

Song of Songs 1:1-7

The Best of All Songs

A Sermon by Dr. Bob Berger, Assistant Pastor

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Theme: God celebrates the best song of His love for us
by engraving it upon the tablet of married love.

Word Count: 4439

Song of Solomon 1:1–7 (ESV)

¹The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

²Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine;

³your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you.

⁴Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.

⁵I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.

⁶Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!

⁷Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions?

I would invite you to participate in a quick survey now that you've heard the text that I will be preaching on.

Please raise your hand if you have ever heard a sermon on the Song of Songs preached in a church that you have attended.

I suspected that it would not be many of you, which is a shame because this short book of only 117 verses is an important part of the inspired Word of God. However, it doesn't surprise me that few choose to preach on it, because it can be hard to interpret correctly and can even seem a little embarrassing – not the kind of stuff you want to expose the kids to in church, right? And yet what better place for our kids to hear about this topic!

This morning, I want to try to tackle the first 7 verses of this song. Our time together won't allow me to be exhaustive, but hopefully, it will whet your appetite to do your own further study in this short book of the Bible.

VS. 1

How should we interpret this book?
Some of that question revolves around the issue of who wrote this book. How does vs. 1 answer that question?

Song of Solomon 1:1 (BHS/WIVU)

נְשִׁיר הַנְּשִׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמֹה:¹

Solomon's - which is - songs - The song of

Song of Solomon 1:1 (ESV)

¹The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

is how the ESV translates this Hebrew phrase.

Does the text assert, therefore, that Solomon wrote this book? Maybe, but this is also where people stumble. Have you ever read the historical commentary about Solomon in 1 Kings 11?

1 Kings 11:1–3 (ESV)

¹Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women,

²from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love.

³He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.

How could a guy who made such a mess of his marital life, be God’s instrument for instructing us about marriage? You may find it interesting to note that there has been very little debate over the centuries about whether the Song of Songs belongs in the canon of Holy Scripture. For thousands of years, the clear majority of the Church has accepted this book as part of God’s holy, inspired, and infallible Word.

So did Solomon write it? Is he the husband in the story? If we say yes, why didn't he heed his own advice? If we say no, are we denying the plain meaning of vs. 1?

Perhaps not. The Hebrew preposition **lamed** has a wide variety of uses in the Bible and could indicate a more complex kind of relationship to Solomon.¹

The preposition could mean:

To Solomon – dedicated to Solomon

By Solomon – authorship

Concerning Solomon – Solomon is the subject matter

Solomonic – in the Solomonic/wisdom literary tradition.

As a comparison, you have heard of the King James Bible. No one believes, King James wrote that Bible. Rather, as the King,

¹ (Duguid 2015, 73) *lislomo* may mean “belonging to Solomon” (1 Kings 10:28) or “pertaining to Solomon” in a more general sense. (1 Kings 5:16).

that edition was dedicated to him because James commissioned its translation and declared that it was the only “Authorized Version” to be used in British churches. In a similar way, the song of songs which is Solomon’s could be honoring Solomon as king without saying that he wrote or was even the subject matter of the book. It is true that Solomon’s name is mentioned in 3 passages in this book, but none of those contexts is conclusive that Solomon is being referred to as the male lover in the book.²

2

So
ng **The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.**
1:1

So
ng **I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the
1:5 tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.**

So
ng **Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty
3:7 men, some of the mighty men of Israel,**

So
ng **King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of
3:9 Lebanon.**

Of course, as Craig Glickman points out (2004:173-175), sometimes those who know most about failure are the best teachers and guides to others. Who better to teach us about faithful perseverance under pressure than Peter, who once denied his Master (1 Peter 5:8-9; cf. Matt. 26:69-75)? Who better to instruct us about salvation by grace alone than Paul, the former Pharisee of the Pharisees (Phil 3:3-111)? If Solomon was indeed the author of the Song, who better to show us what true love looks like in marriage than a man whose own life was a walking marital

So
ng
3:1
1 **Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.**

So
ng
8:1
1 **Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he let out the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.**

So
ng
8:1
2 **My vineyard, my very own, is before me; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.**

disaster? ...Of course, this interpretation only works if Solomon is describing something other than his own personal experience, for it would be deeply hypocritical for Solomon to paint his own story in such glowing colors when in reality it was so different.³

I have been studying the Song of Songs since 1976 when I read the first of the six commentaries on this book that I own. Now I have a confession to make. I read my first commentary on this book in preparation for my wedding, to my first wife who died in 1982. I was in my first year of seminary and this was also my first year to study Hebrew. It is said that St. Jerome (A.D. 331-420) who is best known for his translation of the Latin Vulgate, used to throw himself into thorn bushes when he felt the onset of sexual arousal as a youth. And when that didn't work, he took up the

³ (Duguid 2015, 21)

study of Hebrew to calm his hormones.⁴

Well, as I said, I've studied Hebrew, but I haven't found it helped with my hormones either.

