

# Song of Songs 1:1-2:7

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- [ 0 : 00 ] Great God in heaven, purify my heart and cleanse my lips that your voice may be heard. Give us your spirit that we may understand your word and love and do your will to your glory. Amen.
- So, everything is a love story. And so, jumping into this book seems in some ways appropriate.
- And yet, love stories are so nuanced and delicate. There is a group of us who watched The Godfather Part 2 last night, which at its core is a love story.
- It's a love story between a thoroughly corrupt man and his wife, who is so repulsed by him that she ultimately does the unthinkable and leaves him.
- So, maybe I'm just in a cynical place. This seems like probably a better picture of marriage in this day and age, in this life, than what Song of Songs has to offer.
- [ 1 : 09 ] Yet, I think I'm encouraged to be looking at the Song of Songs. I'm hopeful. This is an ideal picture, and it has a lot to teach us.
- Song of Songs, also sometimes called the Song of Solomon, or canticles, which is the Latinization of the word songs, is a superlative, like King of Kings or Lord of Lords.
- It means it's the best song of songs. And while I'm happy to be taking a look at it, I've also come to believe that it is just about the most difficult book in the Bible for preaching.
- Various commentators have called it the most difficult, or easily the most obscure book in the Bible. And so, with those endorsements in mind, I'm going to take a little bit of time here, and a somewhat extended introduction for the whole book, and for our short series in Song of Songs.
- And then we're going to dig deeper into our first passage. So, what do we need to know about the book? Or, to put it differently, what do we need to remember as we read it?
- [ 2 : 18 ] Three things. It's graphic. It's historic. And it's Christian. First, it's graphic. This one, if you spend any time reading the book, is obvious.
- You need to spend just a few seconds, actually, visually considering most of the metaphors, and you will think graphic is actually a tame way of putting it.
- By this, though, I mean it is graphic in a literary sense. One of the most important things we can do as readers of Scripture is to understand a text on its own literary terms.
- We need to know what kind of text we're reading, and therefore what kinds of tools we bring to reading it. In our case, Song of Songs is wisdom literature in poetic form.
- It's poetry. And as we saw with Job, two of the most important tools for understanding poetry is understanding images and understanding emotional content.
- [ 3 : 23 ] That is, it is often just as important to ask what emotion is being provoked by this poetry as what point is being made by this text.
- Unlike most of the rest of Hebrew poetry in the Bible, however, this poetry is overtly sexual. Some of the images are quite explicit, and the emotional content of the poetry is, as a result, quite...

I don't know what the right word is. It's quite hot. There's a... I think there's a reason why... There's very old tradition in Jewish circles that the young Jewish man was not allowed to read this book until he was either 30 years old or married.

So, I think there's a good reason for that. But it's not just graphic. It's also historic. This is an important point because most of the last 2,000 years, the dominant way of reading this text, in fact, the nearly exclusive way of reading this text, was allegorical.

First century rabbis and the church fathers alike defended its place in the canon, but they defended it in part because they understood it to simply be an allegory of God and his people or Christ and his church.

[ 4 : 42 ] It's only in the last 150 to 200 years that scholars have gone back and said, this text really bears no marking of an intentional allegory.

We have plenty of ancient texts, some in the actual Old Testament, which are intentionally allegorical, but this text isn't one of them. Rather, it seems that it was intended by its author to simply be a collection of somewhat connected lyric poems.

It's not a drama, if only because we actually don't know who's actually speaking at which point and there are no stage directions and it's not structured like a drama.

It's not an allegory because contrary to Jewish interpreters and their later Christian interpreters, the two breasts of the young woman mentioned at various points in the book were not intended to represent Moses and Aaron or Moses and Phinehas or Joshua and Eleazar or the Old and the New Testament or the twin precepts of love God and love neighbor or blood and water or as Gregory of Nyssa argued, the two breasts were the outer and inner man united in one sentient being.

Now, fueled by a Neoplatonic and probably Gnostic separation of the physical from the spiritual, the Church Fathers started a long tradition of fairly improbable allegorizing.

