

The Song of Songs for Us Today

Having read the Song of Songs, it is necessary to look back. For the question arises, what will we do with what we have read? How can this material be applied? It seems good to return to some points which reoccurred continually.

Creation and sexuality

Already on its first page(s), the Bible touches on the subject of creation and sexuality. It teaches us that sexuality and marriage are to be highly esteemed. Much has already been said about this in Outlines 2 and 3. God, who created all things and in his might, wisdom, and goodness, created male and female, shall never go back on this original design. In fact, he builds on this good plan in his further revelation.

What matters is not what we, as people, determine as spiritual, less spiritual, or unspiritual; rather, God alone and the way in which he pleases to reveal himself determines this. When we, who are conceived and born in sin, have difficulties with this, we must be sure not to blame him for the problems we have with physical life, which includes sexuality. If Scripture speaks in an uninhibited manner about these things – and it does – we must not try to be more pious than the Lord. If the Lord, even after the fall into sin, rejoices in the works of his hands, we must not make such an outcry.

The Word of God is written for man. We notice this when we look at the attention given to human impressions, experiences and emotions. The Bible teaches us to have an eye for a beautiful landscape, the behaviour of an insect, the flight of birds, and the grace of a deer, but also for a beautiful young woman and a handsome young man. When the Bible admonishes us for sin, it is for sins of commission. The LORD knows our frame, and yet does not require us to quench the joy we find in life. It is not sinful to be joyful. This is important to keep in mind with respect to all kinds of obsessions and delusions. These can play a part in our misplaced piety, which is not scriptural.

How sexuality marks life

The emphasis is here on *how* sexuality marks life. The Bible does not absolutize sex. Anyone who claims that sexuality is so important that it overrules all other facets of life has a warped perspective, an unbalanced, unhealthy, and unbiblical attitude. This attitude is, however, prevalent in society, and modern media makes use of this.

Sexuality does not only have meaning in marriage. It is not true that men and women can only show the full extent of their humanity in marriage. Every “woman is fully human in her womanliness, and likewise the man in his manliness. It is a lie that the unmarried man or the unmarried woman would be any less human in the unmarried state.”¹

The above mentioned author continues, “In general, it is better that people enter the beautiful mystery of the married state; it is not good for the man to be alone, Genesis

¹ K.J. Popma, *Levensbeschouwing VI*, Amsterdam 1963, 145

2:18. On the other hand, unmarried life has its own particular beauty.”

It is not right to see unmarried people as somewhat odd, different from others. There can be various reasons, difficult to explain to a third party, for some people to remain unmarried. Every heart has its secrets. I know many who, by their position and the way they learned to cope with it, were made by the Lord into a great blessing for others.

Furthermore, sexuality is not limited to the body, as many think. Eve looked like Adam, her husband. He recognized that she was “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” Yet she was different, and so was able to be a helper fit for him, to fulfill all his needs. This refers to more than just her body – even though she must have been a beautiful woman – but also her psyche, her soul, as it revealed itself in the body regarding all she felt and thought and desired. A woman is womanly in all respects, just as a man is manly in every way. There is even, despite all the jokes, a feminine logic which is different from the masculine one, a feminine way of moving and of speaking, a feminine tenderness, a feminine handwriting, and a woman’s intuition. There are also feminine occupations.

There comes a time when one’s marriage will belong to things that are past; but sexuality remains because it involves the entire personality. The entire personality of the man is directed to the woman and vice versa. The fact that this is possible shows that, despite the many differences, there are some feminine traits in men, while there are some masculine traits present in women. A man ought to be tender at times, and currently the idea is gaining support that a man should not be ashamed of tears and emotions. By the same token a woman may be strong, with a unique personality, like the young woman from the Song of Songs.

Partnership with a wife is for life

Since every individual, both male and female, is a person, this implies that, except for Adam, the first man, a choice has to be made. The more (young) people there are, the more boys and girls, the more options there are also. On top of this, as I pointed out, it is not only the outward appearance but also the character, the attitude toward life, the temperament, and the belief system that matters, that makes the difference between one girl or boy and another. Although the appearance can be ever so attractive, even alluring, it is through the appearance that some aspects of the inward disposition are revealed. One minister wrote in a book on marriage that “a cute little face does not mean a thing to us.” I, for one, would rather modify that to “a cute little face does not mean everything.” The young man looking for the woman of his choice has to proceed very carefully, employing a lot of thought. An insight into human character may be useful here.

