

Sermon: Love at its Purest

Trinity Virtual

29 August 2021

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Readings: [Song of Songs 2: 8-13](#) and 1 John 4: 7-16 (The Message)

Songs: Lecha Dodi [Lecha Dodi - English and Hebrew Transliteration - YouTube](#) and I love You Lord [I Love You Lord | Lyric Video - YouTube](#) Laurie Klein

If you joined us last week we looked at the book of Ecclesiastes where Solomon, after trying all that this world has to offer, concludes that living without God is meaningless, like chasing the wind. The life worth living is a life with God at the centre of all you do.

This morning we turn to consider the Song of Songs, the book that follows after Ecclesiastes.<sup>1</sup>

While Ecclesiastes calls for the application of our minds, the Song of Songs calls on our emotions and in particular the emotion of love.

I have not heard a sermon preached on this book. In fact I have found advice given, probably sound advice, that one should rather avoid preaching on this book. I do so only after an insightful teaching on this beautiful series of poems by Louise Ruch, one of the elders in our church.<sup>2</sup>

*"What in the world is this doing in the Bible?"* is not only a question often asked today but is one that caused great debate and controversy right from the beginning.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Akiba, a great teacher and mystic (AD 50-135) was influential in securing the inclusion of this book in the scriptures. He said: *"The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."*<sup>4</sup> The Song of Songs (Shir HaShirim) is the Hebrew way of saying the most excellent of songs.

The Song of Songs plays an important liturgical role during the Passover feast and is traditionally recited on the Sabbath that falls in the festival. The Lecha Dodi is recited Friday at dusk, usually at sundown, in synagogue to welcome Shabbat prior to the evening services. This is based on verse 7 in chapter 7. A sung version is one of the songs I have chosen for today.

For many centuries the Song was interpreted spiritually by both Jewish and Christian believers.

In the Jewish community Song of Songs was seen as depicting the love of God for Israel.<sup>5</sup> In Christian community it was interpreted as depicting the love between Christ and the church.

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<sup>1</sup> The only reading from Song of Songs in the lectionary is Chapter 2:8-13 which is read only once in a 3 year cycle. This is the reading prescribed for this morning.

<sup>2</sup> I rely heavily on research by Louise Ruch, an elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church Lynnwood, Pretoria for her teaching on the Song of Songs.

<sup>3</sup> See this article: [Commentary on Song of Solomon 2:8-13 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

<sup>4</sup> (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5).

<sup>5</sup> For some detailed debate and comment on the interpretation see: [why-do-we-sing-the-song-of-songs-on-passover.pdf \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](#)

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I read that Origen (AD 185-254) wrote a ten volume commentary on the Song of Songs and that Bernard of Clairvaux, in the twelfth century, wrote eighty six sermons on the Song (and did not even get past chapter 2)!

In more modern times the plain meaning of sexual love in the Song of Songs has been acknowledged.

Perhaps more interpretations have been proposed for the Song of Songs than any other biblical book.<sup>6</sup>

One is the allegorical interpretation which reads the Song of Songs as a poem that is to be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

*"This school sees Song of Songs as entirely figurative. It has no foundation in historical fact. The events which it records never actually took place, but are simply pictures of something else."<sup>7</sup>*

I have mentioned the interpretations in the Jewish and the Christians communities. The Song of Songs is not quoted by Jesus. Paul did write this in Ephesians<sup>8</sup>: "27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

There are real difficulties in finding a spiritual meaning in all the words and descriptions used in the Song of Songs.

In addition to this the book contains some fifteen references to identified geographic places which indicates a factual basis.

A second is the naturalistic interpretation says the Song of Songs praises and promotes human love. It is aimed at showing how physical beauty and married love are good and perfect. The book teaches how to love and admire the human body, created by God and also to see our own faults in married love. This is too limited an interpretation of the Song of Songs.

A third is the typical interpretation which says the Song of Songs is a romantic love poem. The events recorded are descriptive are suggestive of spiritual truths without there being an exact equivalent. Dr G Campbell Morgan wrote this:<sup>9</sup>

*"The songs should be treated then, first as simple and yet sublime songs of human affection. When they are thus understood, reverently the thoughts may be lifted into the higher value of setting forth the joys of communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, and ultimately between the Church and Christ."*

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<sup>6</sup> Introduction to Song of Songs in the NIV Zondervan Study Bible General Editor DA Carson

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Olyott – in his book: Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

<sup>8</sup> [Ephesians 5:27](#)

<sup>9</sup> Dr G Campbell Morgan in The Analysed Bible p197

This view allows one to honour the factual basis of the poems and yet sees Christ in them. The love described in the Song of Songs is so deep, vibrant, committed and joy-filled that it directs us to look at a love that is higher and greater.

