

Cole Community Church Growth Groups Leader's Guide for Solomon's *Song of Songs*

Note: There are many commentaries written on Solomon's Song of Songs. The most sensible and Christ-honoring one I know is by H.A. Ironsides. Dr. J. Vernon McGee has succinctly summarized and paraphrased Ironside's lecture notes. This guide is taken largely from those two sources and others, which are cited at the end.

This small book of the Bible is one of the most beautiful, yet most neglected and misunderstood books of the Bible. Most commentators agree that it is an allegory. Few commentators think it represents something smutty, and these few are very "liberal". Four interpretations predominate among serious Biblical scholars. The book is:

1. A picture of the joy and glory of love in the context of a divinely instituted marriage.
2. A picture of the love of Jehovah God for His spiritual wife, the nation Israel. Ezek. 16; Hos. 2:19.
3. A picture of Christ and His Bride, the Church. Eph 5:23-32; Rev. 21:2, 9ff.
4. A depiction of the intimate and sacred communion between Christ and the individual believer. (As C.S. Lewis has said, we are all "female" with respect to Christ.)

There is no spiritual or literary reason to exclude any of these allegorical interpretations. They may all be true simultaneously. Even human writers may have dual purposes in their writing. For example, the Greek storyteller Aesop told wonderful children's stories that thoroughly entertain little ones with the antics and escapades of talking animals. When we grow up a bit, we notice something we missed as toddlers, that the stories all have a secondary meaning and a "moral" that teaches a life lesson! We must not think God any less a literary genius than Aesop! There is no reason to question that this small book may depict all four different, but related, spiritual truths at once.

To some people, this book borders on the vulgar in its sensuality. But it sets forth the beauty, ecstasy and holiness of committed love, regardless of which of the four allegorical pictures is the focus. As Dr. McGee writes, "When reading the Song of Solomon, take off the shoes from the natural man, for the ground on which you stand is spiritual ground." Let us leave our prurient mentality behind as we enter into the Holy of Holies.

Ironsides has proposed a story line for this book that makes a lot of sense and helps to understand the book. His story line is of a poor girl in the tribe of Ephraim, who is like Cinderella. The family's poverty forces her to work in the vineyards (her brothers made her do this) where she is burned by the sun ("swarthy") and has not had the luxury of taking care of her own beauty (i.e. "vineyard"). Here, she meets a shepherd, and they fall in love. He leaves her with the promise that he will return, but he is gone a long time. As she waits for his return, she longs for him, dreams of him and despairs of ever finding him again. One day, it is proclaimed that King Solomon is getting married. The maiden is not interested, but Solomon calls for her. When she is

brought into his presence, she recognizes the shepherd with whom she fell in love. He takes her to his palace in Jerusalem, where most of the story takes place, and they are married.

Isn't that a wonderful picture of the way we know Christ: we fall in love with the Shepherd of our "swarthy" unworthy souls, only to find that He is also the King who will one day return for us and take us as His bride.

The characters in the story: The "beloved" is how the maiden refers to the Shepherd King. "My love" is how Solomon refers to his bride. The "daughters of Jerusalem" are like an antiphonal chorus in ancient Greek drama, who observe and comment on the drama as it unfolds.

Summary and Highlights of the Book (*Background information for leaders based on Ironsides' lectures and McGee's study guide. This part can be omitted.*)

Chapter 1, vv. 2-4 The bride, in the palace in Jerusalem, reviews in her mind how she met the Shepherd King. The story is then re-told in flashback.

v. 5: she was sunburned, and (v. 6) forced by her brothers to tend the vineyard

v. 7. The shepherd she meets doesn't seem to have any sheep

v. 8. The shepherd is evasive, but he expresses his interest in her.

v. 12-17. She falls in love

Chapter 2:

Vs. 1-7 A love scene in the palace

v. 1. She is not boasting, these are humble, low-lying, simple, non-showy flowers.

vs. 8-17. the bridegroom returns after a trip abroad. She hears his voice (John 5:25), "rise up... winter is past".

v. 16. The highest spiritual expression of any relationship with Christ. "I am my beloved's and He is mine!"

Chapter 3:

Vs. 1-5. The bride dreams of her beloved while he is away.

Vs. 6-11 Solomon in all his glory enters Jerusalem with his bride. A picture of Christ, now the Conquering King, entering into the City of Eternal Peace with His bride.

Chapter 4. 1-15. Love song of the bridegroom. Vs. 16 Response of the bride.

Chapter 5. vs. 1-8 While the bridegroom is out looking for lost sheep, the bride is sleeping. When he comes to commune with her, she doesn't feel like putting herself out for him, but then regrets not acting quickly enough. He departs, leaving his fragrance, myrrh, on the door handle. His fragrance remains. She runs out to search for him and is abused by the watchmen who misunderstand what she is doing.

Vs. 9 The daughters of Jerusalem ask what's so special about the beloved, just as the world asks us, what's so great about Christ.

Vs. 10-16. The bride describes her beloved in glowing terms. She both knows him and loves him.

