

The Song to End All Songs

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Preacher: Paul Dudley

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of February 2004.

The preacher is Paul Dudley. His sermon is entitled The Song to End All Songs and is based on The Song of Songs, chapter 8, verses 8 to 14.

I had barely got to the front door last week when Wilma Wyckart comes running up to me and stakes her claim on the box of chocolates.

You may remember last week, to try and encourage the romance and love in our relationships, I offered a box of chocolates for the best Valentine's gift that would be given.

And so Wilma comes rushing up to me and she says, Paul, for the last 45 years, Ian has given me a Valentine's card and I have kept every single one.

[1 : 12] At the moment Wilma's got the chocolates, but I'm happy to take any other claims, so see me after. We've been looking at this book, Song of Songs, the song to end all songs.

We've been looking at the relationship between a shepherd boy and a country girl, the love and the yearning that they had together, the way that last week was the great climax of the song, where finally their relationship is consummated.

You can see that in chapter 8, verse 5. It might be good for you to have your Bibles open at this, at page 548. And there we see them coming out of the wilderness, leaning upon each other.

They are together, finally. After the separation, after the many obstacles that get in their way, finally they are together. And we had this great climax in the book.

And verses 6 and 7 reflect, after the time that they are together, reflect on the nature of love. Let me read it to you again. Verse 6.

[2 : 26] Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death. Passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

My wife says that I'm a Philistine in the music area. I play the trumpet, the flute, the saxophone and guitar, not all that well.

But I love music. And one of the things about music is that at the end of many bits of musical compositions, there is what is called a coda. A coda is this concluding movement of a song.

It's the final part of the song. It comes after the climax. So if you listen to some of the great music in the past, you'll hear the great climax of the song. You may have cymbals and bells, and the music is grand.

[3 : 33] But then after that, the music quietens down. And what we have there in that last section of the song, the coda, we hear the quiet echoes of some of the major themes that have been running through the music.

Well, in today's passage, it is similar. We've come to the coda of the song to end all songs. It is the section where many of the themes are brought just quietly to the surface, allowing us to sit back and just reflect on the nature of love, allowing us a time to drink in all that we've heard, to absorb it all, to apply it to ourselves.

And so that's what we're going to do today. We're going to reflect on this last section and then reflect on how this song fits into the Bible. The first part of today's passage starts at verse 8.

And here we reflect again on the obstacles that get in the way of love, namely in this case, the meddling brothers. They first appeared right at the very beginning of the book, in chapter 1, verses 5 and 6.

There we're told that the brothers made her work out in the vineyards, making her skin dark and unattractive. They pushed her aside, and because she was attending the vineyard, she wasn't able

to look after her own self, to look after relationships.

[5 : 08] The meddling brothers are mentioned here in verse 8. And there they are together, thinking about how they may look after and protect their sister. We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.

What shall we do for our sister on the day when she is spoken for? They start by reflecting on the fact that their sister is still immature, and she hasn't reached that age of marriage yet.

And so they're sitting around together trying to work out a strategy. How are we going to look after our sister here? How are we going to care for her so that she'll be the best sister, the best wife, for whoever it happens to be in years to come?

And then they reflect in verse 9. If she is a wall, then we will build upon her a battlement of silver. But if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar.

The imagery that we have here is that of architectural imagery. It's that of a door and a wall. Now, walls are there to upright structures, that are there to enclose, to divide, to support, to protect.

[6 : 15] They're there, very solid structures. And what they're saying here, if she is a wall, that is, if she is still a virgin, if she hasn't been sleeping around, then what we're going to do is we're going to build battlefronts which make the wall even bigger.

We're going to put silver on, we're going to make it silver, we're going to make it a, we're going to protect her so that she will be right, right for when she is married. The silver here may indicate that they're honouring her in her decision to keep herself for one person only.

It may be that they're also silver in terms of making her more attractive for when she does get married. Now, I think this is an excellent thing that we need to bring back in. I've got four sisters. I'm marrying my last sister in two weeks' time. Now, I'm reflecting on this. Perhaps I should have been a little bit more involved in the whole thing. Perhaps I should have checked his credentials, had a look at his resume.

Perhaps I should have checked what he could offer me as birthday presents each year. You know, perhaps I should have just worked out these things. You know, perhaps he might have brought a better price for us when we got rid of our sister. We should have checked on these things perhaps.

[7 : 24] Perhaps... She responds. Oh, sorry, that's the wall. But then they say if she is a door, a door is an opening into a room or a building or a city.

They reflect there. If she is a door, that is, if she sleeps around, she's sexually promiscuous. Well, if she's that, well then, they're going to build up a board across her. They're going to close her off.