It is also critical before you study the Song of Songs that you have in your mind the time and the place in which it was written and the customs of the time. It is an Eastern love poem and not to be judged by our current day western view in our society.

It would be quite in order for a groom complimenting his bride at the wedding to refer to her nose as being like the tower of Lebanon looking toward Damascus and to refer to her breasts being like clusters of fruit.

Horses were regarded as most beautiful creatures and to refer to a bride as being like a mare among Pharaoh's chariot horses was a deep tribute not an insult. Flocks of sheep and goats were valued and admired possessions. In the hot climate perfumes, probably aromatics infused in olive oil, would have been extensively used. Many of these were imported and prized. Bear all of this in mind as we read together some of the verses.

The Song of Songs can be divided into 3 parts as describing the courtship, wedding and married life of Solomon and his bride, a Shulamite woman.<sup>10</sup>

She is something of a Cinderella figure deeply tanned as a result of her having to tend the vines, keep the foxes away and work outside. He is the King although she does not know this at first.

- The first section, 1:1 – 3:5 describes the courtship;
- The second section 3:6 – 5:1 describes the wedding; and
- The third section describes the married life. This divides again into three parts being:
  - A time of alienation;
  - A time of restored and strengthened relationship; and
  - Settled devotion with husband and wife speaking equally.

Rather than summarise what is said I want read extracts of the poetry so that you see the pictures painted and so that you hear the words. You will be able to identify who is speaking.

### **From the courtship.**

#### **1, Solomon's Song of Songs**

#### **She**

<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 young women love you!

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<sup>10</sup> Probably from Shunem, a village near Megiddo. Shulamite a feminine form of Solomon.

<sup>4</sup>Take me away with you—let us hurry!  
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

### She

How right they are to adore you!

<sup>5</sup>Dark am I, yet lovely,  
daughters of Jerusalem,  
dark like the tents of Kedar,  
like the tent curtains of Solomon.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Do not stare at me because I am dark,  
because I am darkened by the sun.  
My mother's sons were angry with me  
and made me take care of the vineyards;  
my own vineyard I had to neglect.

<sup>7</sup>Tell me, you whom I love,  
where you graze your flock  
and where you rest your sheep at midday.  
Why should I be like a veiled woman  
beside the flocks of your friends?

### He

<sup>9</sup>I liken you, my darling, to a mare  
among Pharaoh's chariot horses.  
<sup>10</sup>Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,  
your neck with strings of jewels.  
<sup>11</sup>We will make you earrings of gold,  
studded with silver.

### She

<sup>8</sup>Listen! My beloved!  
Look! Here he comes,  
leaping across the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.  
<sup>9</sup>My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.  
Look! There he stands behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
peering through the lattice.  
<sup>10</sup>My beloved spoke and said to me,  
"Arise, my darling,  
my beautiful one, come with me.  
<sup>11</sup>See! The winter is past;  
the rains are over and gone.  
<sup>12</sup>Flowers appear on the earth;  
the season of singing has come,  
the cooing of doves  
is heard in our land.  
<sup>13</sup>The fig tree forms its early fruit;  
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling;  
my beautiful one, come with me."

### He

<sup>14</sup> My dove in the clefts of the rock,  
in the hiding places on the mountainside,  
show me your face,  
let me hear your voice;  
for your voice is sweet,  
and your face is lovely.

### She

<sup>16</sup> My beloved is mine and I am his;  
he browses among the lilies.

<sup>17</sup> Until the day breaks  
and the shadows flee,  
turn, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle  
or like a young stag  
on the rugged hills.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> All night long on my bed  
I looked for the one my heart loves;  
I looked for him but did not find him.  
<sup>2</sup> I will get up now and go about the city,  
through its streets and squares;  
I will search for the one my heart loves.  
So I looked for him but did not find him.

<sup>3</sup> The watchmen found me  
as they made their rounds in the city.  
"Have you seen the one my heart loves?"

<sup>4</sup> Scarcely had I passed them  
when I found the one my heart loves.  
I held him and would not let him go  
till I had brought him to my mother's house,  
to the room of the one who conceived me.

