

Introduction to the Song of Solomon

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[0:00] Hang on. Is that, this is all working, is it? Keep the royal wedding picture up, because I think that's quite a helpful thing to have! in the background. So this morning, ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to introduce the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, which we've read. You're a visitor to the church. As we explain, it's a little bit unusual. We do usually go through the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, a bit at a time, carefully. But this is a rather unusual book of the Bible.

So we've prayed and we've asked God's help. And what is this doing in the Bible? It looks very much like a love song stuck in the middle of the Old Testament of the Bible. And it makes you immediately ask some questions. So we've just read a bit of it. Can this really be what it looks like, a love song for human beings? It starts, I remind you, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. So where do we go with that? And you might say, I thought the Bible was against sex. And so this bit of the Bible says, no, that's a mistake. Question two, isn't this a rather embarrassing book to look at in a morning sermon? And it does have bits. I don't know who's going to end up reading chapter 7, verse 7. Your breasts are like clusters of fruit. And I thought I didn't want to ask anybody else to read this morning because it might be embarrassing. So I read it myself this morning. So isn't this an embarrassing subject to be looking at? Well, question two. Question three, how do you interpret it? How is it to be understood? What are the people in it? What's the plot? And it talks about Solomon. We had two references to Solomon, didn't we? Or was it just one reference? Solomon's Solomon's Song of Songs. We've certainly got a, did we not have another reference to Solomon? Verse 3? The king, yeah, there's the king. I'm sure there's some more about Solomon, but I've got these things muddled up in my head. Five? Yes. So is Solomon part of this? Who are the people in it? And then the fourth question, what use is it? So I thought we'd look at those questions and ask them in different ways this morning. So is it really a love song? Is it rather embarrassing? How do you interpret it? And what use is it? So I'll have a go at those in reverse order. So first of all, what use is it? And I'm going to say, I think this is a song of very, very much use. And you might say, come on, we've got all sorts of people sitting in here this morning. Is it of use to anybody here? Look at the audience.

So there are children and young people who might be thinking about what the future holds for them, what they should be looking for in their future lives. And I think this song has something to say to them. There are people here who are married. And I think this song has something to say to you. There are people who are single and might get married. And this has something to say to you. There are people who are single and who might be quite content with that and not get married. And this has something to say to you. And there are people, I'm sure there'll be people sitting in any largest group who used to be married and it didn't work out.

[4:00] And there are people who used to be married and perhaps their partner has died. And I want to say that the song has something to say to all of us. Whatever our situation, the song has something to say to all of us. And let me put this into a context, which I'll try and do as honestly and respectfully as I can. We live in a very confused world about sexuality. Today's Western view of love, marriage and sexuality is very confused. I don't know whether you've watched Love Island. I hope you haven't. But I think we all probably know what goes on in Love Island. TV program with what I, forgive me because I haven't watched it, I could be doing them a disservice. Those are very hunky young men and very gorgeous young women and they're sort of put together to love each

other. And I think that that is such a very superficial view of what relationships are about between men and women.

We have the Equalities Act. I think it's, I'm not an expert on this, 2010, which introduced different sexualities and said that the people concerned are to be respected. And I'm all in favour of all people being respected. But this is now brought into our current thinking a bit more than just respect and what is thought to be desirable. And as Christians, and I think I'm not, I think Christian religion is not alone in this, we start to say, well, hold on, what's legal?

And the people who go down that route, choose that lifestyle, we respect them. But that doesn't mean we have to agree that we think that God agrees with that. So there's a line to be drawn there. And I guess it's going to be a more and more difficult line to draw. So confusion. So there's a current challenge to the, what you might call the traditional view that gender is a given.

Given at birth, like your ethnicity, like, you know, your genes, you're given that. So that view is being challenged, isn't it? And I think that's a confusing thing. There's confusion over sexual relations, how that is to work. The Bible, as I was trying to point out, does talk about sexuality.