Since it is such a personal matter, no one else can make the choice for him. It is up to him to look around for the right companion. He is free. He has to make up his own mind. Just to help him, we can tell him that his partner is more than mere flesh in the form of a woman, more than the sum of certain conditions she has to meet. The challenge lies in how to proceed in looking for the right person. Looking? There comes a moment when the man sees her and is struck by all he sees at a single glance.

It is difficult to describe such a moment. Every situation is unique, but intuitively the young man knows: there she is. The same thing happens to her, and the LORD, the Creator of them both, delights in it. The appearance of the one affects the other. Call it falling in love, even lovesickness. It is a feeling of love which will grow into true love. Some time will pass between that first meeting and the solemnization of marriage.

Even if they know it right from the beginning, a closer acquaintance is necessary, they must come to know each other better. If it later becomes evident that it was a mistake, it must – however painful – be undone. Two people who discover each other must come to know that they are well matched, and become certain that they can trust each other. From now on two separate people will go through life together.

Thus, after the marvelous moment of the discovery, follows the period of becoming better acquainted. This is a time during which one may be pleasantly surprised or taken aback at the other. The latter occurs when the characters and opinions vary greatly. The time of dating is a probation period and that is not a bad thing. By probation period, I mean that according to Genesis 1 and 2, and throughout the Bible, a person's whole life, including the time of dating and engagement, is a time of probation. Where there is true, mutual love, the things that divide can be overcome in time.

Some points of controversy are more easily overcome than others, but problems are gradually eliminated. This is not through the one being a master or mistress at forcing the other to concede, but because each person rejoices upon seeing the other. They should enjoy every opportunity to have a lively conversation on all sorts of issues in order to know each other better, to grow close to each other. Each meeting is reminiscent of the first meeting. "He who finds a wife finds what is good." (Proverbs 18:22)

The reactions between the two are in the first place very personal, a matter of character and insight. What one easily overcomes can remain an obstacle for the other, in which case it leads to a breaking of the bond. In the first case the tie is strengthened. The two are and remain delighted with each other. There is an invisible seam between soul and body. The feelings which arise by the nearness of the other are experienced physically. Emotions rise up in the body, which are not known when socializing with others. These feelings arise spontaneously. The one has no need to undress for the other. These days, enough (too much?) of the body is visible at the gym, the sport field, the swimming pool, or the beach.

In themselves, these feelings are not sinful passions or temptations of the flesh, for this is how the Creator made man. Only let us remember that we no longer live in paradise like our first parents. Sin came between them, and this created feelings that easily turn into evil passions. It is very important for both boys and girls to be careful with these feelings, to keep good what is good. They may not treat each other as sexual objects, that is humiliation of the one by the other, which conflicts with Genesis 2, where God gave the man a suitable helper. One's helper is not an object to be used when desired, but someone you must be able to look in the eyes and who may expect to be treated lovingly. One is not in love with certain sexual organs, but with the whole being, the whole young woman, who is altogether female, and the whole young man, who is altogether male.

It follows that intercourse is to be saved for marriage. This is very clear in the Bible in Exodus 22:16 "If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her... he must still pay the bride-price for virgins." The RSV uses the word "entice." That word condemns the deed of the man. The girl was seen as her father's property, and he could refuse to give her to that man. This verse deals with a stranger. But also Deuteronomy 22:13 makes clear that a man who marries expects to marry a virgin, one who has not had intercourse with anybody else. During Old Testament times, the sanctions were very rigid when the woman appeared to be guilty, but also when the husband accused her falsely.

What follows in Deuteronomy 22:33 makes it very clear to us that a betrothed young woman in Israel was still a virgin and seen as such. The same was true in the New Testament, as can be seen in the story of Joseph and Mary, from Matthew 1:18-25. The Creator laid an insoluble connection between sexual intercourse and the generation of new life. When new life sees the light, it needs the protection of a roof over its head and walls of its own house, and it needs to be joyously received by a young man and woman, who as father and mother, take to themselves unhindered the responsibility for this life.