Yet as we come to the text before us, the all-important question is how are we to interpret this book. Part of the problem is that we need to remember that we are looking at poetry. As Dr. Iain Duguid has rightly observed: *“Poetry is the art of condensation: expressing the maximum meaning in the minimum number of words. As a result, poetry is often more evocative than explicative. It doesn't take the time to unpack its figures of speech or to explain analogies.”*⁵

It's easy to see that the Song of Songs is a song about love. But whose love? Is it talking about human love between a man and a woman or is it intended to illustrate God's love for his people? Or is it

⁴ (III 2001)

⁵ (Duguid 2015, 24)

something in between, a poem about love in all of its dimensions?⁶

If we are just speaking historically, the top approach toward the Song of Songs has been an allegorical approach depicting God's love for his people. For instance, Cyril of Alexandria (5th century) would direct our attention to chapter 1:13 which reads:

Song of Solomon 1:13 (ESV)

¹³My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts.

How are we to interpret that verse? "That's easy," says Cyril of Alexandria, "that's talking about Jesus standing in between the Old and New Testaments."⁷

Yes, sireee! That was the first thing that came to my mind when I read that verse! But hey, don't knock the allegorical method of interpretation. It came in especially handy for Bernard of Clairvaux, a famous French monk, who lived around

⁶ (Duguid 2015, 25)

⁷ (Duguid 2015, 25)

1100 AD. Bernard preached 86 sermons on the first 3 chapters of the Song of Songs. Oh, and did I mention who his audience was? Fellow monks who had taken a vow of chastity. So use the allegorical method if you want to totally take sex out of this song.

Dr. Tremper Longman, III, reminds us, however, that *“The allegorical approach was not wrong in insisting that we read the Song as relevant to our relationship to God. The more we understand about marriage, the more we understand about our relationship with God. More than any other human relationship marriage reflects the divine-human relationship. There are only two relationships that are mutually exclusive to humans. We may only have one spouse and only one God. Accordingly, there are only two relationships where jealousy can be a positive emotion. The allegorical approach erred in two ways, however. First, allegories suppressed the human love dimension of the Song, and second, they pressed the details in arbitrary*

ways in order to elicit specific theological meaning from the text.”⁸

More recent commentators on this book have tended to regard it as a celebration of human love and sexual intimacy. And indeed, one of the best ways to see Christ in this book is to understand how human marriage, the way it is was created to be, with its joys and responsibilities, points us to the love between Christ and His Church. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this fact in Ephesians chapter 5 when he reveals that the relationship between Christ and the Church is the ultimate mystery of marriage, but then immediately the apostle shows how this practically affects the duties of human husbands and wives.

Ephesians 5:31–33 (ESV)

³¹“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

⁸ (III 2001, 70)

³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Dr. Iain Duguid has captured what I believe is the right balance. There is a proper “spiritual” approach to this Song which recognizes that we love because God first loved us (cf. 1 John 4:19). Therefore, the Song has much to teach us about God’s passion for His people and our love for Him. But equally, there is a plain or “natural” reading of the text which celebrates the gift of married love, including the glorious gift of sex, which exists between one man and one woman who have been created in the image and for the glory of God.

Given our time constraints today, let me cut to the chase about what I personally believe about this nature of this book. I wish I had the time to take you through each chapter as I do with my seminary students in Uganda where I teach a course

on pre-marital counseling, but a brief summary will have to suffice here:

- I don't believe Solomon wrote this book. I believe it was dedicated to him.
- The book is poetry, romantic poetry, and is in fact a collection of love poems.
- It is **not** strictly a narrative, written in chronological order about two historical persons. It is not the three character view (which I don't have time to explain of the king, a poor shepherd, and a Shulamite woman). Rather, it is poetry about an idealized man and woman, who even though they are not historical characters, they do express universal human emotions.⁹
- Vs. 1 tells us that this is the SONG (singular) of SONGS (plural). In the Hebrew language that phrase is used

⁹ Jan Borger has commented about the Blue Bloods TV series which we enjoy: "I wish they were real!" Because the drama so effectively communicates basic human longings.

as a superlative. This is the Song of Songs because it is the Best of Songs. It's similar to the phrase: "Lord of Lords" or "King of Kings". Yet because it is one song, there is an undeniable unity to this collection of love poems, and this unity can teach us much about both married love and God's love for us.

