

## Part 1: Love Out Loud

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Tyler Velin | Song of Songs 1:1-4

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I'm not by nature a gifted evangelist. Yet, as I pray and practice in my weakness God is faithful to provide for me ample opportunities. One presented itself in a conversation I had with a college student who sat next to me as our plane waited for an open gate.

He told me that he was Catholic, and I asked him what he meant by that. He said he went to church, he tried to be a good person and he generally did what the Bible said. "Well," he said, "except for some stuff. Like, sex before marriage and things like that."

Two things stood out to me as we talked. The first was that a low view of sin leaves us thinking that we can work ourselves into grace—the classic heresy of legalism. But second, a low view of God leaves us thinking that we can work ourselves into greater joy.

I told him that because God alone is infinitely good, our own works cannot overcome our sinfulness. We need outside help—that's the beauty of the gospel: Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. I went on to explain that if this infinitely good God was so infinitely loving to send his own Son as a substitute and savior for those who come to him by faith—then what we have in intimacy with the Creator of all goodness, in contrast to the sinful mess we made, is the most satisfying of all joys.

Sin at its end a quest for joy. And while that's true for every sin from lying, to greed, to sloth, there is one area which seems to be—even for the growing Christian—most difficult to accept on God's terms. It seems natural to trust God with our lack of money, our lack of perfect health, or our lack of the job we want at this moment. But it seems so hard to trust God with our lack of, or self-sanctioned participation in romance, intimacy and sex.

The author C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.' Now this is so difficult and contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it is, has gone wrong. [It's] one or the other."

From men on a plane, to movies and pronouns, podcasts and magazines, pornography and marriage—our world has opinions on our bodies and our relationships. The sexual revolution has been drawn to its ultimate end in that love has been redefined as a mere act between two consensual peoples. And yet for more than a mere action, that capacity, tendency or desire now defines the very core of who you are.

In the face of such redefined passion, love, and freedom—the Christian view seems, as Lewis described, out of place. We think of it as outdated and body-negative. It conjures up images of old spinsters and the Handmaid's Tale. But if we would consider for a moment that perhaps it is the world who has it wrong, what does the Bible say is right?

This is where the beauty of the Old Testament book of The Song of Songs comes in. If you couldn't already tell by what was read, the whole of this book is rich and alive with love, excitement, passion and pleasure—which should confuse our culture and hopefully correct the Christian.

Today we will examine the opening verses of this song that we will spend the better part of two months in. And by way of introducing what is to follow, our main idea today is simple: **Biblical love is something to get excited about.**

These opening verses introduce us to three key themes: **Love's Context**, **Love's Content**, and **Love's Community**. But after we see that we will touch briefly on some points of **application** as we move forward.

The book begins this way: **Song of Songs 1:1**, "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's."

While we might want to skip over those few words, they have been written, preserved and inspired by the Holy Spirit for our good. These words outline for us our first point: **Love's Context**.

Historically speaking, the interpretation of this book has been contested and debated. One Jewish Rabbi in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century described it as, "It is like a lock whose key is lost or a diamond too expensive to purchase."

While I think that's a little dramatic, part of the struggle is that this book is a series of songs. Think of it as an album. While albums often describe true reality they do so poetically. This book has a loose story arch, moving from engagement, to the wedding, to marriage—but it doesn't read like a precise timeline in a history book. And while it describes true emotions and realities, the poetic language of the songs is meant to illustrate by pictures more than it is to describe by words.

A second interpretive issue that we need to decide is Solomon's relationship to it. It opens simply saying, "The Song of songs, which is Solomon's." While the ESV translation we use here titles the book, "The Song of Solomon," the more historic and traditional title has been that very opening phrase, "The Song of Songs," or as it was called in Latin, the *canticle*, which means, "The Song."

While I do think there's strong evidence that the book is written by Solomon, the Hebrew phrase "which is Solomon's" doesn't necessarily communicate authorship. But it does communicate an important and essential connection to King Solomon. What is that connection? I think it's primarily the role he had as God's wise king.

The song is not a biography of Solomon, in fact, we shouldn't even assume that the shepherd king we meet in the text is Solomon, nor should we assume the woman is his literal wife. If you're not already familiar with Solomon, he is the last person we would expect to write a book about love. He was a polygamist who led the nation of Israel into civil war.