The Song of Songs and sin

Those who have been born into a Reformed family are from the days of their youth familiarized with the preaching of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. They will remember the sermons preached about Lord's Day 41, and the tension with which this Lord's Day was anticipated. Was that because of a certain desire for sensation, or was it because of a secret fear of the discovery of one's own sin? Whatever the case may be, the power of sinful lusts and their gratification were laid under the grip of God's commandment.

At times God's commandment has been imperceptibly mixed with human traditions. For example, in the 1920s, there was debate regarding the length of the skirts and the use of flesh-colored nylons, and in the 1930s, a girl was frowned on when she showed her bare feet in public. But, in their own way, our forebears were serious about God's commandment. The Song of Songs did not play a role in that discussion as far as we know. The text references under questions and answers 108 and 109 do not include the Song of Songs. This must stem from the opinion they had of this book, but that is deplorable. This book contains much good information about dating and preparing for marriage. It is reminiscent of paradise. This book is particularly valuable because it takes place during or shortly after the time of Solomon, a time of glory for Israel, but also a time when sin was already present on the earth.

Where does this book mention or warn about sin? It is in those passages of the book where the relationship between the two lovers was disturbed by others... or by themselves.

The others are the daughters of Jerusalem and their standard for what is beautiful and good, as has already been seen. There are also the friends of the young man, mentioned in 1:7 and 8:13. What was their role? Were they just friends? But why did the girl not

want to stay with them, neither in her wanderings nor as she was veiled? Did she not like them because they were rough and rowdy? What are the “little foxes” of 2:15? Does this refer to an outsider meddling with their business? Or were they wrangling over a petty matter? This is not known.

But chapter 2 already gives the impression that they were put to the test. It has already been noted that the time of dating and engagement are real times of testing. Through confidential and intimate discussions, they were to build a solid relationship, which was meant to last for life. This would be the time to open their hearts to each other. There is so much to talk about, from the most ordinary subjects to matters of faith. The life of faith should be emphasized. It must go deeper than simply what church to attend (if they are from different denominations).

When both attend the same church, there are no issues regarding “another church.” That is good, but it does not mean that everything is in order. It is of greatest importance to end up with a truly believing partner by our side. These are not the weighty or solemn words of a minister who wants to lay it on the line for his young people. Rather, it is essential for the life into which two young people will enter together.

It begins with faith. What is not of faith is sin. Only in faith will they go forward safely, and from it a warm love will grow. By exclusively focusing on sexual intercourse, a couple will not sufficiently appreciate everything that comes before. This physical union is never the beginning – it may not be – but comes afterwards. That this is not sufficiently realized is a symptom of the harmful attitude of instant gratification of today’s society, which would give everybody all that they desire from a heart filled with greed. From such an attitude will arise problems and misfortunes, before and after the wedding day. A pure life is the entrance into a good marriage. After all, being married does not mean that there are no more restraints. Far from it!

Physical union is reserved for marriage, but it does not mean that the physical aspect should not play a role before marriage. That is impossible. It is even absurd. For everyone knows the other, a living soul, by the body in which he or she appears. Lovers are not excluded from this. Much has already been said about this.

The Song of Songs is a good manual for teaching young people how they should behave with regards to the physical aspect of a relationship. Chapter four makes use of songs of description, which include a succession of images which profile the typical male and female, slowly moving to a climax, a high point. These focus expressly on the physical appearance of both the man and the woman, and their admiration for one another. They do not refer to the sexual organs, which are scarcely mentioned, as compared to some other literature, such as Indian literature.

The Song of Songs takes care that the lovers do not enter into the danger zone. The admiration of the young man for his girlfriend is accompanied by modest fear. This can be noticed especially in 4:6, where, after describing her breasts, he stops and says no more for the time being. The young man from the Song of Songs is as sensitive to that

aspect of the body as is a normal young man today. In verse six he backs up a little. And what is said in verses eight and following is exactly the opposite of what is seen today. Modern literature includes the touching of the breasts as a direct introduction to impassioned sexual assault. But the young man from the Song of Songs, upon coming to this point, sees the girl in her beauty, her femininity, and he is almost afraid of her. She is not beneath him, but far above him. Like a creature from another world, she has bewitched him. She keeps herself undefiled. That is why the garden was closed, the fountain sealed.