So, who is this book written for?

1. It is written for the young couple who are contemplating marriage and wondering why they should wait until their wedding day to engage in sexual intimacy. (cf. 2:7)
2. It is written for the elderly couple whose plumbing doesn't work as well as it used to, but who know by experience and conviction that sexual intimacy is best built upon the foundation of a true friendship. (cf. 5:16)
3. It is written for the widow, the divorced, or the never married person who wonders if God's passion for them or their passion for Him must be inferior because they don't

have a human spouse, just like Jesus didn't.
(cf. 7:10)

4. It is written for the person who is confused by his or her same-sex attraction, or pornography addiction or those who search for God's purposes in creating two and only two genders. (cf. 5:1)

5. It is written for those who thought that marriage was the answer to all their heart cry for true intimacy but who now years later cry quietly in their disappointment or despair. (cf. 5:7)

6. It is written for those who want to love Jesus because they have first felt His love. (cf. 1 John 4:19)

In a word, dear friend, the Song of Songs was written for you.

Put up the last slide with vss. 2-7 now and keep it up ALMOST through the sermon's conclusion. There will be one last slide.

Vs. 2

The Song of Songs is a book with no beginning and no ending, or perhaps better said: “It is a beginning with no beginning and an ending with no ending.”¹⁰ Let me explain: When the book opens in vs.2, there is no introduction of who the characters are. Rather, the woman just launches in to her longing that her man would kiss her. It opens like Charles Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”

And after you’ve read through all 8 chapters, you won’t come to a tidy ending. Rather, it concludes with the passion with which it first began as a never-ending love song.

Song of Solomon 1:2 (ESV)

²Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine;

¹⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux referred to it as a beginning with no beginning.

shouts vs. 2. Kiss me! For this is a song about desire. The woman wants something – or rather someone – with a passionate and breathless desire. And what does she want? She wants him to kiss her with the kisses of his mouth – not a French cheek to cheek, not an Eskimo nose to nose. She longs for the kisses of his mouth for his love, his caresses, are better than wine.

Vs. 3

Yet the woman's attraction to the man is not merely physical. Vs. 3 tells us that his name is like "oil poured out; therefore, virgins love you." What makes her feel excited is what that name represents, which is his character. He is not simply a good kisser, he is a man of integrity, and that is what even the broader community (referred to here as the marriage eligible virgins) also attest to.

Vs. 4

In vs. 4, we find the woman longing for her beloved to sweep her off her feet and to carry her off swiftly to the privacy and intimacy of his chambers. She wants to be able to say those classic lines from the novel *Jane Eyre*, “Reader, I married him.”¹¹

She refers to him as a king, but this must not be taken literally. It is love language. In her eyes, he is a king, the best and most powerful male in her life, worthy of the highest honor. In 1:7, she calls him a shepherd, but that is not literal either. These are terms of endearment. The Song is best understood as creating a poetic world, not as describing actual events.¹²

At the end of vs. 4 we find the “others” sometimes referred to as the “daughters of Jerusalem” praising their love and union. We’re taught something else very important about marriage here. Your

¹¹ (Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary: Song of Songs 2016, 6)

¹² (III 2001, 92)

marriage is not just about you and your spouse. It is also about the community in which you live. God gave marriage for the purpose of creating a stable society – yes, marriage is important to you and your spouse, but it is also vital for the health of the broader community.

Vs. 5-7

When we come to vs. 5 we see a problem developing. The woman tells the daughters of Jerusalem that she is “**dark but lovely**”. This is not a reference to her race, rather as she explains in the verse that follows that she had to do all the work outside and got sunburned.

Cultures change and what we regard as beautiful is almost humorous at times. In ancient times, it was the servants who had to do their chores outside while the wealthy stayed pale while comfortably inside. Today, with most people working inside, it’s only the wealthy who have time to go to the beach and pick up a nice tan.

Yet in this woman's situation, it was her brothers (note how she calls them "my mother's sons" i.e. step brothers) who made her tend the vineyards but her own vineyard, her own beauty suffered from the neglect. This is an ancient version of the Cinderella story. The woman in our song was disregarded by others, but she had a beauty that went deeper than the skin.