It talks about sexuality between male and female. And it says that God made the human race male and female. And it is this bonding, this very close bonding of two unlike entities that is the mirror of God's plan. And we live in a world in which faithfulness is not always seen as a virtue. So we have the churning of partners, multiple marriage-like relationships in succession. And that seems to be, if I might say, sort of relatively normal. And no wonder if young people, and I'm thinking particularly young people in churches, say, do you know this is all such a minefield? There's so many possibilities of failure. You know, I'm not even going to bother going down this route of marriage. I won't even try and find a life partner of the opposite sex. There are lots of other things I can do with my life. I can pursue a career. I can find someone more like me. And the song enters this context with its unashamed celebration of the unmatched beauty and glory of what you might call covenanted, faithful, heterosexual, sexual love.

[8:09] And the song sort of shows this in brilliance and glory and says, look, this is such a beautiful thing that God has put into our world. Just sit up and listen to this and take notice of it.

Now, it's part of Holy Scripture. And the Apostle Paul says, all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. So, if it's in the Bible, it ought to help us with all those things. And how? So, let's just stop a minute and see how we're supposed to read this. So, one way of reading it, I've got three ways of reading it. One way of reading it is this, to say, although it seems to be about human beings and mouths and perfume and kisses and embraces. Actually, it's not. It's about God and his people or Christ and his people.

So, this is the way of reading it as an allegory. And an allegory is a coded way of communication. So, you say one thing and you mean something else. So, my wife says to me, go and buy cashew nuts. And what she really means is go and buy cornflakes. You see, that would be a code. It would be very confusing though, wouldn't it? So, in this allegory, when it says he, it just means Jesus. Simple as that. And when it says something like, he went into the garden of nuts, we think, right, now what does that mean? That means the church. And this is a quote from a book by a gentleman whom I respect and I've met. I believe I've met him anyway, Reverend Richard Brooks. And he says, okay, it's a garden of nuts. Now, that's code.

What that actually means is it's the church. And it says nuts because it's a hard shell with a sweet kernel. So, the church goes through tribulation but enters the kingdom of God. Well, I think that would be an excellent benefit to people to listen. What they're actually listening to is comments from the devotional life of the preacher and the connections that he's able to make with his knowledge of the Bible. But, pace. Is that right? Pace. Is that Italian or is that Latin? It means peace. It means I'm not trying to argue with you. So, I put pace. It's not actually clear that the Bible is teaching us that. It's what the preacher is reminded of. But it's not entirely clear that on reading one that the Bible is teaching us that. So, let's look at reading two. So, you could read it that it's only about human beings. It is simply about this boyfriend and girlfriend and their kisses and embraces and they're looking forward to being together and so on. And if you read it simply as a human book, well, people go off in all directions with this. They read into it codes about human sexual behavior. And then they would say, well, this is a bit weird if this is the way to read it because God is not even mentioned. Jesus doesn't seem to be present. What's it doing in the Bible? And so, my thought on that is it

might be a very inspiring Bible study material for a newly married couple on honeymoon. But if it was only about human beings, it wouldn't be too much use for the rest of us, whether married or single or whatever. So, let's try reading three. Reading three is this. It is about human beings. But every human couple is meant to be an expression of the romance which is the reality behind this universe.

[12:16] The Bible, if you were to think of it, and this is what a quote from a podcast I heard, he says, the story of the Bible is a romance. It begins, said this preacher, with a blind date in the Garden of Eden. So, Adam meets this woman, Eve. He likes her. I don't know whether you remember reading this part of the Bible, but he doesn't actually say, wow, but he says, bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. This is woman. She's Isha because she's taken out of Ishma. So, it begins with the blind date and it ends with a wedding reception. The book of Revelation talks about the wedding supper of the Lamb, when Christ and his people are all together. And if you think of it from one end to the other, it's a love story. And I've already mentioned this uniquely Christian insight into human marriage. I think it is uniquely Christian. Because it's Paul who can say, the mystery I refer to, he's talking about human marriage, and he says, this is Christ and his church. The claim that God has built into human society, all across the world, something that is an expression of his master plan for saving people. So, in other words, all Christ's people are part of this wider, deeper love story.

And that's why somebody like Charles Wesley can write, Jesus, lover of my soul, let me, in his whole, the original, it said, let me to thy bosom fly. Let me be embraced by you. And Christians would say we have a lover of our soul to whom we respond in a wife-like loving submission. And we look forward to the day when we will see him face to face. That's every Christian person, whether they are married or single, young or old. And I'm going to take this reading as the way we look at it, reading number three. Everybody's very quiet. Are you all with me so far? Yeah, good. Okay. I'm going to do a little Martin Luther King thing. I had a dream.