We do deal with sin in the Song of Songs. Were these young people without sin? Of course not. Who among us is without sin? But they were on the right track. In that spirit the young man continued on his way to the top. In 6:9, we again note his respect for her, “the only daughter of her mother, the favorite one of the one who bore her.” She proved herself to be pure when she was abducted and found in the wrong company, in 6:11-13. Here again we see a facet of sin in the Song of Songs.

But she withstood the test. When they were together again (7:1ff), the most intimate part of the Song begins. The young man was not looking her in the eye when he marveled at her feet. From there he lifted his eyes, viewing her legs and hips, indicating the most intimate zone – but no more than this – to end by emphatically describing her neck, head, nose and eyes. Proudly she lifted her head, showing her personality. In verses 6-9, his passion showed itself to be strong but controlled. She knew how to lead him in his passionate admiration! Is this passage, in which the fire of passion shows so clearly, sin? If it were so, the author, led by the Holy Spirit, would have spoken a word of warning. Instead he allowed the lovers themselves to work toward married life. Despite all their sins and weaknesses, which they indeed had, they could be trusted.

Again, the Song of Songs is not to be read as an allegory. However, those who read the book must be spiritually prepared, and in the right frame of mind. It is important for the reader to have the right perspective, in order to deal with the mutual love of a young man and his girlfriend. For this book can be used with the wrong intent. Those who do so are like the “ignorant and unstable people” of whom Peter writes in his second letter (2 Peter 3:16), for they do so “to their own destruction.” Let the reader be warned that if the Song of Songs is not safe for him, the worst must be feared for the girl with whom he will associate.

Christ in the Song of Songs

When in past years I held my lectures about the Song of Songs, I was often asked the question, “You are so against allegorical exegesis, but is there any place for Christ in the Song of Songs? Is it not so that there is no book in the Bible in which Christ is not revealed?”

The questioner was correct. The point is, *how* do we see the Saviour appear here? I must again say: not in the character of the young man. Certainly not. The reason has already been explained in Outline 4. But how then must we see it? The answer is that Jesus is our Redeemer. What is redemption? What is the nature of His saving work?

We cannot say a sensible word about redemption, *without taking full account of God's work in creation*. Christ himself spoke of marriage and how it was from the beginning (Matthew 19:4,8). Then it was good. John 3:16 points to the original goodness of creation, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Before this, John had introduced the Son of God to the people with the words, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Christ does not take away the *world*, but *sin*. This includes the sin of the young people from the Song of Songs and that of our young people. But these sins must be acknowledged and confessed. Again we note that sin in the Song is everything that does not agree with love as described here. Chapter 8:7 refers to everything that comes up with the flood of many waters to resist love. Is it not remarkable, that where these powers threaten to quench that love, JAHWEH appears? Against him these powers do not succeed. It is the only place in the book where the name of the LORD is mentioned. For JAHWEH is love, and this love reveals itself in his only Son, Jesus Christ, so that men and women, boys and girls, who love each other can go through life together, until death makes them part. They cannot do this in their own strength, or in the strength of their love. It is only possible with faith.

That is the victory that overcomes the (evil) world: our faith. And who will overcome the world? Is it not he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Faith, love and everyday life

In this connection we will allow a digression, in order to point out three facets of life.

In the first place there is religion, that is, our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Essentially this is a secret. It touches the foundation of our existence. This relationship is very personal. It is often difficult for us to speak about it. It is as though we are somewhat ashamed.

In the second place, there are the more or less important everyday things. We like to talk about them. We find no fault with them. A great part of our life is taken up by these, and some do these things all their lives. We may think: tell me what you are always talking about, and I will tell you what kind of person you are.

