

LOVE TESTED

Song of Songs 1:1–3:5

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Song of Songs is placed immediately in front of the prophet Isaiah. This book is also called the “Song of Solomon,” although I prefer to use the more traditional title—“Song of Songs.” It’s called the Song of Songs because like the phrase “Holy of Holies” or “Lord of lords” it signifies a song above all songs. Even as Jesus is called “Lord of lords” meaning the Lord above all lords, and the Holy of Holies is called the holy place beyond all holy places, so the Song of Songs is the love song above and beyond all other love songs.

Tonight’s theme is “Love Tested.” We’re looking at chapters 1:1–3:5. I need to spend some moments talking about how we’re going to approach this book. There are as many ways of teaching from the Song of Songs as there are teachers who teach from it. One commentator I read this week took one hundred pages of introduction to simply describe what theories were afloat by the year 1850 in regard to the interpretation of the Song of Songs. Even people who have a particular approach within a school of interpretation have differences from one another within similar schools. By 1850 or so, there were already about 650 commentaries written in the Christian Church on the Song of Songs—all of them taking a slightly different tact. So what approach you use in interpretation in the Song of Songs will largely determine the results you get.

I want to share for a moment on the three major ways of looking at the Song of Songs. The most common way the Song of Songs has been interpreted is what might be called the “allegorical method.” The allegorical method is simply a way of looking at Scripture by reading into much symbolism and spiritual meaning that may not actually be there if we were using a literal

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approach. It's seeing mystery that is there. People, ever since the Song of Songs had been written, have been somewhat uncomfortable with the Song of Songs. Therefore, they have sought to allegorize it. Then it becomes a spiritual kind of book, rather than a book which talks about a romance between people. The allegorical interpretation basically had two developments to it—the Jewish allegorical interpretation and the Christian allegorical interpretation. Of course, the Song of Songs existed before the Christian Church came into existence. But Jewish rabbis, before Christ and many afterwards, treated this book as a story of Jehovah's love for His bride Israel. Some went on to find meaning in every particular phrase. So for some of the rabbis, the Song of Songs was a description of God's finding Israel in its captivity, in the Exodus, bringing them out, settling them in the land, having them rebel against God in the land, and being dispersed. Finally, the book culminates with the people being gathered back and looking for the rebuilding of the third temple. Each verse was meant to support that scenario—that development of events. The Christian allegorical interpretation sees this book as, not a romantic book, but a book of romance between Jesus (the bridegroom) and the Church (His bride). This may be an appropriate interpretation, but the allegorical view sometimes carries it to the point of extremes. Also, one of the difficulties with the allegorical interpretation is that everybody finds their own meaning as they go along. So, there's a great deal of non-standardization in the text.

We will look at the Song of Songs as what legitimately can be deduced about our relationship with Christ. We won't do it allegorically. We will try to look at it, first of all, as a love story and then deduce from that the appropriate principles.

Others have taken the Song of Songs as simply a collection of poems. Some scholars have held that these are poems used in seven-day wedding ceremonies, and the poems were said at various times during the seven days. One of the problems with this is we don't seem to find that

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substantiated by practice. Also, this appears to be more than a collection of poems. There appears to be underlying unity—a story that can be traced through all of the Song of Songs.

This leaves us a third approach to the Song of Songs, which is to take the Song of Songs as a drama. This is what the New International Version has done and many of the modern versions do when they lay out the Song of Songs. There are divisions—“the Beloved,” “the Friends,” and “the Lover.” One of the things that is crucial to note is these headings are not in the original text. They reflect the opinion of the people who translated it. They may have some cause for assigning parts because in the Hebrew there will be a feminine verb tense or a masculine verb tense. It’s clear by looking at the Hebrew that it’s a woman speaking or a man speaking in certain parts. So the drama theory has some weight behind it.

In the drama theory there are two basic views. One is—this is a high drama of love between Solomon and his bride. Therefore, this is a book which very frankly celebrates the joy of married love. One of the problems with that particular point of view is that Solomon has a rather checkered history in respect to fidelity. It is wondered if the Lord would have in the Scripture a book which celebrates married love written by someone who was so profligate in his relationship with others. The rebuttal to that has often been—just because a person doesn’t practice what he preaches, it does not necessarily invalidate the truth of what he says.