But that's why his connection to the book is so important. I think it's reasonable to assume that Solomon wrote this Song as a reflection on what he wished he would have known in his youth—it's a reflection on the joy of God's design that often sings most clearly after painful mistakes.

But Solomon's connection also goes beyond him in to God's promise. God had promised to rule his people forever through the line of David, Solomon's father. After David established Israel in security and peace, God said that he would grant Solomon one request at his inauguration as king. Here's what Solomon asked for in, **2 Chronicles 1:10**, "Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can govern this people of yours which is so great."

The wisdom that God gave Solomon was not so he would be smart himself, but so that he would govern God's people in a way that best cared for them. So it's no surprise that while Solomon was unfaithful at many times, God was faithful. Through Solomon we have much of what we call, the Bible's wisdom literature. It is natural that when God's king is on the throne the policies of God's plan and purpose are declared and the result is joy, wisdom and peace.

And because God is the king of the whole universe, his wisdom brings order and peace to every area. In Proverbs and Ecclesiastes we see God's wisdom in the practical and the philosophical, and in the Song we see God's wisdom for romance and intimacy.

The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper once said, "There is not one square inch of this universe over which God does not point his finger and say, 'mine.'" Our love life falls into God's rule—and if we want the passion and intimacy this book describes we will not get it as Solomon tried painfully on his own, but instead we will get it by submitting ourselves to the greater and true wise king from the line of David, Jesu Christ.

A life lived in relationship with, and under the rule of Jesus is the best life we could ever live and it reaches into every corner of our lives.

One final bit of context that is important is that this is said to be "*the* song of songs." It's been reported that Taylor Swift has written over 250 songs, Paul McCartney of the Beatles has written over 500 songs, and Bob Dylan has written over 600 songs. But, 1 Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon wrote over a thousand songs. But this song is: the song of songs.

The Bible often repeats words to stress ultimate importance. Consider in Ecclesiastes the "vanity of vanities," or in the temple, "the holy of holies." It's the blazing center of the object.

Despite the fact that Solomon in his sin had 700 wives and 300 concubines, in reflection the one song he wanted to be known for—the Song that embodied all his wisdom and all love's passion was a song about one woman and one man desiring intimacy in the context of marriage. *The* song of songs is the blazing center of Solomon's joy.

This brings us to our second point: **Love's Content.**

A couple weeks ago, I was greeting people in the foyer before church and I was in full on "pastor" mode. I was engaged in some conversations, and shook some hands of people to welcome them in. But when I got home, my wife looked at me and said, "Do you know what you did to me at church?"

I was terrified. What *did* I do? She said that when she walked in, I saw her, shook her hand, and said, "Hey Sarah," and then began to talk to the other people coming in. I welcomed my wife with a hand-shake. And while it wouldn't have been appropriate to start making out with her the moment she walked in, neither was it appropriate to just give her a hand shake.

The Song largely consists of an engaged couple singing to each other. She opens the song this way: **Song of Songs 1:2**, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine; your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out, therefore virgins love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers."

This lady is not looking for a handshake. She is looking for the bedroom. This is ultimately a book about love, but it's only inside of this love do we find the appropriate celebration of sex. One pastor in the fourth century was uncomfortable with the language this book contained, he said it was too "human" to be included in the Bible. He tried to get the Song thrown out and the result was that he was thrown out and condemned as a heretic.

Sex, belongs to God. And its celebration in the proper context belongs to him and his people forever. We see the contrast of context already don't we? Notice how our lady lover isn't after a passionate one-night stand. She's calling out for her beloved to draw her deeper into a relationship where they then run together for the rest of their lives.

The passionate language of intimacy we read here is understood and written in the context of marriage between one man and one woman. It's not merely after lovemaking, it's after lovemaking in the context of life together.

In this way we need to understand *the song* in light of *the first song*.

In the Garden of Eden, God created Adam and then he delayed for a moment before he created Eve. Why? Did God not think it all the way through? No, it was always God's design to create humanity male and female in Adam and Eve.

But he waited just long enough for Adam to know that among all of creation there was no partner fit for him except for Eve—she was made for him, and he for her. And there, as Adam saw Eve for the first time, both of them naked and unashamed, we find the first song in human history as Adam sang: **Genesis 2:23**, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man."

It didn't sound like Shakespeare, but to Adam's credit poetry and song didn't even exist before this moment. But the creation of his partner, stirred in him such deep longing that the first wedding brought forth the first poetry and song.