Chapter 6. vs. 1. The daughters of Jerusalem are impressed by her account of the beloved and they become believers.

Vs. 2-12. Bride and bridegroom express love for each other.

Chapter 7. Daughters of Jerusalem praise the beauty of the bride (see Rev. 21, the bride of Christ described)

Chapter 8. The love song concludes. The bride remembers in flashback how her brothers watched over her in her childhood, helping her stay pure. But she was pure. “I was a wall.)

Questions for Discussion:

1. Read Eph. 5:29-32 with Rev. 21:9 and 1 Cor. 7:2-5 with Proverbs 5:18,19. Suggest two possible interpretations of this book that apply to the Christian believer.

(a) The Ephesians and Revelation verses will be dealt with in another lesson, in some detail. They are cited here to show that the Lord Jesus Christ is betrothed to the Church as His bride, and that He is coming again to take her to be with Him. His love is infinite and eternal. If the Song of Songs refers to this, allegorically, then there is great passion, ecstasy and joy in knowing Christ intimately.

(b) The 1 Corinthian and Proverbs verses refer to the physical union of two married believers and shows that this physical union is ordained by God; it is holy in His sight, intended to be joyful and satisfying, and is not to be set aside or abused by either party (see also Heb. 13:4).

2. What could God’s purpose be for including this book in His Word, in which there is such an appeal to the physical senses and such vivid metaphorical description of human body parts?

(a) This book shows, in terms readily understandable to humans, a depiction of spiritual intimacy with God by comparing that spiritual intimacy to the joy and fulfillment of physical intimacy in marriage.

(b) To present sexual intimacy within the context of marriage as wholesome and pure.

(c) To provide a pattern for couples to imitate when giving and receiving physical pleasure within marriage. (God’s “marriage manual”).

Some people think an allegory to the sexual union of a married man and woman is too “earthy” for God to have meant such an interpretation. On the other hand, God designed both marriage and sex, and it is not a “stretch” to suppose that, given the importance of marriage and the damage to the human family when marriage goes awry, that God may well have intended to comment directly and in unmistakable terms, on this union. God Himself, in both Old and New Testaments, has chosen the analogy of marriage to represent His relationship with the believer. The ecstasy of physical union is something we experience in our bodies. The passion and joy of spiritual intimacy with God are by analogy shown to be powerful and fulfilling.

God has placed many prohibitions on sex, and perhaps in this book He means to show that physical intimacy within marriage was created to be a joy and a blessing. The Bible teaches that there is only one spiritually pure venue for expression of our sexual side, namely marriage. If the analogy is true (and surely it is) God intends for us to experience breathtaking physical satisfaction within marriage. The obedient believer should not think he/she is “missing out” by staying pure until marriage, and then remaining faithful within marriage. On the contrary, God blesses such a marriage with the greatest joy, satisfaction and passion that human sexual intimacy can give.

This book is not the only place in Scripture where the sexual intimacy of marriage is shown to be joyful and pleasurable (see Prov. 5:15-19, as one of several examples) but it is the only place we see evidence that the woman also enjoys and is blessed by the sexual union. (Song 8:3)

3. If the allegorical picture of joy in physical intimacy of marriage is valid, what lessons can we learn from this book that would serve to strengthen and protect Christian marriages?

(a) Things the couple must do together: (for example: Song 2:15, 16)

(b) What the man does for the woman: (for example: 1:15 and 4:1,7; 2:4-6, 10; 8:6)

(c) What the woman does for the man: (for example: 1:16; 2:17; 4:12,16)

(a) Things the couple must do together: Song 2:15. “Catch the little foxes that spoil the vines.” Deal with every problem as it arises, however small it may seem at the time. Some people (often men) think,

“if we don’t talk about the problem, then it doesn’t exist”. Newsflash: failure to discuss problems does not make them go away. They just simmer, hidden, until they explode from the build up of pressure. Other people (often women) think everything is a bigger problem than it is. These folks want to discuss endlessly, without achieving resolution. Both types of people need to move closer to the center. Discuss **and** resolve, doing both according to Biblical wisdom. All problems become small when we compare them to the surpassing greatness of God. (2 Cor. 4:17,18)

Song 2:16. “my beloved is mine, and I am his”. The couple belongs to each other, they keep themselves only for the other, and guard that exclusiveness. This verse connects with 1 Cor. 7:2-5, where the man has control of the woman’s body, and the woman has control of the man’s body. Each one “owes” the other access to the physical pleasure designed by God and given as a blessing. This reciprocal co-ownership extends beyond mere access for it includes maintaining physical, emotional and spiritual attractiveness to one another. If he wants her to take better care of her “vineyard” then she needs to do this for him, because she is not her own. For example, a woman might consider these: eat right, exercise, maintain the level of health and fitness that your genetic profile permits. And don’t neglect the “hidden person of the heart which is precious in the sight of God” (1 Pet. 3:4). Nothing kills attraction like constant carping and criticism. (Prov. 21:9, 19; Pr. 27:15,16) The tongue must be brought under control! Likewise, the man needs to do those things that make him attractive to his wife. For example, anger, silence, sloth, pornography, and an unhealthy body are not attractive! Deal with these!

