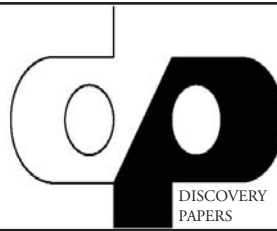


THE SUPERLATIVE SONG

SERIES: FAIR AS THE MOON, BRIGHT AS THE SUN



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Song of Songs 1:1
1st Message
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I want to begin this morning with a parable of sorts. G. K. Chesterton compared us to a shipwrecked sailor marooned on a desert island, suffering from amnesia. As remnants from the ship and relics from his former life drift to shore, the sailor combs the beach retrieving each bit and piece of his past, trying to remember its intended purpose. Sex is one of those relics left over from an earlier state of being, the purpose of which we have largely forgotten.¹

The parable of the amnesiac sailor does not suggest defiance. This is not King David, raised on the Ten Commandments, denying his conscience in adultery with Bathsheba. Rather, the picture being painted in this parable is of a culture so distant from its Creator that it no longer can distinguish what is healthy and what is not.

To extend Chesterton's imagery, the wrecked ship is a cruise ship fitted with every luxury. The beach is strewn with mounds of stuff: baubles and gadgets, alluring possibilities appealing to every one of our senses. All around is sex-infused opportunity with no guide for choosing well. Silicon Valley, like the desert island, is a hard place to make a life. It is hard to be a young person leaving childhood behind, and it is hard to parent young people. It is daunting to be single and stressful to be married. Yet our task as Christians is to light a light, to speak a word of truth, to live our lives in such a way as to push back the darkness, to strengthen brothers and sisters in Christ, and to offer a word of hope to those who have none.

Our task is to light a light, and it may seem a curious choice, but the way we are going to do that is to give attention to a three thousand year old poem. Only one hundred seventeen verses long, the Song of Songs, also known as Canticles or the Song of Solomon, is in some ways the oddest book in the Bible. Both Jewish and Christian commentators have questioned its place in the Scriptures. It raises issues and speaks in language that you find almost no other place. God is never mentioned directly in the Song of Songs, and yet His presence is everywhere in it. And for all the years of its existence, this poem has been used by God to encourage hope and to lead believers to worship. The language of human intimacy becomes the language of worship, and I hope that will happen among us here as well.

I want to say a word to single adults in particular who have learned to recoil from Christian marriage talks. I urge you to stick with this. This is a book about the gift of marriage, love, and intimacy, and the book deals with these things in some (perhaps frustrating) detail. But the Giver of the gift is everywhere in this text, and I hope that you will hear the blessing in His voice.

Not Just Any Song

Verse 1 is an introduction to the whole:

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

There are two ideas here. First, we are dealing with a song, and not just any song, but the song of songs, the highest song, the superlative song. Second, we are reading a document that is attributed to Solomon.

Let's look at the connection to Solomon first. Because this is Solomon's book, we know that we are dealing with a royal document. Not only was Solomon the son of a king and a king himself, in his own time he was the wealthiest, wisest, and most powerful king of all of Israel's kings. Among the ancients, the common practice was for the king's literature to magnify the monarch. Royal songs are about the royal person. They are about his beauty and power. Wedding songs are about the king's virility and conquests. References to the king's wife concern how many children she will bear him and how they will further magnify his name. Because this is a royal book, it ought to contain such features, but it has none of them.

Strikingly, the voice of the bride has the greatest prominence. The writer of the book has learned to speak in a woman's voice, has listened long enough to be able to speak from her perspective. The lessons of love recorded here are for everyone. We are invited to find ourselves in this book, not to gaze at the greatness of Solomon.

The mention of Solomon also brings before us the tension between his great insights and his personal failure. Solomon prayed that God would make him wise, and all his life he was wise. He was able to communicate the wisdom of God to others, but he was not able to live it himself. This was particularly true with respect to his relationship with women. We find that, at the end of Solomon's life, he was married to hundreds of women and had hundreds of concubines, and his heart was moved away from his Lord and away from his responsibilities as king. His inability to choose well regarding women ruined him. So how can this beautiful poem be Solomon's?

I think the answer is similar to what we find in another of Solomon's works, the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes concludes very wisely: in the end, the best a person can do is to fear God and keep His commandments. But the rest of the book is about trying every alternative to God's commandments. Solomon effectively said to himself, "I am the richest and smartest man in the world, and I can do whatever I choose. I am going to spend myself on every sensuality. I am going to give way to every intellectual pride. I am going to engage all the possibilities

that riches promote, and I'm going to see if it makes me happy." At the end of the day, it didn't, of course. But he ran the negative experiment and then wrote a book to say what doesn't work.

I think the Song of Songs relates to Solomon's life in a similar way. Knowing his own experience of failed relationships, he discovered a couple whose love story was beautiful and arranged for it to be preserved in a poem. The references to royalty and even the names Solomon and Shulamith are literary devices. Solomon's wisdom allowed him to teach what he did not live.

The other phrase in this opening verse is that this is the Song of Songs. Poets and lyricists have found the themes of falling in and out of love and broken and mended hearts and all that goes into being in love to be rich material for their art. Some love songs are tender and moving; others are silly or angry or beautiful.