However, I would say the arguments for this being a two-part drama are probably just as strong as the viewpoint I will advance—that this is a three-part drama. If it’s a two-part drama, the story goes something like this—Solomon, in his early days perhaps before his harem and foreign wives enter the picture, falls in love with a northern girl who is called in the poem a Shunammite from the place of Shunem, which was in northern Palestine near the Lebanese border. He falls in love with her, and the book is a reflection of their thoughts prior to their wedding day, at their

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wedding banquet, and on their wedding night. It is felt that if this is the case, then Solomon, at one point in his life, really knew what true romance and marriage fidelity was. But later, he fell away from that position.

However, it is not necessary to accept the viewpoint that Solomon authored the Song of Songs. It is called “Solomon’s Song of Songs.” A more literal rendering would simply be “The Song of Songs Which is Solomon’s.” That can mean it is either a song *authorized* by Solomon, or it is a song *about* Solomon. I am going to take the point of view that this is a song about Solomon. I’m going to take the point of view that this is a song which is rather hard on Solomon. And I’m going to take the three-part drama view that says, “The real essence of this story is that Solomon visited one of his northern properties in Palestine—one of his vineyards to the north—and he found a beautiful young country girl. He had her brought to his harem because he wanted to marry her. She did not like that at all. Throughout this poem, she is meditating upon and soliloquizing about her boyfriend, who is identified as a shepherd.” Solomon is a king and not a shepherd. The real love story in this book is the story between a young woman and her shepherd boyfriend. And the person who is separating their relationship is Solomon. Therefore, as we go through the book, it seems to me this interpretation has the greatest merit. Instead of simply celebrating married love, this book celebrates fidelity, it celebrates trust, and it celebrates the integrity of a person beyond their physical attributes. Therefore, it is a song of the Shunammite, a song of a shepherd, and a song about Solomon.

If it has pleased the Holy Spirit to let this book for over three thousand years be interpreted in any number of ways, it must be the Holy Spirit is not too upset with the variety of interpretations. If someone starts tearing apart the gospels and gives them a whole wide variety of interpretation, I’d say that would not please the Holy Spirit. He would not allow that sort of variety. But in the

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Song of Songs, He appears to have allowed a divine variety by the Spirit. As we go through it, I'm going to discard the parts of speech that have been assigned by the New International Version. We're going to assign different parts to different people. Other translations assign different parts to different people. So, it's not the task of the translator to assign parts and lock them in concrete. These are suggested to help us read the book, and I'm going to be giving you my part as we go along.

I. The first scene we're going to identify as being located in Solomon's harem.

Look at Song of Songs 1:1–11. It begins with the Shunammite's "soliloquy" to her shepherd—that means she's talking to herself. If you imagine this as a drama, and if the participants of the drama were seated on the stage, the camera would open on the Shunammite girl who is soliloquizing. She is talking to herself. She is talking to herself about her relationship with her shepherd boyfriend whom she has left in the north. She is saying four things. She's talking about four things that she misses about her shepherd.

A. The first thing she misses is his kisses. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine" (Song of Songs 1:2, NIV). She thinks of her boyfriend, first of all, romantically. It may well have been that they never kissed. We don't know. But she physically desires the kisses of her boyfriend. In romance, God was pleased to allow communication between men and women not only to be verbal but to be non-verbal as well—this beautiful communication of kissing. Cultures vary. My mother, for example, was of the opinion that no kissing should occur between a young man and a young woman until they had set their marriage date—until they were formally engaged. There are others who are not quite that rigid in respect to courtship. It is a wonderful thing when, somewhere along the line in their relationship, two people can express their love to one another by means of a kiss. God intended it

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that way. It's nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. She thinks his kisses are intoxicating. It brings an exhilarating kind of feeling. She says to her boyfriend, "Your kiss is like that to me—exhilarating." She's starting out with some wonderful memory and thought of her boyfriend.

B. The next thing that she says about her boyfriend is that she likes his fragrance. "Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out" (verse 3, NIV). In those days, they did not have Arrid Extra Dry or Right Guard. It was necessary in that rather hot climate to deodorize by means of anointing with oil. She is thinking about him and saying, "When I'm around you, you're always fragrant. You are not a person from whom I have to back away. Your fragrance is pleasing." A good tip for people in love is to smell good, and she acknowledges that as a human fact.

