



THE SONG of SOLOMON

Read Song of Solomon 1

The Song of Solomon opens with a series of lyric poems about human love. In these poems a woman and a man use highly erotic imagery to proclaim their mutual longing for each other. The passion she experiences for the man she loves prompts the woman to characterize him as a king, with all of the splendor associated with that station.

Reflect: Commonplace language never quite captures certain aspects of the people we love, and so we often revert to figurative language in our descriptions. Others may consider such imagery an exaggeration, but it conveys much better the emotion that accompanies our perspective.

Pray: Be grateful for the people you love and who love you. Pray for the grace to recognize human love as a gift from God that deserves to be honored and respected.

Act: Let those you love know how much you cherish them.

1 The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

Colloquy of Bride and Friends

- 2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
- 3 your anointing oils are fragrant,
your name is perfume poured out;
therefore the maidens love you.
- 4 Draw me after you, let us make haste.
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.
- 5 I am black and beautiful,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar,
like the curtains of Solomon.
- 6 Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
because the sun has gazed on me.
My mother's sons were angry with me;
they made me keeper of the vineyards,
but my own vineyard I have not kept!
- 7 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 is veiled
beside the flocks of your companions?
- 8 If you do not know,
O fairest among women,
follow the tracks of the flock,
and pasture your kids
beside the shepherds' tents.

Colloquy of Bridegroom, Friends, and Bride

- 9 I compare you, my love,
to a mare among Pharaoh's
chariots.
- 10 Your cheeks are comely with
ornaments,
your neck with strings of jewels.
- 11 We will make you ornaments of
gold,
studded with silver.
- 12 While the king was on his couch,
my nard gave forth its fragrance.
- 13 My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh
that lies between my breasts.
- 14 My beloved is to me a cluster of
henna blossoms
in the vineyards of En-gedi.
- 15 Ah, you are beautiful, my love;
ah, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves.
- 16 Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
truly lovely.
Our couch is green;
- 17 the beams of our house are cedar,
our rafters^a are pine.

Read Song of Solomon 2

The woman's poetic musings move from longing for her beloved who is absent from her to rejoicing in his approach and company. The phrase "My beloved is mine and I am his" reflects the mutuality of this love.

Reflect: The ebb and flow of emotion expressed in the poems reflects the ebb and flow of human love itself. It has its ups and downs, its agonizing longing and its reassuring sense of fulfillment. While the first poem depicts the woman's longing, this poem flows from the intoxication she experiences when her beloved comes to her.

Pray: Thank God for the deep contentment and the amazing exhilaration you experience in human love. Accept this as a gift from God and reverence it as such.

Act: Beware lest you selfishly cling to the emotions that spring from love rather than unselfishly open yourself to another out of love.

2 I am a rose^b of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.

- 2 As a lily among brambles,
so is my love among maidens.
- 3 As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
- 4 He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his intention toward me was love.
- 5 Sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
for I am faint with love.
- 6 O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!
- 7 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!

Springtime Rhapsody

- 8 The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
- 9 My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
- 10 My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

^b Heb *crocus*

- 11 for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
12 The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
13 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.
14 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;

- for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.
15 Catch us the foxes,
the little foxes,
that ruin the vineyards—
for our vineyards are in blossom.”
16 My beloved is mine and I am his;
he pastures his flock among the
lilies.
17 Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle
or a young stag on the cleft
mountains.^a

Read Song of Solomon 3

The earlier poems describe the woman's yearning for the man she loves, her search for him, and her eventual discovery of him and union with him. Earlier the man was characterized as a king (1:4, 12). This royal theme is further developed here. The royal imagery adds to the splendor that is attributed to human love.

Reflect: Human love is such a profound experience that ordinary language cannot describe it. It is not uncommon for us to choose exaggerated images in our description of this extraordinary experience. How do you describe the love that you experience?

Pray: Commit those whom you love to the gracious care of God who brought these people into your life in the first place.

Act: Decide on concrete ways in which you can show those whom you cherish that your love is deeper than the words you use to express it.

Love's Dream

- 3** Upon my bed at night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.^b
2 “I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.”
I sought him, but found him not.
3 The sentinels found me,
as they went about in the city.
“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”
4 Scarcely had I passed them,
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go
until I brought him into my mother's house,
and into the chamber of her that conceived me.
5 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the gazelles or the wild does:
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!

The Groom and His Party Approach

- 6 What is that coming up from the wilderness,
like a column of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?
7 Look, it is the litter of Solomon!
Around it are sixty mighty men
of the mighty men of Israel,
8 all equipped with swords
and expert in war,
each with his sword at his thigh
because of alarms by night.

^a Or on the mountains of Bether; meaning of Heb uncertain

^b Gk: Heb lacks this line

- 9 King Solomon made himself a palanquin
from the wood of Lebanon.
10 He made its posts of silver,
its back of gold, its seat of purple;
its interior was inlaid with love.^a
Daughters of Jerusalem,
11 come out.