Last summer, Maria and I were at Anthony Smith's ordination in Durham Cathedral, and we walked through these woods here. Taking the opportunity to stroll around the woodland paths and walks surrounding the mount on which stands Durham Cathedral, we strolled arm in arm one Sunday afternoon in the summer. And I dreamed I saw pairs of semi-divine glowing creatures like angels walking arm in arm through the trees. And not just once, but multiple times. They reminded me, this is my Lord of the Rings thing, like the elven king, the elven king and queen Elrond and Galadriel in Lord of the Rings. Glowing as it were, illuminated as it were. Each pair seemed in my dream to have the dignity of the highest heaven, the beauty of all beauties, to shine some uncreated light into the dappled greens and browns of the wood, outshining almost the sun itself. And then I awoke. And I saw a young couple in jeans, holding hands. I saw a pensioner and his wife helping each other up the steps. I saw a family pushing a buggy, eating ice creams and delaying the moment when somebody had to change a baby's nappy. And I asked the question, which view was the truer view of what it is to be married? Which view was the truer view of the reality of what it is for marriage to mirror the glorious relation of Christ and his church? Let's look at question two. So have I missed one out? Oh, I don't know. Let's look at the passage together. Let's look at the passage together. Is it embarrassing?

Well, I think probably the way to tackle that is to say, what does it actually say? Chapter 1 verses 1 to 14 is as far as we're going to go this morning. And I'm going to say this is not embarrassing. It's about three things. It's about desire, it's about uncertainty, and it's about access. So let's take those one at a time. Desire. This is the woman speaking.

[17:41] And she says, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. In other words, she says, I want to be kissed by this man, not in the same way that you kiss a baby, and not in the same way that you kiss your dad. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. It's desire.

And she says, take me away with you, verse 4. Let us hurry. She says, I want this, and it's not a matter of indifference to me whether this happens now or in 20 years' time. Hurry.

This is something I want. Take me away with you. Hurry. And she says in verse 4, sorry, a longing, a desire. She's not controlling him. She's not saying, this is what you must do. She's saying, but let this happen. A longing and desire. Take me away with you. Let's hurry. So she's waiting for him to lead. You notice this? Will you take me away with you? She's waiting for him to lead. Let the king bring me into his chambers. So when we say king, I'm assuming that this is the way she's speaking of her bloke. She's speaking of her man. I've put young man, but it might not be a young man. To her, he is Prince Charming. He's royal.

She thinks of her relationship as a Prince Harry and Meghan Markle relationship. The wonderful prince to her, commoner, she looks up to him. Let the king bring me into his chambers. To her he's Prince Charming and he becomes to her the king and she becomes to him the princess, the queen, as it were. So here is desire. And I'll just point out that this is not exalting celibacy as the ideal state. Some of the teachings of the early church said you're on a higher level if you were celibate. And I suspect, though I'm not an expert in this, because Roman Catholicism insists that their priests are celibate, that there must be some thought that celibacy is a higher spiritual state. But this bit of the Bible is not saying that. She's saying, here's a spiritual thing. I want to be with this bloke. That's a thing that God can smile upon. I want to be with this bloke. I want him to bring me into his chambers. Let's just stand back from it a bit and say, if this relationship is a mirror or a model of Christ and his church, shouldn't we have the same desire towards our saviour? Shouldn't our Christianity, I'm speaking to Christian people here, be not simply duty, but chemistry? There's chemistry here, isn't there? Do you understand what I mean by that? There's something sort of in the deep parts. And I say to Christian people, Christ has done so much for us. Shall we not have the same something in us of desire for him? Talks about loving him and his appearing? We want to see him.

We want to be close to him. Desire. Secondly, uncertainty. Anybody know who the picture is of? Just me. Anybody know? It's Daisy. Yes, that's right. It's Daisy from Downton Abbey.