They're going to stop this promiscuous nature of hers. Well, the woman responds to this. She responds, although she is not spoken to, it's obviously they're speaking among themselves and she disputes their perception of her maturity and also her chastity.

She says for herself there in verse 10, I am a wall and my breasts were like towers. Then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace.

She is a wall. She has kept herself for a lover. But not only has she kept herself for a lover, she is also mature. She, in light of these two things, brings her love to her great peace.

[8 : 33] The word here in the Hebrew is shalom. It's that idea of complete fulfillment, of peace.

Reminds us when we think back to the picture in chapter 8, verse 5 of them leaning, she leaning on him as they come out of the wilderness.

This picture of peace, of fulfillment, of wholeness. This is the picture of shalom, that idea of fulfillment, contentment, satisfaction and wholeness.

Because she keeps herself for her lover, for her one person. Because she is mature, because of these two reasons, in his eyes, she brings him peace.

She needs him and he needs her. We see here the language that this love is a good thing.

It is good. In verse 11, we continue to reflect on some of the themes of the past. This time we reflect on how love puts power and wealth in its place.

[9 : 46] That you cannot buy love. These are quite difficult verses to try and understand all the details from the two verses. Let's have a look there in verse 11. Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon.

He entrusted the vineyard to keepers. Each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My vineyard, my very own, is for myself. You, O Solomon, may have the thousands and keepers of the fruit, fruit two hundred.

Here she reflects on Solomon. We see in 1 Kings chapter 11 that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

The vineyard that is spoken about here is the image of Solomon's harem of his many wives and concubines. But as we reflect on it, the more wives and concubines that Solomon has, the less deeply personal and fulfilling the relationship he can have with each of them.

And so we see there that he has hired men to look after the vineyard, hired keepers. We see there also the element of money being brought in to these two verses.

[10:58] It's difficult to work out exactly what's being said here. What does it refer to the thousand pieces of silver? And then in verse 12 the 200 that are given to the keepers. But I guess in many ways trying to work out those details isn't important.

What is important here is that the poet is trying to see that you cannot buy love. For all the cultivation of a vineyard, all the commercial activity, all the finances and all those elements that are involved in looking after a vineyard and perhaps the money that you might obtain from a vineyard, those type of things.

The woman reflects you can't buy love. It's not a commodity that can be bought or sold. Solomon, he may have his thousands but they have each other.

The shepherd here and the country girl do not begrudge Solomon his wealth and they do not envy him in his situation. Solomon has a vineyard but the shepherd has his very own.

They are well content. It is there that we bring peace and shalom. It shows us that in a world here there is a shepherd and a country girl that can be happy and fulfilled as a king might be upon his throne.

[12:23] There is contentment found in this relationship. We live in a world where sex is commercialised at every point. It's in many ways this commercialisation of sex in advertisement in all sorts of different areas.

I guess we live in the era of the sexual revolution. In many ways this commercialisation of sex is a loss of personhood.

It's a dehumanising effect for all the great claims that the sexual revolution had of setting us free.

All it has done is dehumanised humans. It treats humans only on a physical level. It fails to see that we are also relational and emotional beings.

We see this in pornography. in prostitution. We see this in so many different ways. It is a dehumanising effect. We see in this couple we see there that they are concerned for each other.

[13:35] They are prepared to sacrifice perhaps great wealths of the world, great claims of the world in seeking for each other's wellbeing. as the song comes to a quiet close, we come to the last two verses, verses 13 and 14.

Here we have a short exchange between the man and the woman expressing their yearning to be together, expressing their yearning for union. These verses seem somewhat obscure and enigmatic verses, particularly the way that they just seem to leave the song hanging in midair.

Look there in verse 13 at the way the man calls out, yearns to be near the woman. Are you who dwell in the gardens? My companions are listening for your voice.

Let me hear it. He calls out and he desires to be with her. We're not sure who the companions are. Perhaps it's some of the other shepherds that were picked up in chapter 2.

Perhaps it's the women, the daughters of Jerusalem. Perhaps it's some rivals calling out to try and find her as well. But here he is calling out for her, calling for her that they may be intimate with one another.

[14:54] And in verse 14 she expresses her wish to be with him. Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spice, the mountains of spices.

back in chapter 2 verses 14 and 15 was another place where he called out to hear her voice. But there she responds by saying, what about the little foxes?

What about these obstacles? We need to deal with all these things. Those obstacles have been dealt with. The time of refrain has stopped. She says, come, let us be together.

But the way that she describes it in such beautiful language, she wants him to sneak away quickly with the speed of a gazelle or a young stag, away from anything that might separate them.

She wants them to come together. She can hardly wait. The mountains of spices. Here the imagery of mountains, perhaps maybe referring to the obstacles that are in between them.

[16:05] She's saying, leap over the mountains. Let us be together. Or it may be that the imagery here of the mountains is actually referring to her own body and she's saying, let us be together, let us be intimate.

