

The Joy and Pain of Love (Part 2)

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much indeed Phil, yes we're going to turn back to Song of Songs and we're going to pick up where we left off last week. It's been a bit of an unusual couple of evening services because it's not so much a two-part sermon series, it's just a two-part single sermon. It was a sermon last week that was too long for one week and we kind of got as far as we could and we're going to pick it up again tonight where we left off. But we are going to spend just five minutes recapping what we said last week. So if you weren't here last week please don't worry at all, you should be able to pick up the kind of things that we said. Let me read again the verses that are on the screen from chapter 2 verses 1 and 2. I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young woman. As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

The title of this two-part sermon is the joy and pain of love. And we said last week that often when it comes to the Bible and when it comes to the things that we emphasise as Christians there's a whole lot that just seems strange to the world around us. So things that are very dear to us coming together to worship on a Sunday morning, thinking about things like the Sabbath and holiness and sin and all that kind of stuff. A lot of that is just not really on people's radar as they go through life in 2022 in Scotland. But one thing that matters to us and that matters to other people is love. That's one thing that we don't need to persuade anyone. Everybody still knows that love is so important. What the Song of Solomon tells us is that love is something that brings incredible joy and it's also something that can bring immense pain. We mentioned last week very briefly that there's lots of different views on how to interpret the Song of Solomon. I gave you a quote from James Durham who was a Scottish theologian about 400 years ago and he said that you mustn't take it literally because it's all just talking about Christ and the church. You mustn't take it literally, you must take it spiritually, figuratively and allegorically. Lots of people have been of that view particularly in the kind of like longer ago if you know what I mean. Because more recently people have gone to the opposite opinion and said it doesn't really point to Christ at all. It's not trying to portray the relationship between God and His people rather it's as the quote before you there is to extol sexual love between a man and a woman. And you've often got these kind of two camps. It's all about Christ and the church and it's not about love between man and woman and others saying no, no, no, no, it's not about Christ at all. It's all about an intimate relationship between a man and a woman. And we tried to say that actually there's probably a sense in which both are true. And the reason both are true is because

Song of Solomon is not so much about what this book is pointing towards but rather it's more about where this love comes from. And we've been reminded that one of the great emphases of this book and of the whole Bible is that love comes from God. It's a wonderful gift from Him. And that means that we're learning that as we look at Song of Solomon we can learn amazing things about love in terms of our relationships, in terms of what God's ideal for marriage is. But we can also learn a huge amount about our relationship with God. One of the things we wanted to highlight was that throughout the whole book there's tension. And so you see sometimes there's these beautiful descriptions of when the man and the woman are together and there's great joy and happiness. But then you read other times where they're looking for each other, longing for each other and there's sorrow. So there's this tension that runs right through the whole book. And that tension highlights the fact that love is a source of immense joy. It's the greatest source of joy. Nothing will thrill you like love. But love is also a source of immense pain. Nothing will hurt you like love. And so the Song of Songs is telling us that love is amazing and it's telling us that love is painful. And so that's why our title is the joy and pain of love. Let me skip through a couple of slides that we highlighted last

week that we don't need to highlight again this week. I want to come back to these five points because the basic emphasis of this two-part sermon is that we're highlighting five lessons from the song about love. We did the first three last week. So I'll whizz through them just 10 seconds each. And then we're going to pick up with points four and five. First of all, we're just thinking in terms of love in general. And we highlighted the fact that the Song of Songs reminds us that the individual is special. For the man and the woman in the

Song of Songs, they are just so caught up with one another. The man is so special to the girl. The girl is so special to the man. And we highlighted the fact that that's kind of different to the way how people often emphasize things today. Often when people talk about the individual being special, it's about my specialness. But the Song is reminding us that that's the wrong way around. That the emphasis is on the other one. In the Song, love flourishes because the man and the woman don't really care about themselves. They just delight in the specialness of one another. Second thing we highlighted was that beauty is precious. And you have these wonderful descriptions, very vivid language, sometimes quite unusual language use to just describe how beautiful the man and the woman are to one another. One of the things that we saw from that is that because beauty is so precious, it's to be handled with care. And we noted the fact that that's so different to the way beauty is handled today, where beauty is just thrown around like a commodity that can just be picked up and put down on your phone or in movies or whatever. The Song is so different. Beauty is precious. It should be handled with care. Third thing we highlighted was that vulnerability is good. Again, this is a great contrast to the way things are perceived in culture around us because people tend to say, no, no, no, I don't want to be vulnerable.

[7 : 09] I don't want to be exposed. People are unwilling to be vulnerable with one another. But we highlighted the fact that love inevitably brings vulnerability. It's impossible without that. There's always going to be that risk. And in the Song, there's such an emphasis in the fact that vulnerability is good, highlighting the fact how much this man and this woman need each other. And there's a very strong emphasis in the fact that their intimacy is always in the context of security, which again is so different to the world around us. So individual special, beauty is precious, vulnerability is good. These are all things that are so different to the way the world thinks around us. But they emphasize so powerfully in this amazing Song. We're going to pick it up in more detail at number four.

