

Out of step

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[0:00] Last time I asked this question, is there a deep, deep truth that human beings were made for! For more than things, but for eternal person-to-person love.

! And I think the answer to that question is yes. That's what we were all made for. And as you will know if you followed, as we've gone through the Song of Songs, it's my conviction that human marriage, human love, is a reflection and an expression of the divine love for people.

And now I'm going to ask a question that follows on from that. We're made for person-to-person love with God.

And now I ask this question, and how many people have that opportunity and stupidly refuse to take it? That's what I'm asking today. How many people stupidly refuse that offer of love?

Perhaps because they're young and they say, oh, I can't be bothered with this, I'm too young, life's too exciting. Or in growing up, they say, I've got lots of other things to discover.

[1:26] In being busy, I've married a wife, I've bought a cow, I've purchased a field, I haven't got time for anything else. In self-centredness, I'm okay, I don't need anything from heaven, I don't need anything outside myself.

In distraction, our life's just too pressurised, I can't think of anything else or hear anything else. And just in the daily grind, the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches, all this thing, just to crowd out the offer which is made in love from the living God.

How many people have that opportunity but stupidly refuse it? Perhaps they refuse it all at once, there's a crisis point, and they refuse it then. Or little by little, you just, no, maybe later, maybe later, and little by little and the chance is gone.

And today's passage is about a missed opportunity, and what an opportunity it is. So let me just do my little introduction that I've done each time, coming to the Song of Songs.

If you haven't come with us before to this, it looks like a love song for human beings. Can it really be a love song for human beings? It begins, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.

[2:52] You think, wow, that's an interesting way to begin a book in the Bible. I thought the Bible was against sex, but no, apparently not. Is it rather embarrassing for a morning sermon?

Well, I suppose there are certain texts that you would, I find it difficult to get somebody to read this morning. Anyway, there we go. I think it's not embarrassing, but it's beautiful.

It's meant to be beautiful. How is it to be interpreted? Well, it seems to me that the simplest interpretation is it's an agricultural girl, works on a farm, and she's marrying a guy who looks after sheep, but she calls him her king, treats him like King Solomon, and his bride, so it's a sort of royalty.

She's his Meghan Markle, and he's her Prince Harry, as it were. So, it's about human romance, but human romance is designed to be an expression of the divine love for his people.

And then what use is it? And my answer is that it's a very, very useful book, because this is a world that is confused about love and sex and gender, and that reaches quite deeply into our society.

[4:16] But the Bible is very clear on this. This song, unashamedly, celebrates the unmatched beauty and glory of covenanted, meaning surrounded by promises and commitment, covenanted heterosexual sexual love.

That's what the book is about. That's my introduction to it. And what we've done so far, we've looked at the first bit, which was about love and longing, where she says, let him kiss me with the

kisses of his mouth.

We looked at courtship, with this thing about timing. Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. We had something about distance and loss, where she feared that he wasn't around. She dreamed about her turning him away, because the time was not right, and then she worried if she'd lost him altogether. We had a passage about the consummation, like the wedding day, where he says, I've come into my garden.

The garden was locked and hidden from all but him. And this time we have a problem. So they don't live happily ever after. There's a sort of the problem that comes up here.

[5:24] They get out of step with each other. And a spoiler alert, they get back together again at the end. So that's the bit we're going to look at today. So I invite you to look at the text, which is in chapter 5, verse 2, where the woman is asleep.

And just to be quite clear, I think this is a dream. When she says, I slept but my heart was awake. I think there's a dream-like quality to this. So there she is, in bed, by herself, because Chappie isn't around at the moment.

And she's dreaming. It's actually a bad dream. There are fears and concerns expressed in this dream, which the dream expresses.

And she says, listen, my lover is knocking. So there's the lover. And... Sorry, that's the best I could do.

It actually uses quite a strong word for beating. So he's banging on the door. And he says, open to me.

[6:41] And he calls her these things. My sister. My darling. My dove. My flawless one. So I thought that was three, but that's actually four, isn't it?

Sister. Darling. Dove. Flawless one. Four terms of endearment. It's rather sweet, isn't it? You know, you're close to me like my sister.

You're my darling. You're my dove. In terms of endearment here. My flawless one. You're without spot, blemish, wrinkle, or anything like that.

My flawless one. And he says, I've been out late. So I don't know whether he was keeping watch over his flock by night. Some people did that, didn't they?

So maybe that's what he'd been doing. And he's had to come back late. And it's dark and cold and wet. He says, I've been out late. My head is drenched with dew.