[21:28] So I thought she would make a suitable picture on this case. Daisy was one of the girls that serves in the kitchen downstairs and she's always getting told off by Mrs. Padmore, the chief cook. Oh, Daisy, you should have done that. I'm sorry, Mrs. Padmore. I'm sorry, Mrs. Padmore. Like that. So let's go back to the song and let's assume that the woman speaking is not actually a princess, but as she would appear to be, a farmer's daughter, a bit like Daisy in Downton Abbey. And she says, so I'm going to go now to verse 5, dark am I yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I'm dark, because I'm darkened by the sun. My mother's sons were angry with me. They made me take care of the vineyards. My own vineyard I have neglected. She says, I'm a farmer's daughter. I work out in the fields. I don't go to the salon every day. And don't stare at me. Don't look at me with disapproval. I'm tanned because I work outside. And I was not really given any option, like Daisy would say, oh, Mrs. Padmore, have I got to stay on late tonight? She said, yes, go shut up, Daisy. You've got to get that finished for the Lord and Lady tomorrow. I was forced to work in the vineyards. I had to do that. But she says, my own vineyard I have neglected.

And I think this is, she's speaking metaphorically. I think she's saying, you know, I haven't had time to sort of look after my complexion. And I've got to go out and work in the fields.

I can't do my hair every day. And I can't put on makeup every day. I have to go out and work. And I think Daisy in one episode says, oh, I'm such a frump. I never do my hair. And I think she gets to borrow Lady Mary's hairdryer, doesn't she? Something like that.

So here's uncertainty in this relationship. And I stand back from this and say, the Church of Christ may well feel uncertainty in her relationship with him. She may well feel ashamed, unlovely, stained, blemished by sin, unbelief, idolatry, with many trips and falls and fails, many commissions and omissions. Can the Lord have mercy on me, a sinner? Jesus told a story about two men who went up to the temple, one who was very observant and one who knew that he wasn't. The observant one said, I thank you, God, that I am not like other men are. I've fasted, I've given, I've tithed. The other man said, oh, God have mercy on me, a sinner.

And do you remember Jesus saying, the one who went home right with God was that last one? I am dark but lovely. Don't stare at me. Accept me. And Jesus Christ says to his blemished, fallen bride, let me pick you up, let me wash you down, let me bring you to myself. I love you.

[24:58] Jesus Christ sees all and we are told that he commends his love to us in this while we were still sinners. Christ died for us.

Uncertainty. Access. She goes on to say in verse 7, tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock, where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends? She says, lunchtime, midday, noon. I know it's going to be hot but I'd really like to see you. I'd really like to see you.

Why should I be left to wander around who knows where, just, you know, like these girls that wander around unattached, perhaps desperate to get male attention, perhaps even tarted up. I think that's probably the reference of the veil. I don't want to be like those women. I need to be with you.

I want to be with you. This is the chemistry part of it, isn't it? I mean, it's definitely there, the human chemistry. I told you the story of Dale Ralph Davis, the professor of Old Testament, who, in one of his illustrations, says that he was engaged to a young lady the other side of the States. And when he'd finished his essays for the week, he would get into his car on a Friday evening and drive all night to arrive at his fiancé's house. And then he would know he'd have to drive all the way back again. And he says, now, this is how he said it. He says, I drove all that way because I wanted to be with that girl. That's exactly how he said it.

The chemistry of it, you see? She wants to be with him. And I just pause to say, being together is an important thing, isn't it, in a human marriage relationship. I want to be with you.

And I just point out that in marriage, working shifts makes things very much more difficult. If you're coming in, I'm going to bed when your wife is just getting up, it makes it difficult.

[27:30] Please notice that and do something to compensate for that because being together is important. And in some cultures, it is accepted that the husband will go and work overseas for not just a couple of days, but maybe two or three years, and then earn money in Dubai, wherever it is, come back to Sri Lanka, wherever it is. And I want to say that that goes against the spirit of this, doesn't it? They want to be together. And planning that sort of thing in your life is really risky for a marriage because you can't be together. It means a loss of time for a husband and wife to be together. It's a risk and a loss. And then I stand back from this and say, doesn't the Christian want to be with the Lord? Doesn't the Christian want to be every day near him? Doesn't the Christian want to be in his presence? Doesn't the Christian want to know him? The Apostle Paul says, he looks to the future and he says, I'm going to die or I might die.

But if I die, I will be with Christ, which is far better. He wanted to be with Jesus Christ. And I say, if we don't, if as Christians we don't have that, I wonder what sort of Christians we are.