And so, she cries out for her partner. She imagines him as a shepherd and she is eager to find him on the foothills, for this is the one, the one whom her soul loves.

What can we take away from these brief verses in the Song of Songs? It seems to me that there are several things worthy of note...

In our culture, any kind of sexual love between any two consenting adults is regarded as good and proper, something to be celebrated whatever their gender or relationship. You don't have to be married or even in a long-term committed relationship to engage in intercourse: sex is

just sex. Nor is sex just for men and women in our culture: it can be for men and men or women and women. But that is not the perspective that the Song of Songs holds before us. No, the Bible lifts up the ideal human relationship as a single-hearted, lifelong, devoted, and exclusive relationship between one man and one woman.

But through a book like the Song of Songs we also see that the Bible's message on this subject is not just the "Thou shalt nots". The wonderful message of this book is that it doesn't just scream: "No, no, no, you shall not have sex!" Rather, it gives us a new hope and goal – this is how you shall have sex.

We are all broken people! Let me say that again: We are all sexually broken people. Yet the answer that the Song gives to our sexual brokenness is to show us with incredible beauty what sexual wholeness would actually look like: one man and one

woman deeply and permanently bonded together in a unique relationship of love.¹³

Here's a second application for us: How do you evaluate beauty? Whether in your own self-image, or in the way you evaluate others, can you behold those who are "dark but lovely"?

Is the first thing you look for when evaluating a potential spouse how much money they make, or how beautiful they are? If you use the wrong measuring stick for evaluating a partner, perhaps you will miss the very best person God has in mind for you.

After all, if the first quality we are looking for in a potential spouse is a love for the gospel, then some of the best marriage candidates will not have a squeaky-clean past. Instead, they will have a deep love for God that is forged out of the experience of their own sinfulness. As Jesus pointed out, the person who has been forgiven much

¹³ (Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary: Song of Songs 2016, 9)

loves much (Luke 7:47). Perhaps, therefore, instead of instantly discarding the boyfriend who confesses his struggles with Internet pornography, a Christian woman should be open to the possibility that here is someone who is actually willing to be honest and open about his problems. Likewise, we should not assume that it is only boys who struggle with porn. Perhaps the person who wrestles with same-sex attraction in a godly way is worth taking the time to get to know as a potential marriage partner. We should be looking for someone whose own darkness ignites in him or her a deep love for the beauty of Christ.¹⁴

Here's one last application:

Intimacy with your marriage partner is a good thing and if this is your calling you should delight in it. But for others, life is not like that. God has not given you an intimate marriage, or perhaps he has not given you marriage at all. Are you

¹⁴ (Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary: Song of Songs 2016, 18)

therefore, consigned to a less-than-human-existence, thirsting for intimacy that you will never find in this life? **No!** You are not less than human!

I want you to consider the most perfect human who ever walked on this earth. His name is Jesus and he is known in Scripture as both the Son of Man and the Son of God. Jesus never experienced marriage or sexual intimacy on this earth. But Jesus had deep and joyful relationships with his twelve disciples and other friends, both men and women, as well as with his heavenly Father.

Let these words of Jesus sink deeply into your soul. They are from John 15...

John 15:14–16 (ESV)

¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you.

¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all

that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you

And the God who chose you to be His friend has also invited you to a wedding supper. It's going to be his own wedding. He has prepared a seat for you there. And there, dear friend, you will find, whether you have been married in this life or not, there you will find the One whom your soul loves.

Put up last slide: I have found him whom my soul loves.

Proceed to Communion Remarks.

Communion Remarks:

As we come to this Table we are reminded of Jesus' words in John 15...

John 15:13–14 (ESV)

¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you.

This table shows the depth of Jesus' love for you. But it is also a table that requires an examination before you come.

Are you passionate about your love for Jesus? Do you want his grace and mercy more than the air you breathe? Then come to His Table because you have been forgiven much.

But if you have not bowed your heart before him as your king or if you are hiding some secret sin that you have not yet dealt with, then don't come, rather hurry and work out your relationship with the Lord Jesus first. Then come back when your

heart is sincere, for I declare to everyone here: *This is the Table where you will find Him whom your soul loves.*

1 Corinthians 11:23–26 (ESV)

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread,

²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

²⁵In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Benediction:

Ephesians 3:20–21 (ESV)

²⁰Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,

²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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