[7:37] My hair with the dampness of the night. So I'm cold and I'm damp. And let me in. Now, what's she going to say? What's she going to say?

It's late, you see? What's she going to say? And what she's going to say is, I've taken off my robe. You know, I've got ready for bed.

I've taken off my sort of outer clothes. I've hung them up. Pending. Quite neatly. Chucked them on the floor. I don't know. So, I've taken...

Am I... Do you expect me to put that all on again? And then she says, I've washed my feet. You know, I've all got all ready for bed. Look, I've washed my feet.

And do you expect me to go across this floor to get to the door? Shall I get my feet dirty again? [8:32] So this is a way of saying no, isn't it? So he's saying... And she's saying... No. No.

Hmm. What happens next? Oh. Let's go back. No. Yeah. So this is a little bit like what's happened before. You might remember in 2 verse 9, the lover who was likened to a gazelle bounded up and peeped through the window and said, let's elope together.

Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come away. And she wouldn't open. She said, it's not the right time. That business of...

Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. It wasn't the right time. But she was worried about that and she dreamed that she went out to look for him. But she was correct to send him away at that time, wasn't it?

That she was correct to send him away first time. Time was not right. But this time is different. So if we get it right, they're married. And the reason that she doesn't open this time is not because the time isn't right, but because it's inconvenient.

[9:50] And she's, oh, you know, I'm in bed now. She's lethargic. And she's apathetic. I can't be bothered.

And the delay. She's, oh... Now, she will instantly regret this.

She will instantly regret this. But that's where she's at at the moment. He's knocking. And she's saying, oh... Can't be bothered.

So let's just stand back from the text for a little bit. And I'm just going to compare this with something in the New Testament. This is the bit that Rosemary read. And it's remarkably like what we've just been reading.

This is Jesus, the risen Jesus, addressing his church in Laodicea. And the church in Laodicea, according to Jesus, is neither cold nor hot.

[10:58] You might remember, I know your deeds, you're neither cold nor hot. You're not useful for cold water. You're not useful like hot water. You're not useful at all. You're useless and fruitless.

And this church said, I am rich. I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.

So this church was very satisfied. We're rich. And we don't need a thing. So they were people without needs.

It's a very dangerous spiritual state to be in, actually. To think, I don't need God. I don't need to pray.

I don't need to hear. I don't need help. I don't need grace. They say, I'm rich. I've acquired wealth. And they do not need a thing.

[11:57] And the risen Jesus says to them, but you just don't realise that you actually are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. And the risen Jesus says, why don't you get from me what I have got to offer you?

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you can become rich and white clothes to wear so that you can cover your shameful nakedness and salve to put on your eyes so that you can see.

So the risen Jesus says, you know, I can give you what you need. You don't realise you need it. I'm telling you you need it. Get real and ask me and I can give you these things.

And he says, those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline, so be zealous and repent. And then the bit that I'm thinking of, he says, behold, I stand at the door and knock.

[13:05] If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me. I stand at the door and knock.

And if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and we'll eat together. I will eat with him and he with me. Now, this is not the only way God deals with people or approaches people.

It's not the only thing he says to them, but he does say this. And this is particularly applicable to a certain group of people who are, let me put it this way, have so far closed the door.

It's addressed to a church here which has got itself into the position of closing the door. I don't need you, Lord. No use to me really. We're fine as we are. And Jesus says, would you just let me in? I'm standing outside knocking. I have all the stuff you need if you would just open the door.

[14:28] put down your defences, put down your excuses, put down all the reasons that you said, oh, you know, I can't be bothered.

If you would just open the door, I will come in, I'll give you what you need and we will eat together. It's a wonderful promise, isn't it? And we're invited to take the risen Jesus at his word.

It's a good news promise, that's what gospel means. It says to people who have long resisted him, perhaps, or long been deaf to him, or for, just not opened up to him, for him to say, here's the opportunity.

Open up. And I say, don't turn over in bed and tell him to go away. Get up and let him in.

Sometimes the gospel is put in an extremely simple form that anybody can understand.

This is it here this morning. He's there knocking. Would you say to him, come on in?

[15:55] My home is yours. Every bit of my life you have access to. I don't want to keep you outside any longer. Let's come back to the text.

next. What she says is, in verse 4, my lover thrust his hand through the latch opening and my heart began to pound for him.

So she's realising her mistake now. I don't know about this door. In Sri Lanka, the gate's outside of a little hole with a lock on the inside and you have to put your hand through to undo it.

Maybe that's what he's doing here. And she says, what she says, my heart began to pound for him. Similar translation you've got?

