

MANual Lessons from Songs of Songs

This week's lessons from The MANual, my NIV Bible for Men is a series of lyrical poems that feature the love dialogue between a simple, Jewish peasant woman and her lover, King Solomon. Scholars suggest it is an allegory of God's love for humankind. However, the Songs of Songs celebrate not only human love but also the sensuous and mystical quality of erotic desire. Given today's sexually charged world, this literature is a good reminder that God created sex and pronounced it "good" within the context of a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman.

About the Song of Songs

Also known as "The Song of Solomon," the Song of Songs is about romantic attraction, desire, love, and physical intimacy. It's central theme is that sex is God's amazing gift to a husband and wife. The Songs give us a proper perspective on physical love between a man and a woman that parallels the beauty of their marriage to God's love for His people.

The Song is structured like an exchange of love notes between a young woman preparing to marry her love, a handsome man who adores her. It's a story of adoration, satisfaction, delight, and sexual desire. It describes their emotions, their passions, their appearances, their fears as they vulnerably write of their love and desire for one another—sometimes rather graphically. it contains three characters who join the song:

1. The Beloved: the bride who is a hard-working shepherd girl with a rough home life (1:6).
2. The Lover: the bridegroom who is a handsome and stately shepherd.
3. The Friends: the chorus or community of people

celebrating the couple's love and union.

The eight chapters of Songs were probably written early in King Solomon's reign (around 965 B.C.) It's the last of the books of Poetry Like the previous posts on Job, the 3-parts of the Psalms (Introduction, Books 1 & 2, and Books 3, 4 & 5), Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The text doesn't explicitly say whether or not Solomon is the bridegroom, but the bride does reference Solomon's wedding parade (3:6–11). The Song's editors probably added Solomon's name at a later date, presumed due to the references to the wise and prolific king.



God, The Lover

Most men are surprised by Solomon's frank picture of marital, sexual love. The King even suggests that God is the great lover of the cosmos and pursues us like a lover.

- What might happen if you took a page from God's book and romantically pursued your wife with passion?
- What if she knew that, beyond all doubt, you would emulate God's unconditional love and never leave her?
- How secure would your kids feel if they knew you would never abandon their mother?

Chapters 1- 3 suggest the memories of courtship and anticipation of the wedding day. The garden motif in chapter 2 is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden that suggests the celebration of human sensuality is good and not wicked. The peasant woman and her lover, however, must enjoy their sexual behavior within the confines of gardens and fields. This is

the metaphor for marriage. It aligns with the ongoing theme of the Bible that there are ethical and moral requirements for enjoying God's promises.

One commentary indicated some modern scholars see similarities between The Song of Songs and other ancient near-Eastern stories about the fertility of the earth with fertile vegetation of their surroundings leading to the success of their romance. The lovers recline on a green couch, which suggests a connection with nature. The song explicitly compares the man and woman to vegetation: the woman as a flower and the man as a fruit tree with images of plants and frolicking animals as symbols of life for the procreative act of human sexual relations. In the city where plants do not grow, the maiden searches for her lover but cannot find him.

Chapter 3 introduces the woman's first dream where she longs for her lover and is searching for him. When she finally finds him, she "held him and would not let go" (3:4) and him to the room in her "mother's house" where she had been conceived. She has awoken momentarily and realizes that she has been yearning for her lover in her dreams. She turns her attention to the others, particularly to the daughters of Jerusalem. The unmarried woman pleads with them not to awaken feelings of love or desire until it was at the right time and for the right man who would return their love once the marriage has occurred.



Pornography

Perhaps you've heard married guys say, "There's no harm in looking" to justify their porn habits. Maybe you've used it yourself. But God doesn't draw a line between looking and touching. They are the same sin as far as He's concerned. God

gave us one outlet for our sexual desire: our wife. That means you must desire her and her alone. You reserve your erotic longing is exclusively for her. Anyone else who receives your sexual attention – whether it's your co-workers or the girl on the magazine covers, is getting something that rightfully belongs to your beloved wife.

- What triggers your sexual attention outside of your marriage?
 - How can you avoid the temptations of lusting after another woman?
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The Beauty of Marriage

The scene changes in chapter 4 to describe the sexual consummation of the marriage after the wedding. The image of a “garden locked” and “fountain sealed” (4:12) is a metaphor for female virginity. Chastity has always been part of God's plan for unmarried people – with good reason: there is great joy in giving yourself completely to someone who is totally committed to you.

The lover's dining in the garden in chapter 5 implies that the two have consummated their relationship and tells of how the couple's marriage grew and matured in spite of problems. Some time has passed since the wedding and the woman describes a troubling dream about her lover leaving due to a developing indifference in their relationship. Solomon had many queens (wives) and concubines.

Chapter 6 continues as the marriage matures. The husband and wife go through a difficult time, symbolized in the second dream. The maiden hears her lover knocking at her door late one night, but he disappears. Overcome with guilt, the woman searches the city for her husband but the city guards accost her. She asks the “daughters of Jerusalem” to help her find

her lover.



Physical Attraction to Your Wife

Polyamory, (the practice of, or desire for, intimate relationships with more than one partner, with the informed consent of all partners involved), though not condoned, was a common practice of the ancient days. Solomon said his desire for the woman had not diminished since their wedding night, even though many other women were available to him.

- How much do you treasure the physical relationship with your wife?
- In what ways can you invest more time and effort meeting her needs?
- In a non-sexual way, how much of yourself do you share emotionally with your wife? Are you as fully hers as she is yours?

The wife and husband find each other in the garden. The man continues to praise each part of the maiden's body in chapter 7. It's the first real example of the bride standing out among the queens, concubines, and maidens.

In the ancient world, beauty was treated as a commodity, and kings commonly accumulated power through marriage. In this chapter, the groom is saying that his love for his bride sets her above other women. She responds sensually by inviting him to be with her (7:11) and frolicking among the vineyards where she says she will "give you my love" (7:12). (NOTE: In Hebrew, the word is *dodim* meaning lovemaking so, yes, there is sex in

the Bible!)

Chapter 8 laments the couple's inability to show public display of affection, which was forbidden in those ancient times. The husband and wife sing of the lasting nature of true love, and yearn to be in each other's presence. She wants to kiss him in public (8:1) and be embraced by him (8:3). As the Song ends, the couple is confident and secure in their love.



God Buddy Focus

Today, our sexually saturated world is confused due to the prevalence of divorce and attempts to redefine marriage. Studies show both Christian and secular marriages in trouble. We're too busy for each other. Pornography use is running rampant. People too often stray in their marriages. We hear that "hooking up," having "friends with benefits," and living together before marriage is now the status quo.

These all stand in contrast to the messages in Solomon's Song.

For married people, the Song provides some practical guidelines for strengthening our marriages.

For the single person, the Song teaches us not to arouse this type of love until the appropriate time when God brings you a spouse.

This week:

- Give your spouse the attention she needs. Take the time to truly know her.
- Avoid criticism. Encouragement and praise are vital to a successful marriage.

- Enjoy each other and plan some getaways alone. Be creative with each other. Delight in God's gift of married love.
- Renew your commitment to marriage. Work through any problems and do not consider divorce as a solution. God intends for you both to have a deeply peaceful, secure love.

The next post begins the section on the Prophets.