Look, O daughters of Zion,
at King Solomon,
at the crown with which his mother
crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
on the day of the gladness of his
heart.

Read Song of Solomon 4

Most of the poems have originated with the woman. Here the man describes his beloved. In his eyes she is a vision of loveliness. He uses metaphors that are specific to his culture to illustrate this. He then compares her to a garden of beauty and delight.

Reflect: Note how the man's perception of the beauty of the woman's body is expressed with comparisons to the wonders of the natural world. Poets from all cultures turn to creation for both inspiration and metaphors to express their thoughts.

Pray: Give praise to God for the wonders of natural creation, one of which is the beauty of the human body. Pray that this beauty will be respected for its integrity, not exploited for crass ends.

Act: Our culture is rife with examples of sexual exploitation. It has become a commonplace aspect of advertising. How has this affected you, and what can you do about it?

The Bride's Beauty Extolled

- 4** How beautiful you are, my love,
how very beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.
2 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.
3 Your lips are like a crimson thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.
4 Your neck is like the tower of David,
built in courses;
on it hang a thousand bucklers,
all of them shields of warriors.
5 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the lilies.
6 Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh
and the hill of frankincense.
7 You are altogether beautiful, my love;
there is no flaw in you.
8 Come with me from Lebanon, my bride;
come with me from Lebanon.
Depart^b from the peak of Amana,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountains of leopards.
9 You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride,
you have ravished my heart with a glance of
your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
10 How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!
how much better is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!
11 Your lips distill nectar, my bride;

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

^b Or Look

- honey and milk are under your tongue;
 the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.
- 12 A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed.
- 13 Your channel^a is an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard,
- 14 nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense,
- myrrh and aloes,
 with all chief spices—
- 15 a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.
- 16 Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad.
 Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.

Read Song of Solomon 5

The woman dreams of the approach of her lover. She searches for him and, because she, a woman, is out alone at night, she is attacked by watchmen. Turning to the “Daughters of Jerusalem,” she then describes the physical charms of the man, in a way similar to his description of her.

Reflect: Genuine love can sometimes place us in vulnerable situations that challenge customary behavior. We might even have to pay a price for our pursuit of love. Do you think such love is appropriate? Is it worth the price?

Pray: Pray for the insight to discern between appropriate and inappropriate pursuit of love. Ask God for the understanding and courage you need to act on what you have discerned.

Act: Be alert to the pitfalls of human love, but slow to pass judgment on the loves of others.

5 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, friends, drink,
 and be drunk with love.

Another Dream

- 2 I slept, but my heart was awake.
 Listen! my beloved is knocking.
 “Open to me, my sister, my love,
 my dove, my perfect one;
 for my head is wet with dew,
 my locks with the drops of the night.”
- 3 I had put off my garment;
 how could I put it on again?
 I had bathed my feet;
 how could I soil them?
- 4 My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,
 and my inmost being yearned for him.
- 5 I arose to open to my beloved,
 and my hands dripped with myrrh,
 my fingers with liquid myrrh,
 upon the handles of the bolt.
- 6 I opened to my beloved,
 but my beloved had turned and was gone.
 My soul failed me when he spoke.
 I sought him, but did not find him;
 I called him, but he gave no answer.
- 7 Making their rounds in the city
 the sentinels found me;
 they beat me, they wounded me,
 they took away my mantle,
 those sentinels of the walls.
- 8 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
 if you find my beloved,
 tell him this:
 I am faint with love.

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

Colloquy of Friends and Bride

- 9 What is your beloved more than
another beloved,
O fairest among women?
What is your beloved more than
another beloved,
that you thus adjure us?
- 10 My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
- 11 His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.
- 12 His eyes are like doves
beside springs of water,
bathed in milk,
fitly set.^a
- 13 His cheeks are like beds of spices,
yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies,
distilling liquid myrrh.
- 14 His arms are rounded gold,
set with jewels.
His body is ivory work,^a
encrusted with sapphires.^b
- 15 His legs are alabaster columns,
set upon bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.
- 16 His speech is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my
friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

Read Song of Solomon 6

Once again the man describes the physical beauty of the woman. He declares that she is singularly beautiful, far surpassing all other women. He then compares her to a nut garden, an image rich in magical and sexual allusions. The erotic character of this poem is clear.

Reflect: It should be noted that the Song of Songs contains no criticism of passionate erotic human love or the enjoyment that lovers experience in its expression. On the contrary, such love is considered as natural as any of the other aspects of creation.

Pray: Thank God for the joys of sexual pleasure, and pray that your erotic inclinations will be directed toward the one you love and not simply to your own enjoyment.

Act: Examine your attitude toward sexual pleasure. Is it mature and considerate of your partner, or is it immature and selfish?