### From the wedding.

<sup>6</sup> Who is this coming up from the wilderness  
like a column of smoke,  
perfumed with myrrh and incense  
made from all the spices of the merchant?

<sup>7</sup> Look! It is Solomon's carriage,  
escorted by sixty warriors,  
the noblest of Israel,

<sup>8</sup> all of them wearing the sword,  
all experienced in battle,  
each with his sword at his side,

prepared for the terrors of the night.

Daughters of Jerusalem, <sup>11</sup> come out,  
and look, you daughters of Zion.  
Look<sup>[a]</sup> on King Solomon wearing a crown,  
the crown with which his mother crowned him  
on the day of his wedding,  
the day his heart rejoiced.

And then the groom addressing his bride at the wedding

## He

**4** How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!

Your eyes behind your veil are doves.

Your hair is like a flock of goats  
descending from the hills of Gilead.

<sup>2</sup>Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,  
coming up from the washing.

Each has its twin;  
not one of them is alone.

<sup>3</sup>Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;  
your mouth is lovely.

Your temples behind your veil  
are like the halves of a pomegranate.

<sup>6</sup>Until the day breaks  
and the shadows flee,  
I will go to the mountain of myrrh  
and to the hill of incense.

<sup>7</sup>You are altogether beautiful, my darling;  
there is no flaw in you.

<sup>10</sup>How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!  
How much more pleasing is your love than wine,  
and the fragrance of your perfume  
more than any spice!

<sup>11</sup>Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;  
milk and honey are under your tongue.

The fragrance of your garments  
is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

<sup>12</sup>You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;  
you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

## . He

**5** I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;  
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.

I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;  
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

### **Married life – alienated**

Then a scene where perhaps he comes home late and she has already washed her feet and is in bed.

#### **She**

<sup>2</sup>I slept but my heart was awake.  
Listen! My beloved is knocking:  
"Open to me, my sister, my darling,  
my dove, my flawless one.  
My head is drenched with dew,  
my hair with the dampness of the night."  
<sup>3</sup>I have taken off my robe—  
must I put it on again?  
I have washed my feet—  
must I soil them again?  
<sup>4</sup>My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening;  
my heart began to pound for him.  
  
<sup>6</sup>I opened for my beloved,  
but my beloved had left; he was gone.  
My heart sank at his departure.<sup>[a]</sup>  
I looked for him but did not find him.  
I called him but he did not answer.  
<sup>7</sup>The watchmen found me  
as they made their rounds in the city.  
They beat me, they bruised me;  
they took away my cloak,  
those watchmen of the walls!  
<sup>8</sup>Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—  
if you find my beloved,  
what will you tell him?  
Tell him I am faint with love.

Friends ask her: "How is your beloved better than others?" She answers.

#### **She**

<sup>10</sup>My beloved 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.  
13 His cheeks are like beds of spice  
yielding perfume.  
His lips are like lilies  
dripping with myrrh.

His appearance is like Lebanon,  
choice as its cedars.  
16 His mouth is sweetness itself;  
he is altogether lovely.  
This is my beloved, this is my friend,  
daughters of Jerusalem.

**Married - relationship restored and growing stronger.**

### **Friends**

6 Where has your beloved gone,  
most beautiful of women?  
Which way did your beloved turn,  
that we may look for him with you?

### **She**

2 My beloved has gone down to his garden,  
to the beds of spices,  
to browse in the gardens  
and to gather lilies.  
3 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;  
he browses among the lilies.


### **He**

4 You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling,  
as lovely as Jerusalem,  
as majestic as troops with banners.  
5 Turn your eyes from me;  
they overwhelm me.

### **She**

3 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;  
he browses among the lilies.

### **He**

7  How beautiful your sandaled feet,  
O prince's daughter!  
Your graceful legs are like jewels,  
the work of an artist's hands.  
2 Your navel is a rounded goblet



that never lacks blended wine.  
Your waist is a mound of wheat  
encircled by lilies.  
<sup>3</sup>Your breasts are like two fawns,  
like twin fawns of a gazelle.  
<sup>4</sup>Your neck is like an ivory tower.  
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon  
by the gate of Bath Rabbim.  
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon  
looking toward Damascus.  
<sup>5</sup>Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel.  
Your hair is like royal tapestry;  
the king is held captive by its tresses.  
<sup>6</sup>How beautiful you are and how pleasing,  
my love, with your delights!  
<sup>7</sup>Your stature is like that of the palm,  
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.