But she says, "There's something even greater than his outward physical smell. It's the inward fragrance that I like about him too. His name is like oil poured out." Oil poured out was a way to purify oil to increase its fragrance. She says, "When your name is mentioned—when your name comes to my mind—it immediately fills me with the fragrance of your presence." She is reflecting on the beauty and the winsomeness of her boyfriend—her shepherd's character. His name, not only his outward fragrance, but his name is fragrant.

C. Furthermore, she likes his reputation. That's the third thing. "No wonder the maidens love you" (verse 3, NIV). She has this view that everybody else would really like her shepherd boyfriend. It's a wonderful thing to believe that you have picked someone that somebody else wants.

D. A fourth thing she wants is his company and protection. "Take me away with you—let us hurry!" (verse 4, NIV). That is important if you open the drama in the harem because she is

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wanting out of that atmosphere. She's saying to her shepherd boyfriend, "If you could only come and take me. More than anything else, I want the closeness of your presence—the delight of your company." She says further, "Let the king bring me into his chambers" (verse 4, NIV); in several other versions the verb is past tense, "The king has brought me into his chambers." It's kind of a warning word in the soliloquy, and we close the soliloquy at that point. The point where she realizes, as she tells her shepherd boyfriend, that she is in the king's harem.

The next voice we would hear if we were staging this as a three-part drama is the voice of the other women in the harem. We know from this particular letter that Solomon already had a number of wives and concubines. They now come in. The verbs are in the plural tense. We know it's not just one person speaking. We know that it's a group of persons speaking. They are now saying to Solomon in praise, "We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine" (verse 4, NIV). The Shunammite has just reflected that her boyfriend's kisses are like wine. The harem is now talking about their love for Solomon. First Kings 11:3 indicates that Solomon eventually had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. According to chapter 6, verse 8, of this book, at the time of the writing of this letter, he had already sixty wives and eighty concubines. It would not be abnormal to suppose the harem would greet Solomon with this kind of refrain. "We rejoice and delight in you. We will praise your love more than wine."

At this point, we come back to the Shunammite again soliloquizing and reflecting. She once more is leaping back to the thought that she has in verse 3, "No wonder the maidens love you," and she is picking up that thought once more. "How right they are to adore you" (verse 4, NIV). Then she starts talking about herself. "Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem" (verse 5, NIV). She's speaking to the other women in the harem. "Do not stare at me because I am dark,

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because I am darkened by the sun. My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected" (verse 6, NIV). That's an incredible statement of reflection about herself. She realizes, in the midst of those women, that she is the only dark-skinned woman there.

People's idea of beauty changes. In southern California, our idea of the beautiful woman is the tanned woman. We even have places to pay money to get a tan—a tanning salon. You can get a suntan on the basis of artificial light. In other cultures, that is not beauty. Fair skin is the idea of beauty.

As this Shunammite looks around at the other women, she notices they're all fair skinned, and she is out of place. She is dark skinned. She is not in their eyes the image of loveliness and beauty. She comments on this mixed feeling she has about herself—that she is dark yet lovely. She compares her darkness to the dark tents of the Bedouin life. She compares her beauty to the tent curtains of Solomon, which were delicately and ornately woven tapestries. She accounts for her deep suntan or sunburn by saying that her mother's sons were angry at her. She is reflecting on her brothers. Her brothers made her go outside and work in the vineyard—a place where a young girl should not appropriately be found. But she had to go out and work in the vineyard. She says, "They made me take care of the vineyards. My own vineyard I have neglected." Her own vineyard is her good looks. There has been a neglect of beauty aids. This song sort of celebrates the natural beauty in the girl. Never in the song is she celebrated for artificial beauty. Outward beauty aids can help, but real beauty is something else. She reflects on her appearance, and again she returns to longing for her shepherd. "Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday" (verse 7, NIV). Where can I find you? Where do you rest in the routine of your day and have a few moments free time? Where can I

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find you? Then she realizes the impossibility of going and looking for him because that would be inappropriate. She says “Why should I be like a veiled woman [a prostitute who would go out looking for someone] beside the flocks of your friends?” (verse 7, NIV). In other words, even though she is longing for her shepherd friend, she is not brazen. She is not pushy in that relationship. She is not out hunting him or initiating the relationship by calling him on the phone. She’s thinking of him and longing for him, but she is not pushing the relationship.