My heart began to pound. It isn't heart, it's belly. It's the bit where you really, really feel things, where you get the collywobbles when you've got an interview. You think, oh, that's that bit, the belly. [17:07] And it says, was in uproar, like a storm, like a tumult, like a riot. And my, that, that, my, my belly was in uproar.

And I arose to open for my lover. So up she gets. I arose to open the door. So she does regret her first response, doesn't she? But, she says, my hands dripped with myrrh and my fingers with flowing myrrh on the handles of the lock.

Now I'm not quite sure where this myrrh comes from. I mean, it is a dream after all. And I think maybe she's saying, you know, I put my hand cream on. I'm guessing this is entirely speculation. I put my hand cream on and now I can't actually work the door properly.

Ah! Maybe that's what she's saying. Maybe there's another interpretation of it. But, the point being that when I get to open the door, but he was gone.

There we are. He's gone. I opened for my lover, but my lover had gone. And she says, my heart sank at his departure.

[18:18] Well, heart there isn't heart either. It's nefesh, which means soul. And it says, my soul went out of me. And to say my soul went out of me is actually a really strong thing.

It's like saying I nearly dropped down dead. You know, I thought I nearly died. My soul went out of me. I nearly died. I nearly died.

It's gone. This was my first delay. It was a catastrophic mistake, he says. And I just pause at this point to say she really was upset, wasn't she, that this delay had meant he'd gone.

It was he. And that indicates something, doesn't it, that she really missed him. You can take people for granted, can't you?

You can take people for granted, but when they're not there, if it was I'll never see you again, something like that, you'd think that's awful. Would you miss such and such person if they weren't there?

[19:29] And I'm going to ask this about the Lord, and I'm going to say, would we miss him if he wasn't there? It's a good question to ask.

You don't ask it all the time, but you can ask it every now and again. I hope we would never get to a point where our church is so well organised, so running like clockwork, that we could have services and the Lord doesn't come and we wouldn't even miss him.

And when you come to church, would you miss him if he wasn't here? Would you say, the reason I came, I mean, it's great to meet with your people and through meeting your people I meet with you, but it is you that I want to meet with.

And if I came and I didn't meet with you, I'd be, what's the word, mortified. She really missed him and it's a question about our concern for the Lord, isn't it?

Would we really miss him if he wasn't here? Well, what does she do next? Well, it looks to me like she goes off into the night. She did this in the other dream as well, didn't she?

[20:39] She went off into the night and she's put something round her, a cloak, it's not the same word as the robe that she had before, and she says, I opened for my lover, but my lover had gone.

My heart sank at his departure, my soul went out of me. I looked for him, but did not find him. I called him, but he did not answer.

So there's three actions and three negatives. I opened, he was gone. I looked, but did not find. I called, but no answer.

Hmm. And then in this dream, these watchmen find her, these rather, they don't say much, these watchmen, but it seems to be their job to prowl round the city, making sure all is well.

The watchmen found me. There's the watchman. As they made their way round the city. And it says, they beat me and bruised me, they injured me, and they took away my cloak, these watchmen of the walls.

[21:57] So she gets badly treated as she's looking round. round. And maybe they mistook her for a prostitute.

Let me just read you what it says in Proverbs chapter 7 about the prostitute. And it is said of her, I'm going to read you Proverbs 7 verse 6, and the writer says, I looked through the window of my house, I looked out through the lattice, I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment, he was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house, at twilight, as the day was fading, as the dark of the night set in, there came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute with crafty intent.

She is loud and defiant, her feet never stay at home, now in the street, now in the squares, at every corner she lurks, she took hold of him and kissed him with a brazen face, she says, come with me. Maybe this is what the watchman thought our lady was, and it's a bitter thing really, isn't it? It's a bitter irony.

She has been so careful to do things in an honourable way, she's been very careful about this and now through this delay, through this miss, I don't know what you call it, to slip up.

[23:33] She is now mistaken for, in the Bible understanding it, low moral status woman, she gets beaten. It's a dream, it's a bad dream.

So, things are not good and all of a sudden she meets her friends, I don't know what they're doing there in the middle of the night, but anyway, here they are, it is a dream after all.

So, the watchman treated her badly, but now she refers to the daughters of Jerusalem. Daughters of Jerusalem, so these are her peer group, we take it as being that.

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you, if you find my lover, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love. So, she enlists their help and she says, come on girls, I want you, this is awful that I've lost him, give me some help here, and I charge you, it's that same strong word again, I put you on oath to find my lover.