Either way, she calls out for him that they may come together soon. The song ends abruptly, leaving the reader begging for more. I don't know if you enjoy watching love films and things like that, but at the end they're often hand in hand or they're riding off into the sunset together. But here we're left, them calling out to each other, calling to be together, but we're not quite sure whether to actually get together there. We're sort of left wanting to know more. We're left there not quite satisfied, longing to know.

Perhaps the poet has done this intentionally, again to reflect on the nature of love itself, leaving us not quite satisfied, longing for more.

Well, as I said, this is the coda of the song to end all songs. It's time to stop and reflect upon it, to take a moment just to reflect and allow the waves of music to flow over us, to hear from it, to apply it to our lives.

[17:38] As you reflect on it, I wonder if in your mind there's this little question, what the heck is this doing in the Bible? There's got to be more to it than just relationships, surely.

Surely it's not just about the relationship between a male and a female. when they're so human. Where's the divine in all this? Where's the deeper meaning?

We want the deeper meaning. We don't want this human love business. It's so secular. Well, if you've got those little voices inside your head, you're not the only ones.

Back in the first and second centuries, rabbis used to have a mystical interpretation of this, that the real theme, the real thing that it was speaking about wasn't the love between a male and a female, but the love between Yahweh and his people, Israel.

It was an allegory. It was this idea of, as we read through it, it's actually talking about God loving and yearning for Israel, and Israel yearning and loving for God.

[18:43] And there are many passages in the Old Testament from Joel and Hosea that pick up some of these images. Christians. Well, it wasn't just the rabbis back in the first and second century.

It was also the Christian teachers back there in the first and second century. Oregon made this comment, things seem to me to afford no profit to read as far as the story goes, nor do they maintain any continuous narrative, such as we find in other scripture stories.

He's saying there's no story of the salvation history of God, God working in his people here.

Therefore, he says, rather we should give them a spiritual meaning. There's no value in looking at it from a human perspective.

It's only value if we look at it in terms of what it says about us and God. Well, as we read through, we look through there through to the 11th century and Bernard of Clairvaux, and he says there that he wrote 86 sermons on the Song of Songs.

I bet you're thinking you're very lucky, aren't you? We've only had four. 86 sermons on the Song of Songs. He only got up to chapter 3, verse 1 as well.

[19:55] That's an average of two sermons per verse. I don't think we should do that, Paul. It's okay. This continued, this allegorisation of the song, this trying to find a spiritual meaning, not reading from the surface level continued right through to the 19th century.

The problem is, as you look through a lot of these sermons, they're all so very different. It all appears to have such an ad hoc nature.

For some, the two breasts of a woman found in chapter 4, verse 5 and 7, verse 8, is there, the two breasts there are talking about the church and where the church feeds.

That from the Old and New Testament. others thought that perhaps it is actually speaking about the inner and outer body or perhaps blood and water or the great pinnacles of faith, the love of God and the love of neighbour.

All had such very different variations on this, this spiritual meanings. It's so ad hoc. The reality is, they don't take seriously the reading of the book as it presents itself.

[21:08] They rely too heavily on a Greek philosophy that shaped the world back in the first and second century. A Greek philosophy that wanted to divide the body and the soul.

And that the soul, our spiritual natures, were much, much better than our bodies. Our bodies were things to be ashamed of. Things that would pass away.

Things that were of the earth, I guess. They wanted to put a split to divide the two. This is what the Greek philosophers said.

And I think as we read through much of the history of the Song of Songs, you get that feeling from people that the body is just the husk for the soul. And that we can leave the body behind.

But I set odds with the way the book speaks. If the song is to be heard and to be spoken for itself, to allow it to speak on its own terms, then we must see it as a song about love.

[22 : 16] Love between a male and female. We must take seriously this. For instance, if we were to take this out, take this book out, what are we left in terms of what it talks about our love for one another?

Where does it talk about our sexuality in a positive note? As we read through the rest of the Bible, it is often spoken in negative terms. Don't do this. Don't do that.

beware. But here is the affirmation of the goodness of the body, of the goodness of love and of relationships and of our sexuality.

So as we stop then and we reflect, like the Coda encourages us to do, what has this song got to say? What is its contribution to the Old Testament?

Well, the contribution that we see there, we see that it links in with wisdom literature. We see there right at the very beginning that it is attributed to Solomon, indicating for us that it is wisdom literature.

[23 : 23] It is literature that has a teaching function like Proverbs and Job and Ecclesiastes and a few of the Psalms. This is a teaching song, a song where we may learn more of love, what it is to love and to be loved.

But also we see there, I guess, an affirmation of Genesis 1 to 3, of God creating us and saying it was very good, but also seeing in chapter 3 the brokenness of relationships, the way that sin entered into our world.