In the drama, the spotlight would again focus on the harem in verse 8. As she had been soliloquizing about her shepherd boy and where he could be found, they speak to her contemptuously. “If you do not know, most beautiful of women [they would be saying this sarcastically because they don’t believe she’s beautiful at all], follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds” (NIV). In other words, “If you want to know where this boy is, why don’t you go look for him?” The idea being that there is something wrong with you if you would prefer a shepherd boy over the palatial comforts of Solomon. They are saying, “So go out and look for him.”

At this point, Solomon comes onto the scene and meets the Shunammite for the first time. See verses 9–11. His first words are simply ones that focus on her outward beauty. He doesn’t appear at all to have a sense of her inward beauty. “I liken you, my darling, to a mare” (verse 9, NIV).

We might say that’s not very complimentary. But to Solomon in that day it would have been.

Solomon liked horses. We know from 1 Kings 10 that he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses. First Kings 11, right after describing Solomon’s love for horses, goes on to describe his love for women and his many foreign wives. So for him, a horse from Egypt—a horse that Pharaoh would have used—was the prettiest thing around. So he says to this young girl who’s been brought in from the north, “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of

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the chariots of Pharaoh.” Then he goes on to compliment her. This ends scene one and takes us to scene two.

II. The next scene is at a banquet table.

This scene begins at 1:12 and extends through 2:17. I would call it “Reverie at the Banquet Table.” A reverie is kind of a dreamy like state. The action in the drama now moves in and out of reality. The reality is that there is a banquet going on with Solomon as the host. The dream-like quality is that the Shunammite’s mind keeps coming in and out of the banquet. She moves from the moment of reality of Solomon before her to the moment of her thought and memories of the shepherd boy. So with that kind of a context for this second scene, we approach this drama unfolding.

The Shunammite has an inner secret. “While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi” (Song of Songs 1:12–14, NIV). At the king’s table, she cannot help but realize that she has fragrance to her. That perfume is spreading its fragrance, and she likens the fragrance which is radiating from her to the fragrance that her shepherd friend already is to her. As custom was in those days, a woman slept with a sachet or pouch of perfume around her neck as a necklace at night. Then, when she arose the next day and took it off, the fragrance of the perfume was with her the whole day. So she is saying that her shepherd boyfriend is like that to her—a lovely continual fragrance lighting up her life. She says of her shepherd boyfriend, “You are like the blossoms from En Gedi.” This blossom was a beautiful flower, and I believe it was red. Where she says it’s from is important. En Gedi was an area by the Dead Sea. It was an oasis, and around it was all desert. If you were coming out of the trackless desert of the Dead Sea area, all around you would see barren waste. And then you

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would come to the oasis of En Gedi, and you would see beautiful flowers. She is saying of her shepherd boyfriend, “All around my life there is barrenness, but you are like the beautiful flowers that one comes to when they come into the oasis of En Gedi.”

So her secret is—even though she is at the king’s banquet, she is very much in love with her shepherd boyfriend. Then she goes on, as we continue the reverie, to dialogue with her shepherd friend—a dialogue which either actually happened and she is remembering the country day when they talked together, or she is imagining being in the country again with her shepherd boyfriend and having this conversation.

I would submit to you that one of the keys to interpreting the Song of Solomon is to have had this experience yourself—being in love, fantasizing conversation with your love, remembering what has happened in your relationship, or wishing that it could have been this way. She’s doing one of those.

As she is sitting there at the banquet table, her mind is a million miles off. She is remembering or wishing for that day when her lover said to her, “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves” (verse 15, NIV). What woman in love does not like to hear the man of her life, whether married to her or courting her, say to her, “You are beautiful, my darling.” The first thing the shepherd boy singles out about her is that her eyes are like doves.