And they say, what shall we tell him? And she says, tell him I want him back. Tell him I'm sick with love. And this now leads us on to the next bit in which she says, the friends say, okay, what's so special about your lover?

[25:03] This is verse 9. How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than others that you charge us so? So, that leads us on to the next section. So, we've had this mishandling of the situation where he knocked and the awfulness of losing him and the bitterness of it and now we're off to try and find him.

Okay? And this is the opportunity for her to say why is worth finding? And I just pause to say, what a regret there was to turn away the lover of the soul.

And before we leave that section, I just want to make that point again. You get it, Old Testament, New Testament. In the Old Testament, Isaiah has these words from the Lord, all day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people.

It's not knocking, but it's holding out hands. All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people.

The Apostle Paul quotes that in the New Testament. And before I leave it, I'll just say the point again. God is very patient. He is extremely patient.

[26:36] He's patient with me, and I'm sure he's patient with you too. But his patience is not infinite. Sometimes we say he's got infinite patience, but we don't really mean that.

God won't put up with delay and procrastination and refusal forever. There comes a point when he says, okay, you said you're not going to have me, that's it, I'm off.

there's a window opportunity and the window closes. It might be at our deathbed. Actually, it might be before that, because if we end up with dementia or so and so, there won't be much that gets through to us in a period before the deathbed.

The window will have closed. But before that window closes, don't you be one of the obstinate people. And he's held out his hands to you all day long, day after day, and you said, no, no, no, no, not yet, well, sort of, and you've never actually said, yeah, absolutely, no conditions.

Don't let the obstinate one be you. Okay, let's move on to the young man. So I've got the picture which is the counterpart of the young lady that we had last time, and I'll just go through his

description.

[28:06] So they say, oh, what's he like, this chap of yours? I don't know whether they're saying so that we can recognise him. So she says, okay, I want you to look for somebody whose colouration is as follows.

Verse 10, he's radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. I'm not sure that we would find somebody being radiant and red, a particularly beautiful description.

But perhaps what she means is he's glowing with health, radiant skin, and so on. Then we're told about his head. His head is the purest gold.

So girls, look out for somebody who's got a pure gold head, that's the one we're looking for. I think it's poetic, isn't it? His head is of pure gold. And we're told about his hair, so it's wavy and black, his hair is wavy and black as a raven, so blackness being an attractive hair colour.

So as I look around, some people have got black hair, some people haven't, some people haven't even got hair. Anyway, as she sees, having black hair is an attractive thing, she says, well he's absolutely that.

[29:33] His eyes are like doves. See, he said that about her. And so there's a sort of mutuality going on here. There's some doves. His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume.

I don't know what to say about that, so I'll carry on. His lips, we're told his lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh. I don't really know what to say about that either. His arms are rods of gold or sort of stands of gold or mechanisms of gold perhaps, set with chrysolite.

chrysolite would be a semi-precious stone. Maybe, if I got this right from the original, the original says Tarshish, but Tarshish is a place, isn't it?

Beryl, we talk about burial, don't we? It's a semi-precious stone. So, it's a beautiful thing, but it's not like a diamond, it's semi-precious.

His body is like polished ivory decorated with sapphires. So, look out for somebody with a smooth ivory body with sapphires stuck in it.

[30:46] Yeah, and a gold head. And his legs are like pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold. There we are. And his appearance, if you want to know what he looks like in general, he looks like a huge forest, because that's what Lebanon is like, this beautiful, lush, forested area.

He's like wooded Lebanon choice as its cedars. And let's come back to his mouth. His mouth is sweetness itself. And if you put it all together, she's just saying, he's brilliant.

He is, isn't he? He's everything you could want. He is all desirable. And once again, I just point out, if we had a photograph of him, you know, he wouldn't actually have a gold head and golden arms.

But what she's just saying is he, in my eyes, he's beautiful. He's everything I want in his appearance.

This is how she sees him. So this is her description of him. And I hope next week say a little bit more about the body. But I won't stop and talk about that this morning.

[32:02] No wonder she misses him. You'd miss somebody if their head was a pure gold and their arms were a pure gold and so on and so on. But she misses him. And I pause at this point to say she has a lot of good things to say about him, doesn't she?

And that's always good advice for a couple, to notice the good things. You soon get to notice all the other things, don't you? He leaves his socks in a pile at night and doesn't fold his clothes up properly and so on and so on.

But she doesn't go through that. She says these are the good things and she has a lot of good things to say about him. And I'm just going to stand back from the passage and say the great lover of our soul as the New Testament presents him is Jesus.

And so my next question is would you have a lot of good things to say about him? Would you have a lot of good things to say about him? If somebody said to you, what's he like, this saviour that you claim to honour?