(b) What the man does for the woman: Song 1:15: 4:1.7 He rejoices in her beauty and he tells her so.

Song 2:4-6,10 He takes away from poverty and heavy labor, places her under his protection. He provides his banquet and his riches. He wants her company. He covers her with a “banner of love”. A “banner” was a military standard. This is picture language meaning that he protects and shields his wife. He is a warrior, willing to fight to maintain the “love covering” over her. “Love covers a multitude of sin”. He covers her sin with his forgiveness. It might be a “battle” but God says she’s worth it! **Song. 8:6** He sets her as a seal upon his heart and his arm. His heart is hers, and his strength is expended for her. Men, don’t just build a “hedge” around your marriage, build a fortress and then defend it!

(c) What the woman does for the man: Song 1:16 She admires his physical beauty and she lets him know! **Song 2:17**; She is his “cheerleader”, encouraging him to lead, to be strong “like a young stag”. She never demeans him or his manliness in the whole book. (Nor does he demean her...) Rather, she exults in his masculinity. **Song 4:12, 16** She is a walled garden, a closed-off spring. She is a lush garden flowing with refreshing water, but only for him. She is faithful, there is no other man even in her thoughts. Toward him, she is open and inviting, eager for him to come to “his garden” and “eat of the pleasant fruits”.

What happens when couples think and act this way? They say “It takes two to tango,” and that’s right! The tango is a beautiful, complex, passionate dance, and both partners must do their part for the tango to “work”. But it only takes one partner to mess the whole thing up. It only takes one partner failing to obey God’s instructions, to guarantee the failure of the marriage “tango”.

4. Read Song 2:16. (repeated in Song 6:3) Discuss how this applies to the believer as a member of the “Bride of Christ” and also to an individual believer in union with Christ.

The spiritual allegory, of exclusive, passionate, marriage-like devotion to Christ is very rich in this book. We can only touch the surface. Some thoughts include, as our response to Him, like the bride of the Song:

“Abiding in Christ” suggests very intimate, continuous contact with the Beloved. John 15:4

Fixing our eyes on Jesus. Heb. 12: 2

Fixing our hope on Him, gazing on Him has the power to transform us. 1 John 3:2

“he who hath the Son hath life” 1 John 5:12

“Christ liveth in me” Col 2:20

As His provision for us, like the Warrior/Shepherd/King in the Song:

He loves us even while we are “swarthy” and unclean. Rom. 5:8

His love covers and protects us; it cannot be broken or defeated. Rom. 8:35-39

He is coming to take us to be with Him. John 14:2-3

5. A repeated refrain is found in Song 2:7; 3:5 and 8:4. “Do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.” The repetition suggests importance. What could this refrain mean in the context of a believer’s relationship with Christ? What could it mean in the context of Christian marriage?

Interpretation varies among commentators. In the metaphor of the individual believer in union with the Lord Jesus Christ, it is generally felt that we cannot artificially generate any true spiritual depth or experience out of our own efforts. We cannot create the sort of passionate, ecstatic worship of and oneness with the Beloved that is depicted here. Rather it must come from waiting upon the Lord, searching for Him, and being truly united with Him according to His prescriptions for intimacy. There is a suggestion of this same truth in John 15:9-11 and 14: 21. Our obedience is counted by God as love, and *after* we are obedient, we have joy. After obedience, the Father and the Son come and manifest themselves to us and we enjoy the “banquet” of their fellowship. The obedience is prerequisite and cannot be short-circuited by any artificial means, including false stimulation of the emotions. We cannot “gin up” a genuine, intimate worship experience with Him, by human effort. The attempt to generate spiritual intimacy, joy, satisfaction and fulfillment, by any artificial means, will only produce sham, hypocrisy and falsehood.

In the metaphor of human marriage, some commentators link this verse to the need for young people to keep themselves pure and free of premature, artificial stimulation of interest in the opposite sex. The refrain may also provide an insight into the failure of marriages in our modern sex-saturated culture. Could an over-emphasis on sexual behavior and widespread premature interest in sex be one reason so many couples are disenchanted, having fallen “out of love” with each other? Why so many marriages end in divorce? We have so over-stimulated ourselves that we can no longer enjoy sex the way God intended. The recent scandals involving pornography even among believers are evidence of a huge problem. And yet, the “overstimulated” ones are the big losers in this form of disobedience. Song of Solomon shows a sexual intimacy that is highly satisfying, exalting, soaring to heights of ecstasy, yet probably achieved by very few couples. And how many couples maintain such a “honeymoon” love affair over the years? Have we traded God’s idea of sexual intimacy for Satan’s lie, as we have done with so many other things? Let us consider what may be done, to return our hearts and our obedience to the Shepherd, the lover of our souls, that we might have not only passionate, intimate union with Him, but also the blessings He intends us to have in the physical intimacy of our marriages.