There is something very picturesque about that and very probing in regard to the identity of love. The eyes tell an awful lot about a person. He says, “When I look into your eyes, I see gentleness. I see gracefulness. I see beauty.” He is not immediately talking about all the physical beauty the Shunammite has, but he is attracted to the deeper dimension of her life—the way her eyes look at him. She says to him, “How handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant” (verse 16, NIV). She’s sitting at Solomon’s banquet table. It’s plush, stacked with all

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the things that go with a fancy palace. And she is saying, “But I’d rather be with you sitting out on the grass. How charming you are. How handsome you are.” This outdoors theme continues. The lover says, “The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs” (verse 17, NIV). In other words, “As we sit out on the green grass and look up, we see the cedars and firs. Our love nest is in the great outdoors.” Solomon is inside a stuffy banquet atmosphere, and she’s saying, “Everything here is artificial. But out there with my shepherd boyfriend, out in God’s great outdoors, what a beautiful setting that was!” Then she says to him, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys” (2:1, NIV). We often take this as a phrase that is found in Christ. We mean well by it, but we’re probably not interpreting it correctly. Even the people who take the two-part drama theory do not put this in the words of Christ. It is a word that is spoken by the bride, not the bridegroom. “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” Instead of being a compliment, she is downplaying her beauty. The Plain of Sharon is one of the largest plains in Palestine. In the springtime it is abloom with flowers—roses and lilies. As her shepherd friend is complimenting her and talking about their beautiful atmosphere, she’s saying, “I’m just a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. There are thousands of flowers in the field, and I’m one of them. Nothing special. A rose. A lily of the valleys.” He says back to her, “Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens” (verse 2, NIV). “All the other girls are thorns. You’re not just anybody. You are the real lily.” She now responds back to him, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men” (verse 3, NIV). She promptly proceeds to identify what she means about the allusion to the apple tree. He does two things for her that an apple tree does. An apple tree shades and an apple tree produces wonderful, tasty fruit. She is saying that she loves to be in his protective, overshadowing presence. And there is fruit out of his life that is delectable. Then she says of him, “He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me

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is love” (verse 4, NIV). Here again, mark the contrast. She is sitting at a banquet with all kinds of servants and people scurrying around. But she is really thinking about being out on the green grass outdoors. She’s saying, “He has brought me to his banquet hall—quite different from Solomon’s. The banner over me is his love.”

This phrase we need to look at. What does it mean, “His banner over me is love”? In Old Testament times, the banner was something that was used in a battle when the troops needed to regroup. They didn’t have walkie-talkies of course. The banner was raised so that all could see—if they belonged to that particular company—where they were to gather. This kind of banner was used in great marches where thousands of people were divided up and guided by the position of the banner. Therefore, it served as sort of a traveling billboard. Are you beginning to see what this girl is saying? She is proclaiming that the love her shepherd boy has for her is evident to all who know about it. The real thing about their relationship is that wherever their relationship is known, it is identified by her boyfriend’s love for her. That love is consistent in public as well as in private. Wherever she goes in the relationship, she finds him one and the same person. His banner over her is love. He is not one thing to her in private and another thing to her in public. He is the same. Whenever he is in her presence and she in his, the word describing them—the word which causes other people to gather around them—is the word “love.” She melts at this. She says, “Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love” (verse 5, NIV). Again, people who have never had a romantic involvement of love don’t have the foggiest idea what she is talking about. Now, she longs for his embrace. “His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me” (verse 6, NIV). They are holding one another.

Then she turns around, and in this reverie, she speaks to the other women at the banquet and the harem. She says to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does

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of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (verse 7, NIV). This is one of the key verses in the whole book. It occurs a number of times. What is she doing when she says this to the harem? She is protesting against the artificial stimulation of love. She’s saying, “Don’t try to use these mechanical means of arousing desire. Rather, desire (or love) will awaken when it so desires.” In fact, she will say this later to her shepherd boyfriend when she realizes their romantic involvement is becoming too deep. She will tell him to leave. Because she says, “It is not right to waken or arouse love until it so desires.” Here, she is recognizing the propriety of time in respect to the amount of affection showed. Unlike the sensualist in Solomon’s court who says that sexuality for sexuality’s sake is ok, she is saying, “Not so at all! One should reserve themselves until love has awakened within their own hearts. Therefore, do not arouse it or awaken it until love comes forth.”

She continues at this banquet table to reflect upon the time she has spent with her shepherd.

Again, I keep referring to the shepherd. It’s important to realize Solomon was not a shepherd. Solomon was a king. Over and over again, the allusions to the love in this book are between a young woman and a man of the country—not a man of the city or a man of refinement. That’s what persuaded me to go to the three-part drama view rather than the two-part drama view.