And we see that so clearly through the song, don't we? The harshness and possessiveness of the brothers, the foxes that are mentioned in chapter 2, the sexual violence by the watchman, the presence of death and grave, the woman being suffered by the abuse of men and the subtle abuse from women who keep on disdainfully looking at it.

But in the end as we read through it, it's almost like we go back to the garden, don't we? Are driving towards going back to a garden where we are satisfied with the fruit and the fragrant perfumes that the garden provides.

The Old Testament is contributed by this book. It affirms the essential goodness of the body, the body's existence and that sexual relationships are those things that are good and that we shouldn't try and separate the body and the soul.

[24 : 55] It's like, I guess, our paper plates. We live in a disposable society where we go to a barbecue and we have paper plates and paper cups and it's only just there to hold the food. I mean, that's the important thing.

It's because we don't want to wash up the plates, we just throw them away. The Bible wants to affirm the goodness of the body and our sexual relationships.

Secondly, it also talks about there that love is the very flame of Yahweh. It's part of his very nature, that love is the ultimate source of love as found in Yahweh himself.

It also resists, the third point is that it resists the tendency to idealise singleness as a superior state. We see there the drive towards the one union flesh, a drive towards wholeness.

I guess a reflection on chapter 2 verse 18 of Genesis, that is not good to be alone. And finally, we see there that there is no reference to children being born, the idea of procreation.

[26 : 00] The song teaches implicitly that the primary function of a one bond, the relationship between the one flesh unity is that of being together.

that's our primary function of the one flesh, of being together, to enjoy each other's company. But certainly procreation we see in Genesis is there as well.

And these are the reasons for marriage. The New Testament affirms many of these things. The negative effects of the fall, the essential goodness of the body is picked up in 1 Corinthians 15.

We see in Hebrews chapter 13 that marriage is the place in which our sexual relationship should be. We see also that when Jesus speaks of the nature of marriage, he picks up on Genesis chapter 2, talking about a one flesh relationship.

We also see, though, that singleness is affirmed in the New Testament, that it is a worthy pattern of life in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. But nonetheless, it is one that is of self-sacrifice.

[27 : 00] For the sake of the kingdom, it is right that some should abstain from being married. I guess picking up the nature of discipleship. But as we look through it all, we see first and foremost that this song is about human relationships, about love and sexuality.

But there is also another element to it. For all putting down allegory, there is an element in which the Bible does liken marriage to the relationship between God and his people.

So as I said before, we saw there in Hosea 2 and Jeremiah 2 and Isaiah 54. There we see that God's relationship with his people is spoken about in marriage.

Flip to Ephesians chapter 5 verse 31. You'll find this on page 952. In 952 we have these words. Ephesians chapter 5 verse 31. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

[28 : 10] Here we see that Paul affirms that the mystery of marriage likens that to Christ and the church. A flip to Revelation chapter chapter 19 found on page 1006.

There in Revelation chapter 19 verse 6 we hear the angels, this great multitude crying out and they cry out, Hallelujah for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. To her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure.

The more that we understand about marriage and the human relationship, the more we'll understand about our relationship with God. More than any other human relationship, marriage reflects the divine and human relationship.

It's interesting. How does the song of song end? The bride calling out to her lover. How does the Bible end? The bride calling out for the groom to come.

[29 : 25] Come Lord Jesus. We see there that Jesus will indeed return.

The true and final triumph over death and the grave, the complete release from the curse of the fall is found in the cross of Christ. The new relationship that can be had there between God and his people.

Love in the song of songs is depicted here. It gives us a taste of what it is in this creation but is also a sign of what will be consummated in the new creation.

It is a sign of the gospel. I guess one of the most important contributions of the song of songs is to underline the effective dimension of love.

True love is not just a matter of the mind and the will but of the affections as well. This is true of male and female relationships. It's true of Yahweh and Israel.

[30 : 27] It's true of Christ and the church. To love God truly is not simply to keep his commandments but to thirst for him as the deer thirst for flowing streams.

To long for him as the bride longs for the groom or for the groom for the bride. For this is how we are loved by God and this is how we should love one another.

The song of song is there to stop love going out of our relationships. Out of our relationships with God and with one another. We need to read it.

We need to apply it to our lives. We need to think upon it. But we need to think upon it not with awkwardness and embarrassment but with festivity. With joy and deep thankfulness to him who gave it to us as holy scripture.

May we do this in our lives and apply it to our lives by God's Holy Spirit. To finish this sermon series we're going to listen to a song.

[31 : 32] An opportunity I guess to reflect. To take time to reflect on this great book of the Bible. God's word to us. So let's take some time to reflect on this.

goodness. You.
You. You.