[ 6 : 17 ] Unfortunately, we cannot do that. We must deal with it as it was intended for its first audience and in the form that we have it as it's intended for the audience of today.

And at its most fundamental and human level, it is a series of erotic love poems. Now, it's not just graphic and it's not just historic.

It is also Christian. This is important for a few reasons. For example, it is wisdom literature. It's paired in every known configuration of the Bible with Ecclesiastes and other wisdom books.

And in part, I think this is because it's attributed to Solomon. But even more so, it's practical. Complete with advice to the young couple and the friends and the readers.

It's practical for people. And also, its graphic nature is not lewd. It is the right and joyful interaction of a married couple, which, if you want, after the service, I can defend from the text.

[ 7 : 30 ] That's to say, this is not a free love manual, hippies. But even more than defending the virtue of the text, it's not just part of the Old Testament.

It's part of the Bible. It was put in the canon for a reason. And as such, it has something to teach us about the scriptures, the word of God, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Or in light of passages like Luke 24, we simply need to understand how this book, this oh-so-challenging book, legitimately anticipates the gospel.

And it's our job, then, as readers, to know how this works. So there it is. That's what I think you need to remember as we dig into this book. It is graphic, it is historic, and it is Christian.

And with these notes, let's look at our first passage, 1-1 to 2-7. This is a passage about the intimacy of two lovers. It's about desire, and it's about commitment.

- [ 8 : 41 ] The first verse, Song of Songs, which is Solomon's, is an inscription attributing it to Solomon. It seems simple enough. What follows, though, is, I think, more complex.
- This first cycle of poems is structured, just as the ESV lays it out, as a kind of dialogue, primarily between a young woman and a young man, with the occasional interjections of a group of observers.
- The woman speaks five times, 1-2 to 4, 5-7, 12-14, 16-2 to 1, and 2-3 to 7. The man speaks only three times, 1-8 to 10, 15, and 2-2.
- The observers interject twice, 1-4, and 11. Let's focus on the first speech for just a moment, so look with me at 1-2 to 4. This is our first introduction to the young woman who is the subject of most of the poetry of this book.
- Notice her first line, Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. She is an assertive woman. Like most of the women in the five scrolls section of the Hebrew Bible, think Ruth, think Esther, as well as the woman described in Proverbs 31, she has no problem saying what she wants to say.
- [ 10 : 08 ] Yet notice she's still humble about it as well. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. Whether it's an intrinsic humility or recognition of a biblically defined complementary role, she does not say, Let me kiss him with my mouth.
- She asks for him to take the lead and kiss her. She invites physical intimacy. But then notice what she does next. She moves right from this third person statement into the second person.
- She starts talking to him. 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. She's invited physical intimacy and now we get a little insight as to why.
- She's attracted to him. She's attracted to his mouth, to his scent, to his character, to his reputation. This is important. While it's physical, it's not merely physical.
- [ 11 : 20 ] It's both. Then the observers jump in. We will exalt and rejoice in you. We will extol your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you. Then in 1.5 through the end of our passage, 2.7, we see several things, beginning with the woman's self-perception.
- Starting in verse 5, I am very dark but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do 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. Tell 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? She works in the vineyards and apparently, from her tanned complexion or possibly a reference to her ethnicity, she works hard out in the sun.
- She compares herself to the city girls who veil themselves and it seems as though she has a somewhat negative view of herself. She hasn't focused on her own beauty or tended to her own vineyard.
- [ 12 : 41 ] And in 2.1, she claims to be a very common and wild flower, not a potted and carefully maintained flower in the royal garden. Where she was assertive initially in verses 2 to 4, she seems a little bit more timid now.
- His assessment of her is quite different. She says she's a lily of the valley. He says in 2.2, she's a lily among the brambles. She is, in his mind, uncommonly beautiful.
- Most beautiful among the young women, 1.8. Three times he calls her beautiful. She is beautiful like a majestic horse. Her eyes, 1.15, are like enchanting doves.

She is the most beautiful in his mind. This all comes to a conclusion then in 2.3.7, where she returns to descriptions of intimacy.

