

# more talk about sex | bible talk

## LUKE TATTERSALL introduces the Song of Songs

There are a few books in the Old Testament that get left alone because we're not exactly sure what to do with them. The book at the top of that list would have to be Song of Songs. It is perhaps the most unusual book in the whole Bible. It is a collection of love poems between the Lover and his Beloved.

### Introduction

If you go to see a movie these days or even when you're renting a video or watching a program on television you will see the censor's rating of that program. Programs are rated according to what kind of audience should view it — "PG" or "G" - suitable for a General audience (good for the whole family), "M", "MA" or "M15+" - for Mature Audiences (those who are 15 and over), "AO" or "R" - this is for Adults Only

Now when they give a film an "M" rating or above they will also list why it has been given that rating. Normally it will say things like: Frequent Coarse Language or Medium Level Violence.

But there is one book in the Bible that would get the "M" rating for a different reason and that book is Song of Songs. This is the book where the censor would probably want to say: Contains Adult Themes.

Here is a book about love. Here is a book about deep passionate love. Right from the very opening words we are left in no doubt:

<sup>2</sup> Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth— for your love is more delightful than wine. <sup>3</sup> Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you! <sup>4</sup> Take me away with you—let us hurry! Let the king bring me into

his chambers. (Song of Songs 1:2-4)

Here is a book that is *unashamedly dealing with* the subject of *love*. Here is a book that *rejoices* in the relationship between a man and a woman.

### What is this book about?

Your first reaction when reading it might even be to feel a little embarrassed. When you read it you feel like you are prying into someone's personal diary. This sounds like the transcript of a conversation between two people who are deeply in love - and you might feel like you're eavesdropping.

This is not some kind of smutty conversation you'd get on a 0055 phone sex line. This is two people who are deeply in love. And they are very open in talking about their love for each other.

Now if you have an NIV you will notice that there are headings scattered through the book. You see the word *Lover* and *Beloved*. Those headings are based on the gender of the words used in the sentences. Where it says "Beloved" we have the lady speaking *to* or *about* her man. She says things like:

<sup>10</sup> My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. <sup>11</sup> His head is purest gold; his hair is wavy and black as a raven. <sup>12</sup> His eyes are like doves by the water streams, washed in milk, mounted like jewels. <sup>13</sup> His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. <sup>14</sup> His arms are rods of gold set with chrysolite. His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires. <sup>15</sup> His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars. <sup>16</sup> His mouth is

sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. (Song of Songs 5:10-16)

Where it says "Lover" we have the *man* speaking *to* or *about* the *lady*. He says things like:

<sup>4</sup> You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, majestic as troops with banners. <sup>5</sup> Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Gilead. <sup>6</sup> Your teeth are like a flock of sheep coming up from the washing. Each has its twin, not one of them is alone. <sup>7</sup> Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate. <sup>8</sup> Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number; <sup>9</sup> but my dove, my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother, the favourite of the one who bore her. The maidens saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines praised her. (Song of Songs 6:4-9)

You get the idea? These two love each other— passionately, deeply, exclusively. Many of the things you read in this book are like the romantic lines you would expect to read in a *Mills & Boon* novel of perhaps hear on an episode of *Days of Our Lives*.

These two are pouring out their hearts to each other. But at first glance some of these things may not sound like compliments. Have a look at the statements the man makes about his lady:

- 1:9 - the man says his beloved looks like a horse
- 4:4 - she has a neck like the Tower of David
- 6:7 - he says she has a head shaped like a pomegranate

- 7:2 - he says she has a waist like a sack of wheat
- 7:4 - he says she has a nose like a tower

My personal favorite is this:

- 6:6 - Your teeth are like a flock of sheep coming up from the washing. Each has its twin, not one of them is alone.

It is almost the *Universal Language of Love*, isn't it? The way to a woman's heart is to talk about her dental work. It was particularly observant of the man to notice that his "beloved wasn't missing any teeth".

Some of them may not sound like compliments but I think we can judge from the rest of the book that these two are in love.

### Love ... passionate

This book fits into a category in the Old Testament we call Wisdom Literature. The other books that fit that category are Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. The Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament is closely associated with King Solomon - the man who asked God to give him wisdom.

In fact, this book even goes under two titles - Song of Songs or Song of Solomon. It gets both of those titles from the opening verse of the book.

But, while Solomon's name may be in the title, I think it is a book *about* Solomon rather than a book *by* Solomon. It is a book that gives us an insight into Solomon's mistakes as King.

The books we call Wisdom Literature look at the issues of day-to-day life - they don't deal with any distinctly Israeli categories. These books mention little or nothing about priests or temple or sacrifices or law. They don't really mention any of the main characters in Israel's history - Moses, Abraham, etc.