But notice what follows right away: **Genesis 2:24-25**, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

That's what I love about both Genesis and the Song. It captures the passion of the lovers, but it frames it in the context of the creator. Adam was hot and bothered, but God is the one who gave the guidelines for where that passion was to find its end. God explains why they have these emotions and where their proper outlet was: marriage between a husband and a wife.

Even in perfection, we need God to speak into our emotions for us to make sense of life. No longer live in a perfect garden without sin, and the Serpent continues to offer us joy according to his explanation: have sex whenever, with whoever, however you want. And yet in a world with so much of what is supposed to satisfy us—we are unsatisfied. Whatever lie we buy, it's not working.

The world really has no guidelines and no context for sex and what we do with our bodies. But the Bible does. Far from meat bags with parts, we are created in the image of God, body and soul, male and

female. We might call our day and age “over-sexualized” but the Bible calls it “dehumanized.” Which is why we need this book as a church.

This is our third point: **Love's Community**.

As we read the book, you'll notice that your Bible probably has little headings of “She” and “Him” in it. That's because our translators are being nice and trying to indicate to us when the gender of the speaker is changing in Hebrew to help us keep track of whose talking. But if you have an ESV translation you'll notice that we meet a third party in verse 4: the “others.”

They pick up saying, **Song 1:4b**, “We will exalt and rejoice in you, we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.”

As I prepared for this series, I had a number of people say to me, “I'm not sure how this will be relevant to me. I'm not married, I'm widowed, I'm still young, this won't be helpful for me.” But what we see is that while she sings about her beloved, and while he sings about his lover, the book is sang to these “others” who are often called, “the daughters of Jerusalem.”

This book is about married love, but it's written to those who are not married!

I want to say a couple things about this. First, this book is unique in that while it was written by Solomon, or in light of Solomon, it is written primarily from the perspective of the bride. Men, you might find some of the emotions and analogies foreign to you—but what a gift that God has given us to consider romance and passion from a different perspective.

The Christian view of gender roles is often describes as being the cause of sexual abuse and domineering men. But any Christian who attempts to live under God's rule must wrestle with the fact that inside of God's gender roles, the book of sex is written primarily from the experience of the woman. Her view isn't repressed, it isn't abused, but it's featured and considered.

Second, where the book of Proverbs was typically used as a training manual for young men who were coming of age, so too is the book of Songs a training manual for young women coming of age.

I was at a tree nursery the other day and the guy there told me that the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, or today. The same is true about how and when we talk to our kids about what God has given us in our sexuality.

The average age of kids being introduced to pornography is dropping each year, and as the last available research I've seen--it's 8 years old. Personally, I was riding a bus to my Christian school in the second grade when I was exposed to pornographic content.

In the church we are often worried about when to have the talk with our kids, but the world is not. There's a difference between age appropriate discussions and dangerous avoidance.

In Montana, we want our kids to have a safe relationship with guns. That doesn't mean we toss them a pistol and tell them to have at it. But instead we want them to know safe avoidance and the need for adult help when they find a gun left out in the open. But then we want them to have a healthy respect

and knowledge when they are at an age where they might be able to pick it up. We need to be ready to be just as proactive when talking about sex.

Scott Mehl has a fantastic chapter in his book on how and when to have "the talk with your kids." P&R Publishing has generously given us permission to distribute that to our body to equip you to have those discussions. I would encourage you, as this book itself does, to pick up that chapter even if you do not have kids.

The book of Song of Songs sets right a community culture that has gone wrong. In our culture today the world takes what should be private about sex (the actual act, and physicality of it) and makes it public, while simultaneously taking what should be public (our struggle with sexual sin, discussions on love and intimacy) and makes them private (it's my body, and I'll do with it what I want). But the Songs takes what is private (the struggle, the shame, the sin, and the questions) and makes it public--calling the church to discuss and care for it in submission to scripture. While also taking what is otherwise public (the acts and the intimacy of it) and keeping it private.

That's the beauty of the poetry of Song of Songs. It is erotic, it is intimate, but it is not pornographic. It excites with emotions it doesn't describe with details. And at appropriate times, the two lovers turn to the others to whom they are singing and they pull the blinds--leaving us to celebrate without participating.

Notice how that's what the "others" are doing here as the woman begins the song. **Songs 1:4b**, "We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine." The community isn't quiet, but instead it's eager to celebrate and support love between two married people.

And that's why this book is so helpful to so many people. Here I want to conclude with some broad **Applications**, five ways this book can be applied.

