might at first think. Read this book

the way you read the liner notes to an album of love songs. And listen to its message like you would listen to the playlist for the dance at a wedding reception. If we read the Song of Songs like a short story, we will be frustrated by its lack of clarity. But if we read this book the way it was meant to be read—as a loose collection of love songs from a steamy romance that became a happy marriage—we will enter into its joy.

The Woman's Desire

The song begins with a breathless desire: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (Song 1:2). Did I mention yet that this is the hottest book in the Bible? The opening verse states the book’s title. Then in the second verse we meet a woman who is smoldering. We don’t know her name. We don’t know the object of her desire. We don’t know if her love is reciprocated or whether it will ever be consummated. Maybe the man she loves doesn’t even know that she exists—it’s just a crush from afar. But as far as she is concerned, this is love at first sight. Suddenly, the woman is in love.

Her impatience for passion is evident from the rapid progression in verses 2 to 4 from the third person (“Let him kiss me”) to the second person (“Draw me after you”) to the first-person plural (“Let us run”). She wants to be with the man she loves, so she is impatient for this relationship to move forward as fast as possible.

The woman’s flaming passion is evident not only from the pronouns she uses but also from the nouns and verbs. Maybe it seems redundant for her to say that she wants the kisses “of his mouth.” But in the ancient Near East, nose kisses were sometimes exchanged as a greeting of friendship.³ So this woman wants to be clear: she is looking for a lover, not just a

friend. She finds her beloved's fragrance irresistible—as in one of those cologne commercials where the man walks by and the women swoon. And when she says that his “love is better than wine” (1:2), the word she uses for her intoxicating attraction is a word for lovemaking.⁴ Understand that this woman's goal is not to have a Bible study with the man she loves or simply to share an evening with him out on the town. It's “kisses” she wants—in the plural. Her vision for this relationship clearly ends with him carrying her across the threshold and into the bedroom—his royal chamber (1:4, 12). Needless to say, the woman is looking forward to their wedding night.

We are only a few verses into the Song of Songs and already we can understand why some rabbis warned the young men in their synagogues not to read this book until they turned thirty.⁵ This is a book “about desire from beginning to end—desire stirred, desire frustrated, desire satisfied, desire frustrated again—but above all, desire.”⁶ One pastor I know likes to guide his parishioners by asking them probing questions about their desires: What do you want? How are you trying to get it? How is that working out for you? The Song of Songs asks us similarly probing questions about our sexual desire, which is one of God's good gifts, but like all good gifts it can be turned to sinful purposes. This makes the Song of Songs a perilous book for us to read. In bringing us close to ecstasy, it also draws us near to danger.

We should proceed with caution, therefore, and one of the best ways for us to be careful is to read the words of this book as closely as we can. At first, the woman's poetic language may seem over the top, but recognize that her affection is more than a shallow infatuation. In verse 3 she tells us that her lover's “name is oil poured out.” Typically, when people fall in love,

they love to hear the name of their beloved. The Ryken family has an old Scrabble set that my mother must have used right after she got engaged to my father, because her new name is written over and over again on the underside of the box top: *Mary Alice Graham Ryken*.

The woman in the Song of Songs is doing something even more significant. In biblical terms, a “name” is a reputation. So when she says that her lover’s name is like sweet perfume and that all the maidens love him too, she is praising his character. She loves him for who he is, not just because he smells nice or because she imagines that he might be a good kisser. She loves everything about him.

Apparently, her friends agree. In verse 4 a choir of young virgins called “the daughters of Jerusalem”—think of them as bridesmaids or debutantes—pronounce their benediction on the man of her dreams, and on her desire for the consummation of their marriage: “We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.” Later these young women will assist the wedding preparations by making “ornaments of gold, studded with silver” (1:11). As single women, they too have a vital interest in the success of their friend’s marriage.

None of this quite fits our conventional categories for romance. Is the would-be bride a feminist or a traditionalist? It is hard to say. She boldly declares her affection for someone she loves and openly communicates her desires, including sexual desires. Yet at the same time she expects and longs for the man to provide leadership in their relationship. Notice that she wants *him* to kiss her (1:2), and also that she calls him her “king” (1:4, 12). In presenting this portrait of love and desire, the Bible is not bound by cultural constructs for gender but

is helping us understand God's design for human relationships. Taking all of this into account, here is how Iain Duguid describes the dynamic partnership that we read about in this book: "In the Song, the woman is not a land to be conquered by the man or a field to be planted with his seed; she is a vineyard to be cultivated by him so that together they can enjoy the sweet wine of their relationship."⁷

Consider another paradox. The woman is independent enough to have desires of her own and then pursue them. She knows what she wants in a man. She also happens to know which man she wants. But she will only pursue this relationship with the support of her faith community. She wants the people around her—especially godly women—to bless and celebrate this relationship, which is not exclusively private but inclusively public.

Already we see signs of a healthy relationship: the woman will enter this partnership with equal passion, hoping and expecting to find a man who is strong enough to lead. And as their relationship develops, they will not cut themselves off from others; they will find strength in the counsel of their community.