If there isn't chemistry in us that says, I want to see him, I want to be with him. To be with the Lord is actually far better than anything else. If we don't have that, what sort of Christianity have we got? Access. Well, let's read on a little bit further. Verse 8. If you do not know most beautiful of women, says the man, oh no, sorry, this is the friends, isn't it? Follow the tracks of the sheep, graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds. So apparently it's not that difficult.

The most beautiful of women, be reassured by that. Follow the path. There's Daisy with, who's that? Andy, isn't it? Yeah, she's had her hair done by the way. And the friends say, there is a way to be close. It's not too difficult. Let's leave it at that. And of the uncertainty, the lover, verse 9, says, no, don't be uncertain. You are beautiful to me. I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnished to one of the chariots of Pharaoh. Well, gentlemen, here's a little piece of advice. Maybe not take this word by word to say to your wife, you remind me of a horse.

I think we have to read into this that there's a different culture. This is clearly in this song. It's not an insulting thing. It's a compliment. And perhaps we have to look at horses a different way and say, actually, horses are beautiful creatures. A well-groomed, cared-for horse. Here's an animal, noble, strong, fast, and beautiful. And I think that's what he's saying. You are like a mare harnessed to one

of the chariots of Pharaoh. Well, he might not even have seen a chariot of Pharaoh.

[31:09] He might only have heard about it. But these are sort of legendary, beautiful creatures. And you are like a legendary, beautiful creature to me. He says, and your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold studded with silver. Well, probably have to save up a lot for that. But he says, I've put it up on the screen there. You deserve, please don't think about how you are loved with uncertainty. To me, you are beautiful.

You deserve to be decorated with the things that fit onto you that are wonderful to behold, precious and intricate. That's what you deserve. We will make you earrings of gold studded with silver.

And I just stand back from this a bit and say, isn't it a strange miracle if God could look at us and say anything like that to us and say, I find something lovely about you. I find something beautiful about you.

It's not because we're beautiful people. It's because of the way God looks at us. It's something that is from his grace. So Jeremiah, the prophet Jeremiah, records God saying, I have loved you with an everlasting love.

What a wonderful thing. The living God could say to his people, I've always loved you. I always will love you. I have loved you with an everlasting love.

[32:51] The apostle Paul will pick up on that long-term love and say of himself and his apostolic colleagues and also say to the church, chosen in Christ before the creation of the world.

That's a love that goes back before everything was made. God says to his people, you know, I've loved you before the first atoms swished across the universe or whatever they did, before the first words were uttered into this world.

I loved you. I loved you. It's an amazing thing, isn't it? So, let's just follow it on a little bit further.

Of course, we come back to the theme of desire. It's in verse 12. While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. So, are we to understand that the king is miles away and that she's thinking, oh, I could, you know, maybe you remember me because of my perfume.

My perfume reaches out to you, my king. And then this bit, so the quote says, My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. My lover is a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi.

[34:15] So, I've paraphrased it. You see, I was getting a bit tired when I did this. You are like a nice smelling neck thing held as close as can be. But the idea of holding as close as you could possibly hold somebody.

You are like a perfume thing from the rich, exotic, royal locations. Because I understand En Gedi would have been an exotic, royal location. You know, it's a bit like perhaps us saying, oh, it's like something from Timbuktu or some other exotic location.

I want to be close to you. I want to have you close to me. And my perfume reaches out to you. We need to do a little bit more thinking about perfume, which we'll do another time. But there's quite a lot about the sense of smell.

Perfume, myrrh, henna, etc. So, I think we're going to stop. So, let's leave this woman here. She's longing for her king.

And at the moment, she's not able to do much more than see him at lunchtime. Take the sandwiches out to him at midday, even though it's hot. And he remembers her, we hope, when he's at the table.

[35:29] And she's longing to be close to him. And we'll leave it just there. She's longing for her king. She can't do much more about that. But one day, one day, distance and aloneness will be turned into togetherness and closeness.

And one day, the waft of perfume will be turned into touch and embrace. And one day, longing and expectation will be turned into consummation.

But as the Apostle Paul said, I speak of Christ and his church. And one day, And one day, And one day, I speak of Christ and his church. And one day, I speak of Christ and his church. And one day, I speak of Christ and his church. And one day, I speak of Christ and his church. And one day, I speak of Christ and his church. And one day, I speak of Christ and his church.