First, it ***Stirs us***.

I've yet to talk to a pastor who preached this book who didn't say immediately, "It changed my relationship with my wife." My wife and I had a three hour car ride last month with no kids. I shared with her what this book was stirring in me in terms of thoughts and repentance and we had a discussion surrounding our sexual intimacy which we had never had before.

I would hope that this stirs similar discussions in those of us who are married. Are you willing to talk about sex more than you have it? Are you willing to be open and honest about your experiences with your spouse? And additionally, are you willing to share (in appropriate ways) that journey with others?

It's also my hope that in a culture that devalues marriage, the beauty of love in the context of marriage is something that we aspire to and desire—even while we trust God with the timing of our relational lives.

Second, it ***Slows us***.

Notice how the bride in our opening verses doesn't dive into descriptive anatomy. Instead what does she speak of? His love, his scent, and his name or his reputation.

Before she knows him in his chambers, she knows him in his character. His character is like oil poured out--and even the other ladies can see it. Working in campus ministry I saw time and time again women begin to date men while all their Christian friends and counselors are saying, "Eh, I'm not sure about that one." But the church community is here to help us see and love partners who look like and love like Jesus.

Four times in the book we see the reprieve: "Do not stir or awaken love until it pleases."

Some things are worth slowing down. Men, notice how the character of the man has stirred her heart before he touched her body. Win her with your holiness and your character first and foremost.

Scott Mehl said it well, "If the bedroom is going to be a truly safe place, then before the clothes come off, [the virtues of holiness] need to simultaneously be put on."

I read one author who said he's heard of many men who died from starvation, several more who have died from dehydration, but none who have died from lack of sex. Because God is our true joy, we can think soberly about the joy of human love in its proper place.

This is the third application, it ***Encourages Community***.

Look again at the words used by the "others" in verse four: they extol and rejoice in the union of the two, they extol their love more than wine.

Married couples might encounter other couples whose love-life seems far more exotic than their own. Singles might tire of being invited to another bridal shower while they are still waiting. Groomsmen feel the frustration of decorating the honeymoon suite of their friend.

But the best way to avoid despair is to practice biblical celebration and support. Learning to be happy and to delight in the joy of others brings us satisfaction too. More pointedly, if you cannot work for and rejoice in the joy of others, then you're not ready for the bedroom. Sex and intimacy is by nature a prioritization of someone else's pleasure over your own.

Another pastor made the helpful point that married Christians cause us to know the intensity of God's pleasure. But single Christians cause us to know the sufficiency of God's pleasure. The church needs both.

Fourth, it ***Soothes the Broken***.

This book is not all roses. The honeymoon phase comes to a crashing halt. You might be a victim of sexual sin. You might be sheltering sexual sin. But remember the same Solomon who was typified by sexual sin is, here, celebrated in God's miraculous grace.

Jesus died for those who are sinners. Jesus died for his unfaithful bride. Jesus died for the barren womb. Jesus died for the dry eunuch. Jesus died for sinners.

And that's why I love this book. The story of the Bible is that in our sin we are Adam. But the beauty of the gospel is that in our salvation we are all Eve. As Paul reflects on marriage in Ephesians 5 he says this: **Ephesians 5:31-32**, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the

two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

We are broken sinners, and we are soothed not by finding a marriage partner, but by finding Jesus.

And this is the last point of application, it ***Satisfies the Christian***.

Some of us get to sing this Song with our earthly spouses. The images and the metaphors give way to the mystery of physical union. But all of us who are Christian, married or unmarried, get to experience this Song in glory with Jesus Christ.

No matter how good the sex was between the two in this book, they were still left wanting more. They were happy in their sex, but they were not satisfied and soon desired it again. But our hope, the hope for every Christian is in Jesus we will be both happy and finally satisfied.

One author said it this way, "**The supernatural purpose of mortal love, and the cause of its sweet sorrow, is to awaken in us the longing for that greater love which alone can give us all that we long for.**"

This is what you were made for, and if you are here today, this can be offered to you right now in Jesus Christ. If sex excites you, wait till you meet the God who made it.

The story of the Bible is a story of Jesus redeeming his bride the church, through his sacrificial work on the cross. And it's this story that is presented in the final chapter of Revelation as the Bible itself comes to a close: **Revelation 22:17**, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price."

That reunion, that satisfaction, that free offer of grace, is something worth getting excited about.