Would you have anything you would say? Would you have lots of good things to say about Jesus? Would you say about his courage and his honesty?

[33:24] Would you talk about the way he speaks so straight? And he doesn't try and curry favour with people, he says it like it is. Would

you talk about his courage and his honesty?

If you're asked to talk about him, would you talk about his compassion and his mercy? How he dealt with the woman that had five husbands, the Samaritan lady, one at the well.

Would you talk about how he dealt with the lepers sinners and the blind and the lame and the compassion that he had? Would you talk about how he dealt with sinners and forgave them?

Would you talk about that sort of thing? Would you talk about his wisdom and his truth? Would your mind go to when he was on that last few days in Jerusalem and they came at him with everything, tried to trip him up about is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, which is the greatest commandment, and the spurious story about the woman who had which way round was it?

She married seven different men, seven brothers and in the resurrection, which one is she wife to? You remember that? All these things and how Jesus so brilliantly just fended off each question with his own wisdom so that nobody dared to ask him anymore.

[34:48] Would you talk about his insight into scripture? Would you say, here's someone who knows life, who knows God, who knows the word of God and brings it to me?

Would you talk about his humility in coming to earth? Would you say, isn't this an amazing person who being in very nature God did not think equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself and took the very nature of a servant and came down to earth?

Would you talk about his remarkable humility? Would you talk about his sacrificial love in dying on the cross? Would you say, this is the only person who has ever said he would die for me and done it?

That's what he's done. That's how much he loves. He knew that's what it took for me to be saved and he went to the cross for me and he died on the cross for me and he bore my sin in his own body on the tree and he experienced the wrath of God that was due to me on him and he took all of it which is more than I can count or tell and all of it he took and at the end he said it is finished.

Would you tell people about that? Would you say, here's a good thing about Jesus, that he died as condemned and everybody thought he was condemned and everybody thought he was finished but God said, no, he's not finished.

[36:14] That condemnation wasn't right and therefore God highly exalted him and would not let death catch him and trap him but loose the bonds of death and brought him out from the grave.

Would you tell people about that? Would you say, this is the beauty of Jesus that he was resurrected on the third day and would you talk about the suitability of his exaltation that where God says, therefore God highly exalted him and gave him Hashem, name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Would you tell them about that? The suitability of his exaltation and the power of his promises that every word that he spoke still rings true and every invitation that he gave is still valid and every promise that he made he will still keep.

Would you tell people about that? Now that woman had a lot of good things to say about her bloke. We've got an awful lot of good things to say about our saviour, haven't we?

Wouldn't we say, if this lady said he's outstanding among ten thousand, we'd say our saviour's better than that? And when this lady said he's all desirability, he's everything he could want, would we say actually Jesus is better than that?

[37:50] Hmm. And would we talk about the acclaim he has yet to receive on the day when, according to the promises that he gave, he will come back, he will come again, and every eye will see, his glory will be shown, and he will be, not only given the title, but in actual practice, will be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and every knee will bow to him, every tongue confess him.

Looking forward to that day, that's where he ought to be, isn't it? He's so great and so lovely, that's the acclaim he deserves. He doesn't yet have it, but he will one day.

Well, the friends wonder how it all ended up. Where has your lover gone? And 6 verse 2, I think the storm is over.

She says, it's okay, nowhere he is, everything's back to normal. My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens, to gather lilies, and we're back together. Yeah. I am my lover's, my lover is mine, and he browses among the lilies. I don't know why he wants to browse among lilies, but anyway, that's what he does. We're together.

[39:24] That's the important thing. I am his, he is mine. He brought me to his banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. It's one of the things.

We're together. All is well. All is well. All is well. well. If that was true in this earthly relationship, how much more true in the divine human relationship of salvation from sin, of the salvation Jesus offers, when he says, no one comes to the Father except through me.

I bring you to the Father's house. I bring you to the throne of God. I bring you home. If you're in my hands, says Jesus, nothing, no one can pluck you out of my hand.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, either whatever it says, height nor depth, things future, nor things past, nor anything else in all creation can separate us together.

Nothing can break it. The song says, it is well with my soul. It's okay. Though Satan should buffet and trial should come, let this blessed assurance control that Christ has regarded my helpless estate.

[41:05] It is well. It is well with my soul. And I think if you can say that, I'm not sure whether there's any more blessed position to be in than to be able to say whatever goes on, whatever the storms are, I'm safe in the love of Jesus Christ my Lord.

Amen. Let's sing together. Let's sing something good.