In the third place – interspersed between the first two facets – there is love. It is something like the everyday things. Dating and married life are part of it. Yet it is not really like everyday life, it is different. It draws one in a particular way, a person, whether man or woman, boy or girl, becomes lyrical, passionate. That is how good it is. At the same time it is a dangerous area. It can do irreparable damage. It can have us in its grip. It is somewhat like religion in that it brings its own atmosphere into everyday life, but is also difficult to talk about.

But it must be talked about. For instance, parents must discuss these things with their children, even when it is difficult. It is such a personal and emotional thing to pluck at

someone's heartstrings, and too often we cloak ourselves in silence. When we do talk about it, we must be careful, for we can do much harm when it is not done in the right way.

Should we talk? Yes! We must be able to talk about the love between a man and his wife. The foundation is in God, who causes this fire to burn. Parents must show their children the way. After all, they know by experience what it is to love someone passionately with the entire soul, to love the person, and – in the Lord – to always love that person. If necessary, a child must be able to find a listening ear with his parents, a boy with his friend, and a girl with her friend. In the time of dating there is so much that is secret between the two who found each other. But when there are misunderstandings, the advice of the father, the mother, or a trusted friend can be welcome, and even necessary. Let us also not forget the LORD, under whose eyes, boys and girls, men and women, enjoy what is good. He, the fountain of joy, shows them the way in his Book, of which the Song of Songs is a part.

Marriage, a public matter

With reference to 8:8-10, let us once again digress, this time with a view to the brothers, the family members, and others, who give their input. From Genesis 34 and 2 Samuel 13, we know that brothers feel responsible for maintaining the honour of their sister. This is also the acknowledged right of brothers. Both of the mentioned passages deal with assault. But that is not the case in the Song of Songs! It could be that the young woman had no father, since he is never mentioned. It is possible that this is why the brothers were somewhat authoritative, and why the young woman did not resist.

Dr. R. de Vaux, who has been mentioned earlier, writes (pp. 26, 27) that the unmarried woman was under the authority of her father... The *mohar* was a sum of money which the fiancé was bound to pay to the girl's father... The amount could vary; it depended on the girl's father (Genesis 34:12), and on the social standing of the family (1 Samuel 18:23). For a compulsory marriage after a virgin had been assaulted, the law prescribed the payment of fifty shekels of silver (Deuteronomy 22:29)... This obligation... gives the Israelite marriage the outward appearance of a purchase. But the *mohar* seems to be not so much the price paid for the woman as a compensation given to the family.

After a long explanation about Arabic usages and Babylonian laws, he continues (p.29), Under these circumstances it is understandable that the parents made all the decisions when a marriage was being arranged. Neither the girl nor, often, the young man were consulted.

Many examples are then listed of a father who seeks a wife for his son. But even more than de Vaux, we would emphasize the wholly unique and specific character of the patriarch family. Here we see the beginning phases of Israel's history, and we see Abraham and Isaac do everything in their power to find the right wives for their sons. Even Esau, independent as he was, reckoned with the will of his father. In an earlier citation, De Vaux wrote that they also reckoned with the feelings of the young people.

What we want to establish is that the family was highly involved in matters like dating and marriage. When two persons plan to become husband and wife, the consent of the respective circles to which they belong is always necessary, and they must be heard in the matter. To live together without public and official recognition by the community was inconceivable in Israel. A marriage could only be nullified via a letter of divorce. From that we may conclude that the marriage which was officially dissolved had to first be officially instituted.

In our day, it is not the parents alone but the government who puts the official stamp on a marriage (in Anglo-Saxon countries it is the church). The office of the civil magistrate has a serving function. It is important that two young people, after a time of getting acquainted, dare to promise, in the presence of witnesses, to be faithful to each other. The community, the parties involved, and the government must know that these two will, from now on, perform as a unit and live in one place. Therefore, the government must give them the necessary protection. Within the walls of their own home they must be able to withdraw and enjoy home life. That same government must, through the appropriate authorities, remind them both of their obligations...

So we end this digression about the last chapter of the Song, the manual for those who will marry, with a note about marriage. The preparation is directed towards it.

We hear nothing of a wedding day in the rest of the book. But it is plain that these two young people will come to a wedding day, and that together they will be rich as a king, a way which is still open for young people today.

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