

SESSION #29

SONG OF SOLOMON

Quite a few years ago I saw a cartoon in a Christian journal which pictured a church congregation and their pastor. When the pastor stepped into the pulpit, the congregation realized that the pastor was going to speak on the “Song of Solomon” again because he had a paper bag over his head to hide his embarrassment. When I was pastoring a church in Japan I taught a series of messages through this book. My wife sat in the back row for this series, and *she* was wearing the paper bag!

Yes, Solomon’s “song” can be quite graphic at times, so there is an element of potential embarrassment here. However, it is certainly part of the Word of God and put there for our instruction and encouragement.

Verse 1 states that this is “the Song of songs” – a phrase which has the same grammatical construction as other phrases in Scripture with which we are perhaps more familiar. For example, “Lord of lords” or “King of kings”. So, in other words, the “Song of songs” is the song to beat all songs! It’s the greatest! And no doubt that’s what Solomon intended with this song.

1. Structure

This book is in the form of dramatic poetry, as we noted in our introduction to this Bible section. However, it’s not a drama with events that run sequentially, which makes it rather difficult to follow at times. It might be better to think of this book as seven little pictures or idylls – small poetic pictures which are set down one after another, but not necessarily in the order in which events happen in the story of the book. Seven valuable pictures of love.

2. Key to interpretation

The Song of Solomon is primarily a book of poetry telling us of the beauty of marital love. I think that is the primary purpose of this book. There is much to be learned here in terms of practical principles for improving the marriage relationship.

A secondary aspect of this book, however, may very well be a picture in spiritual terms. On the one hand, we have a picture of God who called Himself the husband of Israel quite often in the Old Testament. And in New Testament terms, we have a picture of Christ who is the Bridegroom of the Bride, His Church.

So there is certainly some romance in these two relationships, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Something of that relationship of love is reflected in the love relationship described in the Song of songs.

In the middle of Psalm 45 there is a picture of a royal wedding. This is undoubtedly Solomon's wedding perhaps to the Lebanese Shulamith who became his bride. It describes the bride coming to meet the groom in this ceremony. This Psalm is quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews chapter 1 as referring to Jesus Christ.

So, if that picture in Psalm 45 is meant to be a picture of Christ then it is not too hard to assume that some of the descriptions found in the Song of songs may also reflect something of that truth and reality. Solomon is seen in Psalm 45 and in the Song of Solomon as the groom and perhaps Jesus Christ is pictured in some way in that sense too.

This particular book was read out loud by the Jewish people at the Feast of Passover every year. At their major annual feasts, they always read one of the books of their Scriptures. They read the book of Ruth at the Feast of Pentecost, for another example. And here at the Feast of Passover they read the Song of Songs. Why would they read, out loud, a book like this at such a public feast? Well the reason surely must have been connected to the fact that the Feast of Passover was a feast that confirmed and affirmed for them as a nation that they are a people who have a covenant relationship with God.

That covenant was confirmed by God in the shedding of blood of the Passover lamb thereby making that relationship possible.

But that covenant is not only *confirmed* by blood, it is *affirmed* by love. And so they would read this love poem at the Feast of Passover again affirming that their relationship with the living God is based on wonderful love. A covenant love relationship.

The key verse for this book is 2:16, which has been put to music many times over the centuries, including our own: “*My Beloved is mine and I am His.*” That’s the main theme of the Song of Songs.

3. Contrast with Ecclesiastes

What a terrific contrast between this book and the last book we looked at in Session 28, the book of Ecclesiastes! There we saw the phrase “vanity of vanities” repeated often, underlining the main theme of Ecclesiastes. It makes this comparison with the Song of Solomon even more pronounced: “Vanity of vanities” compared to “Song of songs”.

If we cast our minds back to the last session briefly, we remember that this present world, the material world in which we live, with all its pleasures and attractions is simply too small to ever fill and satisfy the human heart. God made the human heart with desires which are far larger than this world can ever fill. That’s what Solomon preached in the book of the preacher, Ecclesiastes.

But by contrast, when you get to the Song of Solomon we see Christ pictured as the loving Bridegroom. He can more than fill and more than satisfy the longings of the human heart. Here the heart is small, the Object is large. Jesus Christ can fill the human heart to overflowing. That’s what the Song of songs is celebrating. That kind of love relationship, first of all between man and wife. But then secondarily, the love relationship with our Creator who fully satisfies the human heart.