Wisdom Literature is trying to deal with "real life" issues - how to live in God's world. They look at issues like suffering and futility. Song of Songs

fits right into that tradition. It is seeking to deal with perhaps one of the most fundamental aspects of life - it looks at the love between a man and a woman. It doesn't try to make a complicated point. In fact the point seems to be very simple: the love between a man and a woman is a wonderful thing. You see that in every verse. In fact, I think you are drawn in by the love these two have for each other.

They're talking about an intimacy in their relationship that some people may feel uncomfortable with - but an intimacy that you have to be impressed by, a closeness that we would all like to have.

There have been plenty of people who think that Song of Songs should not be part of the Bible. Even around the time of Jesus and later the Jewish rabbis and teachers were arguing about the place this book had in their scriptures.

But there were also those who saw what a wonderful book it was and recognised the place that it had in the canon. In 90 AD a rabbi by the name of Akiba said this about the Song of Songs:

The whole world is not worth the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel. All scripture is Holy but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.

Some people think this book isn't worthy of being in the Bible - that it is of such an explicitly erotic nature that Christians shouldn't read it. But the fact is it deals with one of the most precious aspects of creation - the intimacy that can exist between a man and a woman in a committed faithful relationship.

Some commentators think that there must be some hidden meaning to the book. They don't think that sex and sexuality is a topic that God would want discussed in the Scriptures, so they think that there must be some other meaning to the book.

But Song of Songs talks about this subject in an unashamed way. Song of Songs deals with a topic that in our

society is often left to:

- Discussions behind the toilet block at school,
- Articles in magazines for men or women only,
- Late-night talk back radio with Dr Feel-Good or the Love Doctor, and
- The Adult section of the video shop.

But this is a subject that we shouldn't be ashamed of. God has made us as sexual beings. We have been designed to enjoy the sexual relationship that can exist between a man and a woman. And Song of Songs has something important to say about that.

The way that sex and sexuality is often dealt with in our society means that it has been cheapened - we are presented with a very different view from the one that God has. The way that sex and sexuality are viewed is far removed from the pattern that God intended when he created the world.

As Christians we shouldn't despise the capacity we have for sexual excitement and attraction. We should enjoy the good gift that God has given to us in the way God has intended it to be enjoyed. Being passionately in love is not wrong. If nothing else we see that in Song of Songs.

### ... exclusively

We need to note one more thing from Song of Songs. The love that we see is to be faithful and exclusive. The love that the Lover and his Beloved share in this book is not a one night fling that will be forgotten in a month. They are not bouncing from one partner to the next. These two are exclusively devoted to each other. Look at some of the comments:

<sup>8</sup> Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number; <sup>9</sup> but my dove, my perfect one, is unique (Song of Songs 6:8-9)

The Lover says that he is not interested in the queens or the concubines or the

virgins. He has his beloved. He is committed to her.

You can't help but think there might be a bit of a criticism of King Solomon in there. Solomon was the man who had numerous wives and concubines.

Solomon was the man whose downfall was that he married many women. We see another veiled criticism of Solomon in chapter 8:

<sup>11</sup> Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon; he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver. <sup>12</sup> But my own vineyard is mine to give. (Song of Songs 8:11-12)

But the high point of Song of Songs comes in chapter 8.

<sup>6</sup> Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. <sup>7</sup> Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. (Song of Songs 8:6-7)

This is an exclusive commitment that is being made here. The lover and the beloved will be bound to each other by the seal, with a love that is as permanent as death, with a jealousy that is as unyielding as the grave. What we have here is a life-long commitment - a lasting and total commitment between the Lover and his Beloved. What Song of Songs wants to show is that true love is only going to be found in that context - in the context of an all-or-excluding commitment.

Again, I think that our society has been robbed of that idea - it has been stolen and in its place has been substituted other ideas. The idea of love that's presented to us today is the *Playboy* idea or the *Sex and the City* idea - the idea that sex is to be enjoyed whenever and however you can get it. We're told that love is much the same thing as sex - if you find one you have found the other. We're told that if you don't find true happiness in one partner then move on and find it in another. We're told that having multiple partners is a reasonable

thing in your pursuit of true happiness.

That may sound like an exaggeration - but think about what you see on television. Think about some of the shows on television in family viewing time, before 8:30 pm: *Frasier*, *Just Shoot Me*, *Friends*, *Becker*, etc. All of them humorous shows. But all of them are shows that portray the idea that sex and love can be found in multiple partners. Shop around - if one isn't working then try to find what you're looking for in someone else. And in fact the idea of sticking with one partner is often presented as being a boring thing to do. And we live in a society that agrees with those ideas. We live in a society where Christians are being influenced and sucked-in by that kind of thinking. And many Christians end up "buying" the world's attitude toward sex and relationships.