She, in 2:8–17, recalls a romantic day they spent together in the past.

I have for you “God’s traits for a boyfriend or husband.” There are five in all. “Listen!” she says.

“Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills” (verse 8, NIV).

She’s sitting at a banquet table remembering an outdoor scene. What is she describing here regarding her boyfriend?

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A. He is energetic. It's amazing the spryness that comes into a person when they are in love.

Spryness should always be between people who are involved together in marriage or courtship—energy and a desire for the other person's presence.

Also, in verse 7, she adjures the daughters of Jerusalem “by the gazelles and by the does of the field.” That's an important phrase. Gazelles and does are very timid and shy, and they will easily be scared away. She is saying that true love is like the gazelles or does of the field. It is easily scared and is something which is private and personal. It should not be intruded upon or made common place.

But back to the romantic day—the boyfriend is energetic. One of the things the Song of Songs does is call us back to the days of courtship and the beauty in a relationship that has energy to it. She says in verse 9 that he is the one who led the pursuit. “My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice” (NIV).

B. She also appreciates the fact that he's very sensitive. “My lover spoke and said to me, ‘Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me” (Song of Songs 2:10–13, NIV).

He has put it so beautifully. When you think of the reverie she had earlier when she is thinking about being outdoors with him, obviously the winter is a time when you can't go outdoors. He's saying, “The winter is over. It's spring. We can go out and enjoy this day together.” He is an extremely sensitive person. Love has a poetic quality to it. He expresses that poetic quality in a beautiful way.

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His words have become for us the words of Christ—when He comes in the winter of our souls and speaks to us. Have you ever come out of a dark night in your life and felt the Lord speaking that to you? I think that’s one of the most beautiful refrains in all of Scripture. It’s just as appropriate on the lips of Christ as it is on the lips of the shepherd boy.

C. She also appreciates the complimentary qualities of her man. “My dove,” he calls her, “in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely” (verse 14, NIV). Here again, he compares her to a dove, but this time it is a dove in the hiding places of the mountainside. Doves could easily dart in the crags, nooks, and crannies of the surface of a mountainside. He says, “You’re like that. You’re very special. It takes a special kind of searching to find you out. But when you’re found, I love to hear your voice. Your face is lovely, your voice is sweet.” This young girl and guy are very deeply in love.

D. Then she appreciates his protectiveness. In verse 15 he says, “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom” (NIV). They were both country people. They were aware of the damage foxes could do in the springtime with their digging. They could dig up the vine and thereby ruin the whole plant. She is expressing and he as well, the sensitivity to the things in their romantic relationship that could be the “foxes”—the little things that come into their relationship and destroy its beauty and its vitality. It was not simply “Let me catch the little foxes,” but “Let us.” “Let us do this together.” In every relationship, whether a courtship relationship or a married relationship, there are foxes—little things that can destroy the relationship. Uncontrolled desire can destroy the relationship. When expressed, it can bring forth guilt and mistrust. Jealousy and selfishness and an unforgiving spirit can be “foxes.” All of these are represented in this “Catch for us the little foxes.”

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The Shunammite then closes the day by saying, “My lover is mine and I am his; he browses amount the lilies. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills” (verses 16-17, NIV). What is she telling him here? What does “until the day breaks and the shadows flee” mean? An alternate translation here is “until the day breathes.” “Shadows fleeing” speaks of elongated shadows in the evening hours. What she is talking about is the approach of night. There is a point when the heat of the day snaps—the day breaks. The day breathes. She is saying to him, “Until the day breaks, until sunset, until the shadows flee, (the shadows go once it’s night) turn my lover and be like a gazelle, like a young stag on the rugged hills.” In other words, “It’s time to have a moment of pause in the relationship. We’re becoming too serious. We’re deeply in love with one another, but it is not yet our wedding night. The day has not yet breathed. The night has not yet come. Therefore, you go out on the hills. Be out there away from me. Know that I love you, but until the day breaks.” Here, if our interpretation of this song is the correct one, is a celebration of romance in the midst of a fidelity relationship. She, as a young woman in love, is looking forward to her marriage to the shepherd boy. But there comes a time in the relationship when she evaluates how far it has gone. She reserves their relationship—the aspects of their physical relationship—until the night comes when they are married.