The Woman's Hesitation

There is a problem, however, as there always seems to be when it comes to love and romance. The problem in this case is as old as sin and as current as today's fashion magazines. The woman is self-conscious about her physical appearance. "I am very dark, but lovely," she tells her friends. By way of comparison, she says that her skin is dark and coarse "like the tents of Kedar" (1:5). Then she explains why. It is because she has been working outdoors:

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! (1:6)

To be clear, these verses are not about ethnicity. The Song of Songs does not put a biblical value judgment on a particular skin tone. It simply reflects the beauty standards of a culture in which wealthy people typically stayed indoors and poor people were darkened by the sun. The issue is social, not racial. In effect, the Song of Songs tells a Cinderella story. The heroine's brothers (or perhaps step-brothers, since she calls them "the sons of my mother") have forced her to work out in the fields, under the blazing sun. As a result, she has been too busy taking care of her family's vineyard to tend to her own complexion. So rather than thanking God that she's a country girl, she laments her rustic upbringing. Although she believed that she was attractive, she also worried about measuring up to her culture's standards for feminine beauty.

The Bible is realistic about the struggle we have with our embodiment. The burdens that many women carry because of body image are immense. Although standards may vary from culture to culture, there always seems to be something for a woman to try to improve: get a tan or else use skin cream to make your skin lighter; make your hair straight or else curl it; get your body flatter or make it curvier—there is always some feature that ought to be bigger, or smaller, or downright more beautiful than it is. Many men face similar struggles with their physiques, of course.

The anxiety and anguish of these cultural pressures came home to me one day when I was listening to the radio and heard an actress say that she was afraid to go out in public

because she knew that she would never look as good as she looked in the movies, where every flaw was concealed. She hated to leave her house and go places where people would take her picture and perhaps make unflattering comments about her. At the time, she would have been on everyone's short list of the world's most beautiful people. But apparently she wasn't beautiful enough to look like herself! I was brokenhearted when I heard this, because I understood that our culture was holding the women I love—my wife and sisters, daughters and nieces—to a standard that no woman could ever meet, not even the most beautiful women in the world.

In her inner turmoil about her physical appearance, the woman in the Song of Songs reached out to the man she loved—the man she hoped would also love her:

Tell me, you whom my soul loves,
 where you pasture your flock,
 where you make it lie down at noon;
for why should I be like one who veils herself
 beside the flocks of your companions? (1:7)

Here the woman reveals a desire much deeper than kisses and cologne—a passion more intense than wanting to be carried across the threshold and into the king's bedchamber. She wants to know where she can go and be with the man she loves, not only at night but also during the daytime. In spite of her fears, she wants to see him face-to-face. In a word, she wants intimacy. Furthermore, she expresses this explicitly as something she wants with her soul, not just her body. Don't miss the deepest longing of the Song of Songs: not a sexual partner, but a soulmate.

The Man's Affirmation

Notice how the man responds. He finally speaks—the man whose love is better than wine and whose name is like sweet perfume. He does not let the woman's love go unrequited but responds directly and protectively to her insecurities. He tells the woman where she can find him, openly inviting her to spend time with him. And as he does so, he affirms her beauty:

If you do not know,
O most beautiful among women,
follow in the tracks of the flock,
and pasture your young goats
beside the shepherds' tents. (1:8)

This invitation falls somewhere between a guy asking a girl out on a date and inviting her to hang out with his friends. But notice how he begins: by praising her unadorned beauty. Notice, as well, how he does it. Obviously he is responding to her concerns about her complexion. But he is careful not to evaluate any and every part of her anatomy. He simply declares that she is beautiful, which may include her physical appearance but is not limited to that. Then he reinforces his compliment with a comparison:

I compare you, my love,
to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.
Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,
your neck with strings of jewels. (1:9–10)

A man should always be careful about comparing a woman to a horse, but in this case the guy probably got away with it. After all, a thoroughbred is one of the most beautiful animals

that God ever created. But the point of this particular comparison is not simply the horse, but also the horse's adornment. What the man has in mind is one of the mares from Pharaoh's stables, dressed for a parade or some other ceremonial occasion. He compares the horse's ornately decorated bridle to the jewelry that his beloved wears.

Somehow it seems significant that at this stage of the song the man keeps his comments above the woman's neckline. He refers only to her face, and even there he is subtle, because he talks only about her jewelry. He notices how the woman—soon to be his bride—has enhanced her beauty. Her status as bride is clearly implied, for in ancient Israel jewelry was not for everyday use; it was mainly used at weddings.⁸

The practical application of these verses is not only for grooms who love their brides or limited to husbands who love their wives. Like most of what we read in Solomon's song, it has implications for single people as well as married people. It is for every godly man who wants to bless any woman who is made in the image of God.