4. The Story

If there's a story to be told in the Song of songs, it's a rather hard one to follow because in many Bible versions the speakers in this dramatic poem are not identified. So, it is a bit difficult to see who is saying what. And even in the versions which do identify the speakers, like the NKJV, the NIV etc., it isn't absolutely certain that those identifications are accurate. Those are notations inserted by the translators; they are not notes included in the original Hebrew text.

There are very different views about a potential plot in the book so we really don't know exactly what it is meant to tell us in terms of a story. Perhaps there is no story to be told. Maybe it's not a specific drama of a certain husband and wife and their romantic love relationship. It could be seven different poems about seven different couples. It's hard to tell. But there may be a basic story that provided a kind of backdrop for this poetic drama. If so, it may have gone much like this, as suggested by J. Sidlow Baxter:

Solomon, as the royal king, makes a visit to Lebanon to visit the royal vineyards and to see how things are going in that part of his kingdom. As he journeys through the Lebanese countryside he happens to notice a young local Shulamith woman in the fields as he passes by. And he sees that she is very attractive. His cortege goes a little further down the road to where he's going to spend the night – the Holiday Inn or whatever. Having become interested in the identity of this young lady, he disguises himself and goes back to find out where she lives and try to get to know her.

But not as the king. He disguises himself as an ordinary shepherd, otherwise how would he ever have an opportunity to get to know this lady? She would be far too awestruck if she knew this was the king! Even when his retinue passed along the road, she ran away. So, he can't afford to let her run away at first glance; he needs to get close enough to get to know her. Hence the shepherd disguise.

It works, and he wins her love. And then having won her love, he reveals who he really is – King Solomon. He invites her back to Jerusalem to become his wife. And she does. She goes from the Lebanese mountains to Jerusalem and marries Solomon as Psalm 45 describes.

Perhaps that kind of scenario could have provided something of a backdrop for this Song.

5. Additional Structure notes

This book is often divided into four major parts. First the courtship period, falling in love, chapters 1 & 2.

Then the wedding in chapters 3 and 4, united in love.

Then, as is realistically the case in marriage relationships, both ancient and modern they encounter some rocky roads in the marriage. These problems are described in chapters 5 and 6 – struggling in love.

Those problems get sorted out and by chapters 7 and 8 we see progress and maturing in their ongoing love relationship – growing in love.

6. Application example

There are some good applications that can be derived from this dramatic poem. Baxter suggests one from chapter 5 that I rather like.

In this scene, the bride has gone to bed, the husband is out somewhere and comes home late. He forgot his key, he knocks on the door so that she can open. She's already gone to bed. Her hair is in curlers. She's got her facial mask makeup on, she's almost asleep.

And then he knocks on the door, and her immediate response is, "*Oh, no! Did he forget his key again?*" She procrastinates but finally decides to get up to open the door. She tries to freshen herself up a little so she washes her face, puts on some perfume and by the time she reaches the door and opens it with perfumed-slippery hands, he's gone. She has lost the opportunity of fellowship with her bridegroom that she could have enjoyed if she had not delayed so long in answering the door.

It's a poignant Old Testament picture of the New Testament truth written in Revelation chapter 3 and verse 20 – a verse written to Christians, not non-Christians even though it is often used evangelistically: Jesus Christ Himself says, "*Behold, I stand at the door*

and knock. And if any man (a generic term for man or woman) hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and will fellowship with him, and he with me.” That’s a verse of invitation from Jesus to you and me as believers who have already received Him. That verse is written to the Church. But Jesus says, I’m still knocking on the door. I want entrance to have fellowship with you. And if you’ll just let me in to your life and your schedule, then we can have beautiful fellowship together.

But sometimes, like the bride in the Song, we get delayed with other considerations. Or we get apathetic. Or we get lazy. Or we get tired...or whatever. And Jesus, who still knocks on the door of our lives hoping to have an extended time of fellowship with us, is left standing outside the door by our apathy and our delay. And in these cases, we are the losers because we don’t enjoy the fellowship that could have been ours if we had responded more quickly. It is, I think, a clear challenge to our devotional lives.

Well, that’s just one application from the Song of Songs. I encourage you to read the whole book and as you do I trust that your heart will respond in a new way to Christ, our Bridegroom, our Savior whose love endures forever.

We will move into the prophetic books in the next session. I hope you’ll be here once again.