III. Now we come to scene three—the Shunammite’s dream.

This will be the last scene we’ll look at tonight. The first scene we looked at found her in the harem. The second scene was at the banquet table. Now, she is retired from the banquet, and she is back in her room—alone. The spotlight focuses in on her. She dreams. She has just told her shepherd boyfriend, “Go away until the day comes when we are married.” But now she has had a dream. “All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did

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not find him. I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will search for the one my heart loves. So I looked for him but did not find him. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. ‘Have you seen the one my heart loves?’ Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one my heart loves. I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother’s house, to the room of the one who conceived me” (Song of Songs 3:1–4, NIV).

In this dream, she is thinking of the fact that she has lost her shepherd. Being in Solomon’s harem, one of the things most to be feared is that she would indeed lose him. She dreams that she has lost him. In her dream she gets up to find him, and when she finds him, she brings him to her mother’s house. She is thinking of the safety and security of their relationship—that she can bring her boyfriend to her mother’s house. Indeed, when they are husband and wife, there is that safety of welcoming him into her mother’s house and room.

She turns around then and addresses the other ladies in the harem, “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (verse 5, NIV). All of this talk she heard in the harem—the risqué talk—she puts away from her. She is saying, “None of that. Love is sacred and is more beautiful. Love has a deeper dimension to it than that. Do not awaken or arouse it until its time has come.”

That’s sort of an overview. Let’s take a moment to look at some lessons.

A. First, love is the foundation of their relationship. It’s obvious as we read this part of the Song of Songs that these two people are deeply in love with one another. Their relationship is not built on artificial things like wealth or external looks. They are deeply in love with one another’s personality. C. S. Lewis has described the event of falling in love in this manner, “In one high bound, love overleaps the massive wall of our selfhood. It has made appetite itself altruistic.

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Tossed personal happiness aside as a triviality and planted the interest of another in the center of our being.” Therefore, foundational to all romance and marriage is a relationship that is truly based upon love.

B. I think a second application to romance and marriage is that verbal communication between the two lovers is much more predominant over physical communication. Before they have really committed themselves bodily to one another, they have learned how to effectively talk together. They have learned to articulate. One of the dilemmas in many marriages today is the problem of communication. If the physical part becomes predominant, the verbal communication will be short-circuited. God wants to place in their relationship certain things in terms of their understanding of one another, their appreciation of one another, and their ability to articulate what is within them. The foundation of their life together is a shared experience—being on a friendship level. All of those things get short-circuited if they rush the physical relationship. I think Song of Songs models that God has established for us in a courtship relationship that verbal communication must be predominant over physical communication.

C. Third, they were sensitive to what would spoil their relationship. We note this in the comment, “Catch the little foxes that ruin the vineyards” (2:15). They want to be very aware of the intrusion of wrong actions or wrong kinds of thinking that would hurt their relationship or end their relationship. If the foxes can come along and dig out the vines at the roots, then the flower and the fruit will all be terminated. The flower describes the beauty of their relationship, and the fruit describes the sort of attitudes they model and the life they live. All of that is destroyed if they’re not careful about the things that affect their relationship. This counsel is important with married couples, as well as couples who are courting. A married couple, if they would spend an hour talking to one another about the things that are most harmful to their

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relationship, could identify what some of the foxes are. “Foxes” eat away at the roots of a good relationship between you and your spouse. So be sensitive to what would destroy your relationship.

Let’s take an additional moment and see what lessons can be applied to our Christian experience. We noted at the beginning tonight that we are staying away from an allegorical view of Scripture, which tries to take every passage or phrase and somehow relate it to the mystery of Christ and His bride. While we’re staying away from that allegorical approach, I think it is fair to say that a relationship between a man and woman in courtship and marriage is a model of the relationship Christ has with us in our union with Him. Therefore, there are certain principles or lessons that can be derived from Song of Songs in this regard.

D. As the bride of Christ, we are encouraged to desire Christ’s presence. The Song of Songs opens with this phrase, “Oh, that he might kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (1:2). There is a sense in the Christian life where the desire for Christ is greater than the desire for something Christ can do *for* us. Of course, we want Christ as our lover to do things for us, but it’s not based on what He can simply do for us. We are in relationship where we are deeply in love with Him, and we delight and enjoy His presence. We are told through the Song of Songs to cultivate a desire for Christ’s presence within our lives.