When most young men talk about women, they make a lot of comments about their physical appearance, and a fair number of those comments are critical. But what would happen if Christian men said, "I refuse to criticize my sisters, and I won't let anyone else criticize them either"? What would happen if instead of seeing all the ways that women fail to measure up to some cultural standard of physical beauty that no one can meet anyway, men truly saw the total beauty of the women in their lives and then built them up with words of praise? When men recognize the gifts of women, respect their intellect, admire their character, affirm the dignity of their unique design, and then express this verbally, their sisters are empowered to

become more completely the women that God is calling them to become.

Then take this one step farther. What if single Christian men took initiative to invite their sisters in Christ into meaningful relationships? This would do something more than improve the dating scene—although that would surely happen. More importantly, and more powerfully, it would bring genuine intimacy into everyday Christian relationships. Leave romance out of it for a moment: when men and women pursue open, caring, mutually respectful friendships and take time for deeper conversations, they strengthen one another for effective service in the kingdom of God.

This opportunity—this responsibility—is not just for men. It is also for Christian women. All of us can pursue greater intimacy in Christian friendships. But the example in Song of Songs 1 is for men especially. Christian men are called to look for the true beauty in every woman, to choose affirmation over criticism or comparison, and to pursue godly spiritual friendship.

The Mystery of Spiritual Matrimony

All of this takes on deeper significance when we draw a comparison to our relationship with Jesus Christ. Remember the wider context. The Song of Songs paints an idealized picture of any man and woman in love, or at least of a godly man and a godly woman who put their love for one another in the context of marriage as part of their surrender to God. But this picture is painted on a larger canvas. The Bible repeatedly uses marital imagery to describe God's love relationship with his people. The story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden is the trailer for an epic romance that ends with the Son of God marrying his beautiful bride, the church.

The Song of Songs is the soundtrack for that story. Its love is not merely human but also divine. This does not mean that we should treat the book as an allegory in which everything stands for something else, like some sort of secret code. Perhaps the most famous example of this approach comes from Cyril of Alexandria, who (among other things) claimed that when the Song compares the beloved to “a satchet of myrrh that lies between [two] breasts” (1:13), this refers to “Christ in the soul of the believer, who lies between the two great commands to love God and one’s neighbor.”⁹ We should have sympathy for preachers who have read the Song of Songs this way—especially Bernard, who delivered eighty-six sermons on this book to the chaste and perhaps astonished monks of Clairvaux.¹⁰

The Song of Songs is not an allegory, but it is part of a bigger mystery—the mystery of the Father’s love in Jesus Christ for his beloved and beautiful bride. So the song is not just about a man who loves a woman. It is also about the love of all loves, which means that there is a place in this story for all of us. The image of the bride is in the Bible to show “the uninhibited joy and tender intimacy of the divine-human communion” that all of us are offered through the Son of God.”¹¹ One old rabbi described the Song of Songs as “a lock for which the key had been lost.”¹² But the key has not been lost: the key is the revelation of Jesus Christ as the loving husband of the people of God.

Jesus wants to share his love with every one of us, whether we are male or female, married or single. By the grace of God, we discover that his name is oil poured out, and his cross is the fragrance of salvation (Eph. 5:2). We were made beautiful, yet we hesitate because we know our lives are darkened by sin, including all of the disordered desires of our broken sexuality. But God’s affirmation to us is the gospel, which declares that

Jesus loves us and gave himself up for us (Eph. 5:25). This romance is the ultimate reality.

Now Jesus wants to satisfy our soul's desire to be intimate with the living God. The Savior who himself is altogether lovely intends to make us more beautiful than we can possibly imagine. With this purpose in mind, he has gone to prepare a place where we can go and be with him forever.

As we hope for his presence—with a longing for love that the Holy Spirit may intensify until it becomes an aching desire—we tell everyone we can that we have found the One that we want, the One who loves us most of all. And like the beloved woman in the Song of Songs, we join the people of God in celebrating his undying affection: “We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love” (Song 1:4).

We live in a world where sexuality is ruined by sin, its beauty obscured by our brokenness. We need a divine vision for the way love was *meant to be*, with a gospel that offers forgiveness for sin and grace to live in the way that God has *made us to be*.

In the Song of Songs, we encounter a love story that is part of the greatest love story ever told. Philip Ryken walks through this biblical love poem verse by verse, reflecting on what the Bible says about God's design for love, intimacy, and sexuality and offering insights into not only human relationships but also our relationship to God himself—learning more about the One who has loved us with an everlasting love.

“Ryken is a master expositor of the Scripture, and he uses all his ability to beautifully unpack one of the most intriguing and difficult books of the Bible to understand—the Song of Songs.”

Timothy J. Keller, Pastor Emeritus, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

“Ryken shows us how the Song of Songs speaks to everyday relationships and, in doing so, how it points us to the One who made us for himself.”

Iain M. Duguid, Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Song of Songs* (Reformed Expository Commentary)

“This book presents a truly thrilling vision of human sexuality along with the lover's heart of God himself.”

Sam Allberry, Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author, *Is God Anti-Gay?* and *7 Myths about Singleness*

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