- 6** Where has your beloved gone,
O fairest among women?
Which way has your beloved turned,
that we may seek him with you?
- 2 My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to pasture his flock in the gardens,
and to gather lilies.
- 3 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.

The Bride's Matchless Beauty

- 4 You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love,
comely as Jerusalem,
terrible as an army with banners.
- 5 Turn away your eyes from me,
for they overwhelm me!
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.
- 6 Your teeth are like a flock of ewes,
that have come up from the washing;
all of them bear twins,
and not one among them is bereaved.
- 7 Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.
- 8 There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
and maidens without number.
- 9 My dove, my perfect one, is the only one,
the darling of her mother,
flawless to her that bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her happy;
the queens and concubines also, and they
praised her.

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

^b Heb *lapis lazuli*

- 10 “Who is this that looks forth like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
terrible as an army with banners?”
- 11 I went down to the nut orchard,
to look at the blossoms of the valley,
to see whether the vines had budded,
whether the pomegranates were in bloom.

- 12 Before I was aware, my fancy set me
in a chariot beside my prince.^a
- 13^b Return, return, O Shulammitel!
Return, return, that we may look
upon you.
- Why should you look upon the
Shulammitel,
as upon a dance before two armies?^c

Read Song of Solomon 7

These poems describe the mutuality of the love between the woman and the man. First he describes the grace and beauty of her body, revealed as she dances. Then she invites him to go with her to a place where, alone with each other, they can enjoy their love.

Reflect: Genuine human love is mutual. There is no gender-bias, no assumption that the man is the more assertive one. Each partner is at various times either the lover, or more active member of the couple, or the beloved, the one who receives love.

Pray: Pray that you will not fall into cultural stereotypes, but that the love you share with another will enable the unique personality traits of your partner to develop to their full potential.

Act: To the extent that you can, avoid gender stereotypes that are so often biased against women.

Expressions of Praise

- 7** How graceful are your feet in sandals,
O queenly maiden!
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
the work of a master hand.
- 2 Your navel is a rounded bowl
that never lacks mixed wine.
Your belly is a heap of wheat,
encircled with lilies.
- 3 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.
- 4 Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon,
by the gate of Bath-rabbim.
Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon,
overlooking Damascus.
- 5 Your head crowns you like Carmel,
and your flowing locks are like purple;
a king is held captive in the tresses.^d
- 6 How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!^e
- 7 You are stately^f as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
- 8 I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
9 and your kisses^g like the best wine
that goes down^h smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.ⁱ
- 10 I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.
- 11 Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;
- 12 let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.

^a Cn: Meaning of Heb uncertain

^b Ch 7.1 in Heb

^c Or *dance of Mahanaim*

^d Meaning of Heb uncertain

^e Syr: Heb *in delights*

^f Heb *This your stature is*

^g Heb *palate*

^h Heb *down for my lover*

ⁱ Gk Syr Vg: Heb *lips of sleepers*

There I will give you my love.

- 13 The mandrakes give forth fragrance,
and over our doors are all choice fruits,

new as well as old,

which I have laid up for you, O my
beloved.

Read Song of Solomon 8

The final poem is the climax of the entire Song of Solomon. In it, the enduring character of genuine love is described. The elementary forces of nature, namely death, flame, deep waters, and the river, are also the names of ancient Canaanite gods. The woman claims that love is as unrelenting as any of these powers. In other words, neither natural nor supposed supernatural forces can stifle the power of love.

Reflect: Reflect on how the love of others has helped shape the person you have become. Realize that you have a comparable influence on the lives of others.

Pray: Pray that you will be faithful to the loves in your life, so that the love you have for others may be seen as a reflection of the love God has for them.

Act: Do what you can to strengthen the bonds of love you have with others.

- 8 O that you were like a brother to me,
who nursed at my mother's breast!
If I met you outside, I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.
2 I would lead you and bring you
into the house of my mother,
and into the chamber of the one who bore me.^a
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the juice of my pomegranates.
3 O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me!
4 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready!

Homecoming

- 5 Who is that coming up from the wilderness,
leaning upon her beloved?
Under the apple tree I awakened you.
There your mother was in labor with you;
there she who bore you was in labor.
6 Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
7 Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned.
8 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?
9 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.
10 I was a wall,
and my breasts were like towers;
then I was in his eyes
as one who brings^b peace.
11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;

^a Gk Syr: Heb *my mother; she (or you) will teach me*

^b Or *finds*

- he entrusted the vineyard to keepers;
each one was to bring for its fruit
a thousand pieces of silver.
- ¹² My vineyard, my very own, is for
myself;
you, O Solomon, may have the
thousand,
and the keepers of the fruit two
hundred!
- ¹³ O you who dwell in the gardens,
my companions are listening for
your voice;
let me hear it.
- ¹⁴ Make haste, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or a young stag
upon the mountains of spices!

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