### She

May the wine go straight to my beloved,  
flowing gently over lips and teeth.<sup>[b]</sup>  
<sup>10</sup>I belong to my beloved,  
and his desire is for me.  
<sup>11</sup>Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside,  
let us spend the night in the villages.<sup>[c]</sup>  
<sup>12</sup>Let us go early to the vineyards  
to see if the vines have budded,  
if their blossoms have opened,  
and if the pomegranates are in bloom—  
there I will give you my love.

### Married – equals with settled devotion to each other.

### She

Under the apple tree I roused you;  
there your mother conceived you,  
there she who was in labor gave you birth.  
<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<sup>[a]</sup> unyielding as the grave.  
It burns like blazing fire,  
like a mighty flame.<sup>[b]</sup>  
<sup>7</sup>Many waters cannot quench love;  
rivers cannot sweep it away.  
If one were to give  
all the wealth of one's house for love,  
it<sup>[c]</sup> would be utterly scorned.

## Separated but longing to be together

### He

<sup>13</sup> You who dwell in the gardens  
with friends in attendance,  
let me hear your voice!

### She

<sup>14</sup> Come away, my beloved,  
and be like a gazelle  
or like a young stag  
on the spice-laden mountains.

The bride yearning for the king to return.

This is echoed in Revelation: Come Lord Jesus, come.<sup>11</sup>

Very beautiful tender and direct words of love. Some say the major theological theme appears in Chapter 8:5-7. Consider how she describes their love.

The love between them is **sealed**.

Done, committed and on display like a locket around the neck or a ring on the finger. But put even stronger: "Place me like a seal over your heart".

She says that love is as strong as **death** and its passion as strong as the grave. This is a love that will last, that will not be broken.

Love burns like a blazing **fire** – while fire can be destructive it can refine and inflame passion. In verse 6 we find the only indirect reference to God. The Hebrew 'shalhebetyah') contains a truncated version of the divine name 'Yah' and translated would mean "a flame of Yah[weh]". The fire burns like a mighty flame, like the very flame of the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

This signals the key message that romantic love is a gift of God.

It is so powerful that 'many waters cannot quench love' and it can't be swept away by rivers.

And this love is **priceless**. Not for sale and no amount of wealth could purchase it.

Seal, death, Fire and priceless.

Prayerfully consider the love described in this book and let your thoughts move to a higher plane.

In Ephesians we read<sup>13</sup>:

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<sup>11</sup> Revelation: 22:20. "20 He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

<sup>12</sup> This translation is to be preferred because as an author puts it: "Why would a poet, in his grandest statement about love, stumble clumsily with "its flashes are flashes of fire, a brightly burning fire."

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 1:13.

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"13 And in Him, having heard and believed the word of truth— the gospel of your salvation— you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,"

Sealed by the love of God and by the grace and sacrifice of Jesus.

God's love stronger than death as God sent Jesus to die for us – the passion of Jesus overcoming the grave.

Fire refining us and inflaming our love for God. We are not to be lukewarm in our love for God<sup>14</sup>. Paul wrote to Timothy calling on him to fan into flame the precious gift of God received by Timothy.<sup>15</sup>

God's love knows no limits and is priceless. In Psalm 36<sup>16</sup>:

"5 Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.

6 Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep.

You, Lord, preserve both people and animals. 7 How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!"

Eugene Peterson writes<sup>17</sup>:

*"Christians read the Song on many levels: as intimacy of marital love between man and woman, God's deep love for his people. Christ's Bridegroom love for his church, the Christian's love for his or her Lord. It is a prism in which all of the love of God in all the world, and all the responses of those who love and whom God loves, gathers and then separates into individual colours."*

Look at the Song of Songs, read the book again and let the description of love at its purest take you beyond the romantic love poem to embrace the love of God for you and your loving response to God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Gordon Hay

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<sup>14</sup> Revelation 3:16. Lukewarm means neither hot nor cold. In the context of faith, the lukewarm meaning in the Bible describes someone who hasn't blatantly denied Jesus but isn't blatantly living for Him either. ... To sum it up in a simple sentence: lukewarm faith is faith that doesn't affect the way you live.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Timothy 1:6

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 36:5-7

<sup>17</sup> Introduction to the Song of Songs in The Message.