In 1985 a Christian magazine in America called *Leadership* published the results of a survey called "The Sex Life of American Christians". They surveyed 3 500 people that they described as "conservative evangelical Christian men and women". They were asked about their attitudes to sex. On the basis of the answers they gave they were divided into groups:

1. Traditional - they said that the Bible guided their attitudes to sex and that premarital, extramarital and homosexual sex were not how God wanted us to live.
2. Relational - they believed that sex should be part of a loving relationship, but not necessarily a marriage relationship.
3. Recreational - believed that sex should be enjoyed for its own sake and was not connected to love.

The disturbing thing from that survey is that only 50% of the people surveyed were in the traditional category. The other 50% were spread across the other two categories. That means that 50% of these people who are described as "conservative evangelical Christians" thought that sex outside of marriage was okay.

But in Song of Songs we are presented with a very different view. It talks about love the way God intended it to be. It is not prudish or bashful about the subject. It is not ashamed of the idea of love. Love between a man and a woman is something that God gave us to enjoy. It is a wonderful thing for those who have it. And here in this book it is passionate and exclusive. Here is love between a couple who are committed to each other at the exclusion of all others.

I don't think there is any surprise that we find a whole lot of garden imagery in the book. I am sure that we are supposed to cast our minds back to the first garden - the first man/woman relationship. We are supposed to think about the relationship that God had intended for men and women when they were created in the garden.

When Jesus is talking about the exclusive, life-long commitment of marriage he goes back to creation.

<sup>4</sup> "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' <sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?' <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matt 19:4-6)

An essential part of love is faithfulness and exclusiveness. That is the way God intends relationships to work.

### **The Bride & The Bridegroom**

But is that all we learn from Song of Songs? Is it just a book about love? Is it just a book about monogamous relationships. Well no! I think we can take all this one step further. There is a lesson here for us in our relationship with God. It is not that there is some hidden meaning in Song of Songs. There is simply a logical deduction we can make from what this book says about relationships and the relationship we have with God.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament we see that God compares his relationship with his people to the relationship between a husband and wife. God says that he was like a husband to Israel. He loved them deeply. He was exclusively committed to them. You see it clearly in a book like Hosea.

At a very simple level we can say that the closeness and the intimacy that the Lover and his Beloved have in the Song of Songs is what God expects in the relationship he has with his people. God expects his people to love him and he expects them to be passionate and exclusive in that love.

And we see the same imagery used when we turn to the pages of the New Testament.

Q. How is the relationship between Jesus and his church described?

A. It is described as that of a bride and bridegroom.

Q. What image does Paul use when he talks about the love that a husband should have for his wife?

A. Jesus and the Church.

And that is the image that we see in heaven, too. Jesus, the bridegroom, is married to his bride, the Church.

The bond that should exist between Jesus and those who are his people should be as strong as the bond that we see expressed in the Song of Songs. It should be a love that is as strong as death. There should be an exclusiveness and jealousy in that relationship.

We have seen the extent of Jesus' love for us - he was willing to go to the cross to die for us so that we could be his people. You don't get greater love than that. And our love for him should be just as strong. Song of Songs shows us the depth of the love that existed between these two people and from that we see the depth of love we should have for Jesus.

But Song of Songs also shows us that love for another person should be at the exclusion of all others - it is to be

undivided and complete.

That, too, is to be a characteristic of our love for Jesus. It is not to be a compromised love. We must make sure that our hearts are not turned away from him.

The book Song of Songs is sometimes called the Song of Solomon. As I said before there are a few lines in the book that seem to be offering a critique or criticism of Solomon. I think it is a rebuke of his failure as a King. Look at what 1 Kings says about the failure of Solomon's reign:

<sup>2</sup> King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. <sup>2</sup> They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. <sup>3</sup> He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. <sup>4</sup> As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the

Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. (1 Kings 11:1-4)

When it comes to assessing King Solomon's reign he is considered to have failed at two points: 1) his multitude of partners, and 2) his failure to be fully devoted to God. And the two things were implicitly connected.

### Conclusion

Song of Songs is a magnificent book. It reminds us of the love that God intended men and women to share. It reminds us that love between a man and a woman is a wonderful thing - it is what God intended for this world.

But more than that, Song of Songs gives us an illustration of the kind of love that we should have for Jesus: it is to be a sincere love and it is to be an exclusive love. It is only when we are sincere and exclusive in our love for Jesus that we will know the depths of the relationship he has for us.

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