I remember the first time I ever thought about a love song as a love song. I was a shy eighth-grader at a school dance. I didn't know how to talk to girls, and I didn't know how to dance. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but I found myself with my arms around a girl named Bonnie, and there we were, slow dancing to Jerry Butler singing Moon River. I never did learn her last name, but I remember thinking for a long time after that what a beautiful name Bonnie was, and I thought Moon River was an exceptionally beautiful song. I looked up the lyrics this week, and I discovered that they make no sense. But at that time and place, the song had quite an effect on me.

Love songs do that. They express something inside of us that perhaps we have never articulated before. The best ones also connect us to purposes and possibilities larger than ourselves. That is what a love song does, and this is the song of songs, the most beautiful of love songs. It is the one breathed by the Spirit, as all Scripture is breathed by the Spirit. It is the intimate portrait of a good marriage – physical touching, emotional longing, anticipation and ecstasy, tension and resolution, passion and doubt, memory and warning. It harkens back to the oldest music and the first lovers in Eden.

God Makes Masterpieces

There is an enduring caricature that Bible-believing folks mostly speak of marriage in terms of duties and boundaries and responsibilities, while those who are unencumbered by the Bible and religion are free to follow their impulses, finding happiness without rules. But the longer I live, the more certain I am that that is exactly backwards. The problem with freedom without meaning is that the message we receive about our sexuality or about our capacity for intimacy is that it exists to spend on ourselves. Such freedom is actually language for self-adoration, if you will, to do and be and experience and delight in everything that is true of one's self. But eventually that road leads to loneliness. If you are the center of your own universe, eventually you end up alone.

I've also discovered, on the other hand, the longer I do premarital counseling and discuss relationship with people, that, instead of highlighting limits, more and more God has asked me to speak joyful possibility. We were made to discover another person. We were made to serve another person. Two become one: body, soul, and spirit. God makes masterpieces. And I realize that a higher and higher percentage of what I am saying to people is to encourage them to believe that it is possible to be married, not looking for ways to narrow their experience but looking for ways to believe that God can do something great, that the adventure is worth taking. Think about how the popular culture speaks of sexuality. Gender is an arena for political argument. Public policy focuses on sexually transmitted disease. It's no wonder that so many people, instead of looking forward to marriage, are afraid. But you cannot break yourself so much that God cannot fix you. He's been making marriages for a very long time.

So let me ask some questions. If you are married, do you believe that your marriage is a masterpiece? Do you believe it is beautiful? Do you see God at work? Is your marriage growing? If not, are we willing to invite God into our Christian marriages and let Him do something new?

What about your thought life? What about the fantasies? What about the things that don't get expressed in words or in actions but are there? Are they honorable or dishonorable?

Whether we are married or not, I think much of what drives us is fear and pride. Connecting with another person means that you've got to be vulnerable. Married or unmarried, the only way into real relationships in which God does the best things He does in relationships is to deal with what we are afraid of. Are we willing to have pride broken? Are we willing to have fears dealt with?

Some people, I think, married or unmarried, find connection with another person most difficult because they reject themselves. Lost opportunities are mostly due to how much you don't like yourself. Are you willing to let God do something about that?

He Knows Everything

In a few moments we will take communion, so I want to invite us to the communion table as a conclusion. Any change, any choice, any difference that gets made in us is going to be because God does it. Jesus said that this is true food. This is what strengthens us to live real life. And in inviting you to the table, I want to draw a picture that we find in the New Testament. North of Jerusalem, near a well outside a village, about 2000 years ago, Jesus was sitting in the heat of the day and a woman approached. You can read the account of the woman at the well speaking to Jesus in the book of John, chapter 4, and I hope you'll take time to read it. What took place then has a lot to say about the lost, confused, chaotic world we live in now, and I want to highlight some of those elements as we prepare to come to the Lord's table.

First, Jesus and the woman could not connect because their worlds were so different, and in that I think our circumstance is mirrored. We often don't know how to talk to each other. "You're a man and I'm a woman. You're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan. You worship on that mountain, and I worship on this mountain. We don't have anything in common. How are we going to talk?" But Jesus extended himself across barriers and spoke words of life.

Second, Jesus spoke to the woman about her life in terms of thirst, not in terms of judgment or condemnation. He didn't say, "How could you?" He said, "Your life says that you are longing for something you cannot find. You are thirsty for something you cannot discover. You are looking for water that will meet a great need, but you don't know where it is."

When she went back to the Samaritan village where she was from, she said to those who gathered round her, "He told me everything I ever did." Now I presume their discussion went on for longer than we find in the record of John 4. They most likely talked about how she ended up where she was and how she became the kind of person she was and what was done to her and what she had done and why there was so much brokenness concerning men and sexuality and relationships. He still knows people like us. He knows all the stuff. He knows why it is there. He knows what it means. He knows, and so we come to the meal He offers us knowing that about Him. There is nothing covered up.

Jesus also said to the woman: "If you knew the One who is speaking to you now, you would ask Him and He would give you living water." If you know Him, if you believe what he says about Himself, if you know Him in any degree and trust Him with what you know of Him, then you will ask for help and He will give it to you. He will give you living water that never fails, that quenches the real thirst, that deals with the real broken stuff.

So I want to invite you forward with Jesus' invitation. If you know Who you ask, you can ask. You are welcome. Let's pray. Thank you Lord for all your gifts, for the gift of Scripture, for the gift of Your presence by the Spirit, for the meal that speaks to us of Your sacrifice and Your love. Thanks that You know about us and that You want us to ask for help, having offered to help, You invite us to ask. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NOTES

¹ Roper, David. *Song of a Longing Heart*. Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2005.