E. Another principle from Song of Songs that can be applied to our Christian experience is we are called upon to maintain a healthy sense of self-esteem. The Shunammite in Song of Songs sees herself as “dark, yet lovely” (1:5). While she may realize there are deficiencies in her beauty, she knows she is a very desirable person. She will say in the imaginary garden scene to her shepherd boyfriend, “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.” She sees herself as a person who can take her place rightfully alongside other people and rank with them in terms of their

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beauty, appearance, and self worth. It's intriguing in this song that the shepherd has a higher sense of esteem for the Shunammite than she has for herself. Her sense of self-esteem is healthy, but he has an even higher esteem for her. As we noted in 2:1 after she has said, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys," meaning "I'm just like all the other flowers around," he says to her, "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (verse 2). He's saying to her, "You're someone very special to me. You're not just like anyone else. You're special in my eyes." As we grow in Christ, we realize His view of us is so much higher than our own view of ourselves. We should never base our self-worth simply on our own self-view. We must base our self-worth on the high esteem that Christ Jesus has for us. I'm convinced that before we can ever have true faith in ourselves, we must catch a vision of the faith Christ has in us. Christ has far more faith in me than I have in myself. He has far more esteem and regard for me than I have for myself. The real message of justification by faith—of being declared righteous in God's presence—is that God's attitude toward us is that He sees His own Son. Even as the Father looks at Jesus from an attitude of "You perfectly please me," so God looks at us through Jesus. He sees us in that same kind of way. Therefore, we must maintain a sense of self-esteem because we are esteemed by God. And Christ, in His sacrifice for us, is telling us something about the importance of our worth. He shed His blood for us. Therefore, we ought not to see ourselves as junk. The Lord didn't shed His blood for junk. He gave His blood for someone who is exceedingly precious in His eyes. Our sense of belonging, our sense of worth, and our sense of ability all come from the healthy perspective God has for us.

F. Another lesson that can be applied from the Song of Songs to the Christian experience is that we must guard our relationship with the Lord. In the conversation between the shepherd and the Shunammite, the shepherd says, "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards"

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(2:15). Even as a romantic couple must be sensitive to guard against what will spoil their relationship, so we're called upon to guard our relationship with the Lord. It's not simply the Lord's responsibility to guard that relationship, but it's ours as well. It's "Catch for us." Scripture uses the plural pronoun. We're involved in the guarding aspect as well. There are some elements of our relationship with the Lord which—if left untended by us, if left unwatched by us—could develop a very corrosive influence on that relationship. We're told to single out those areas of our relationship—those which we would allow to develop and would prove harmful to that relationship. We're to guard that relationship.

F. Finally, I think the Song of Songs teaches us to anticipate the night. As we come to the conclusion of the exposition of the Song of Songs this evening, we should remember the phrase the Shunammite speaks to the shepherd in 2:17, "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee." We made reference to the fact that she is looking forward to their wedding night—when the time of courtship would be over and their union would be complete. John, in the Book of Revelation, has the same experience in a Christian realm. He looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. There is a sense now that we are held captive in the court of this world, even as the Shunammite felt captive in the harem of Solomon. Our physical contact with the One we love is not at the level we would like. But we look forward to the day when all of that will be in the past. We will be forever in His presence. Therefore, we, like the Shunammite in the Song of Songs, anticipate our going to be with Christ—realizing that once that event has happened, all of the dreams we have lived with all these years as Christians will be reality. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb will have come. We are to anticipate that. The New Testament tells us, "We must do the work of him who has sent us while it is yet day, for the night cometh when no man can work" (John 9).

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Now is the daytime. But the night comes when we will enjoy the wedding song of our beloved—the Lord Jesus Christ. So anticipate the night.

I trust, as we have spent these moments together this evening in the Song of Solomon, this exposition and application has opened the Scripture to you—that you have already begun to see the Song of Songs in a light different light than you have seen in the past. For many persons, the Song of Songs is a very confusing book—sometimes, a very embarrassing book. I think when we look at the Song of Songs in the kind of interpretive style we have this evening, we see it as a song which celebrates romantic love and spiritual love. It puts a premium on the integrity in a relationship, the purity in the relationship, and on the permanence and fidelity in the relationship. I trust this has been helpful to you, and that it will increase your relationship and enhance your love for Christ.