And this is a kind of delicate, sensual intimacy. An apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight, I sat in his shadow and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

[ 13 : 55 ] He brought me to the banqueting house and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love. His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me.

It's kind of hot, isn't it? I mean, it's delicate, it's sensual, it's beckoning, it's foreplay.

She describes it in transcendent terms. His banner over me was love. They are together one flesh. And she is, according to her words in 2.5, sick with love.

It's overwhelming. So much that she's inspired in that last verse to caution her companions to wait. They need to wait until the right time before they should give in and give themselves over to this kind of intimacy.

More on that in a moment. This is our text. So now we have to ask the question, so what? What are we supposed to learn from this sizzling love poetry?

[ 15 : 08 ] Three applications. First, we should learn something here about the right time for sexual intimacy. That last verse, I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases, is an important command.

It's a command we'll see repeated throughout the book. What is the right time? Is our question. Well, biblically defined, it is marriage. And why?

Notice there's no hint of negative consequences here. The negative consequences we know about from many other passages in Scripture. No, it's not the negative consequences or the physical and social consequences we learn about in sex education classes or the spiritual consequences we learn about from Paul in his exhortations to Christians concerning non-marital sex or fornication.

No, in this case, the exhortation seems to be, wait, daughters of Jerusalem, wait, because it's worth it. Love and passion within marriage can be so wonderfully all-consuming.

And here, she says, wait, because it's so consuming, don't cheapen it by giving into passion before it's the right time.

[ 16 : 33 ] Second, we need to learn something about being in marriage. The devotion these two lovers show one another, this astonishingly deep attraction, this intense desire for one another.

Again, notice it's not just physical, it's emotional. There's a deep commitment here. He provides for and protects and embraces her.

She looks not just to his physical attributes but his character and his reputation. Yet, there's no denying the physical. I do not know any married people who don't look at their own marriages and compare it to a passage like this and think, either, one, hey, we're like that or two, we wish we were like that.

So this is a reminder. It's a prayer for married people. Consider your wife. Consider your husband. Look longingly at them.

Consider their whole being and be attractive. I know my desire for my wife, especially while she's away. I pray that she will continue to have desire for me in that same way.

[ 17 : 47 ] See, marriage is a high calling, friends, and this is a full and vivid picture of the most intimate yearnings within that calling. And this kind of intimacy for fallen people such as we are comes at a cost.

We need mercy for each other. We need to be able to endure the hard times by forgiving one another. This kind of intimacy comes only by grace, by sacrificial, heartbreaking grace.

But when that happens, intimacy grows. So married people, think about this kind of intimacy. Pursue this kind of intimacy.

Pray for this kind of intimacy. Third, we should learn something about how we approach our Savior. We do not need to allegorize this passage to say that, in fact, this is a book in a passage that teaches us about intensely desiring the object of our affections.

It teaches us about being in an emotionally charged relationship which we were chosen, in which we were chosen like this young woman, rough and unkept, undeserving, from among the young women in Jerusalem.

[ 19 : 06 ] Listen to Deuteronomy 7, verses 6 to 8. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession.

Out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth, it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

But it was because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

God, in his profound love, chose his people. And then he sacrificed for them, for us, in an unimaginable way.

You see, our sin keeps us from proper intimacy with God. and just as with a married couple, it takes constant forgiveness, this posture of sacrifice and of mercy to repair that relationship and rebuild intimacy.

[ 20 : 19 ] That sacrifice that repairs our relationship with God and restores intimacy between God and his church, between us and our Savior, that sacrifice was Jesus on his cross.

and because he died, intimacy with God can be restored. So yes, we're a mess.

As a church, as a sinful people, we are a mess. But the loving sacrifice of our bridegroom who chose us in our rough and unkept state, who sees us as his beloved bride, all of that means that intimacy is restored.

So the question is, how much do you desire your Savior? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you.

Thank you so much for choosing us. Thank you for loving us so much that you sent your Son to die for us. And we may come to you and receive the gift of eternal life and eternal relationship with you.

[ 21 : 35 ] May we grow in our desire for you with each coming day. We pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.