Togetherness is essential. Let me skip through to the verses at the beginning of chapter three. We read, on my bed by night, I sought him whom my soul loves. Oh, sorry, that's the wrong one. I'm looking for togetherness is essential. That takes us to chapter eight. His left hand is under my head. His right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir up, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. Who's that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved, and so on. This Song is about two people who know that they need to be together. Separation brings pain, fear, and sorrow. Togetherness brings joy. And again, this is where we see such a contrast between the message of this

Song and the mindset of the culture around us in terms of relationships. Our cultures become very focused on the individual, so much so that for many people, the pinnacle of human completeness is when you can say, I don't need anybody. I'm completely happy with myself. I don't need anyone. The Song is saying the opposite. At every point, the man and the woman are saying, I need you. We need to be together. And I think the great climax of that comes in verse five, which you can see in the screen where you have this beautiful picture of the woman leaning on her beloved. And I think that's reminding us that the great goal of this Song is not kind of the romance of kissing, like you might guess in the movies or whatever. The climax is just a beautiful relationship of togetherness and dependence, where this country girl can lean on her beloved and together they're complete. And that's emphasized by this great community emphasis that runs through the Song at the same time. Because the Song is not just about a guy and a girl. There's also the friends in the community. There's the family of each of them. And it's a great reminder that love is something to be celebrated and shared in the whole community. Now, often the opposite can happen. Often there can be brokenness in the community when people are maybe jealous or selfish in regard to the love that other people can share. But it doesn't have to be like that. This Song reminds us that the togetherness that two people can enjoy is something that we can all rejoice in. Togetherness is essential. And then the fifth thing I want to highlight is that the Song of Songs reminds us, shows us, that love is to be longed for. We've been saying that throughout this Song there's tension and I think one of the great truths that that's emphasizing is that love is to be longed for.

And that's I think caught up. I think that's reflected in these verses in chapter two. He brought me to the banqueting house. His banner over me with love was love. Sustained me with raisins, refreshed me with apples for I'm sick with love. His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles of the doors of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

The man and the woman long for each other in this Song. They long for love. And these words that we have in verse seven here is a refrain that appears several times in the Song. And I think that one of the things that these words are telling us here in verses verse seven is that it's highlighting the fact that although love is to be longed for, it can't be forced. You can't stir up or awaken love until it pleases. Now there's a lot of mystery to that, a lot that I can't really explain, but I think it's true because you can't just plonk two people in a room and say love each other. You can't force love. And again, our culture struggles with that, particularly in terms of intimacy, because sometimes intimacy is demanded. Tragically, sometimes it's even bought. The Song of Songs is utterly opposed to that. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

[12 : 26] If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised. Love cannot be forced, demanded or bought. Instead, love is something that we should long for.

And the Song repeatedly has this sense of anticipation. And you'll remember that some sections of the Song are a dream. Maybe a huge part of it is just a hope that this country girl is one day going to find love. And the Song ends with a plea, make haste, my beloved.

There's that sense of anticipation and longing running all the way through it. And that longing for love means that there is great joy when we find it. And it also means that there's great pain when we don't. The greatest love song ever written recognizes that it can be incredibly hard to be on your own. All of that is reminding us that love is the greatest source of joy. And love is the greatest source of pain. But what I want us to go on to now is to think about what does this teach us about our relationship with God? I hope that it's clear to you that there are some outstanding lessons for our relationships from this Song.

For the way men and women should, what they should expect and look for in terms of relationships, there's so much that's valuable in this Song for us. But I do think that there are some wonderful things to learn about our relationship with God. And that's what I want us to look at for the last week while together. So what does all this teach us about our relationship with God? Well, we know that our relationship with God is one of love. We've seen that in some of the verses, in the verse that Phil read at the beginning. And the New Testament describes the church as the bride and describes Jesus as the bridegroom. And to love God is the greatest commandment. So love is at the heart of our relationship with God. So if we go back to our five lessons from the Song, do these things apply in terms of our relationship with God? Well, what I want us to see is that I think the answer is yes, they absolutely do apply in terms of our relationship towards God. So you look at Jesus and in him you see an individual who is so special. He is the great husband. He is the one who is utterly unique. He stands out. He's different. He's holy. He's good in all the horrible brokenness that we see in the world around us. When you see friends betrayed, when you see promises broken, when you see arrogance and harshness, when you see people being judged or exploited, when you see people being abused and manipulated, you can look at Jesus and say he is different.

Jesus stands out a mile from that crowd, from all that brokenness and horribleness that we see around us. Jesus is totally different, totally good. He is so special. Looking at him, the individual is so special. Looking at God, we see that beauty is precious. In fact, God is the source of all beauty, the beauty of creation, the beauty of humanity.

[16 : 18] It's all from him. And we can gaze in wonder at the beauty of his character. We can marvel at all that he's done. We sang about that in Psalm 27, speaking about gazing upon the beauty of the Lord. Looking at our relationship with God, we can see that vulnerability is good. That's the amazing thing about the Christian gospel. We can come to Jesus just as we are.

That's what Phil was highlighting this morning. We just saw that amazing reality that we don't need to sort ourselves out before we come to God. And this again is so different to what we see around us because so often when it comes to a relationship in life, whether that's a relationship with someone we fall in love with or even just a relationship with friends, maybe even with colleagues, we can be so scared that if people knew what we would really like, they would run a mile. That people wouldn't want to know us at all if they knew what we were really like. That is impossible with God. He knows what we are really like.

He knows who we really are. He knows all our weaknesses and our vulnerability can never put him off. In fact, in fact, so much so, vulnerability is not a bad thing in his eyes.

It's good. Vulnerability before the Lord, openness before the Lord is such a good thing. That's why Sam 32 can say that God is our hiding place. He's the one from whom we don't need to hide anything, but he's the one in whom we can hide and be safe. In our relationship with God, togetherness is essential. We need him. We need him every moment of every day as individuals as a church. We're lost without him. Without him, we cannot do anything. We need God so, so much. That's the great curse of sin that it separated us from God, broken our relationship with him and made us his enemies. We absolutely need him. Our togetherness with God is essential. A lost eternity is when that togetherness is gone forever. In our relationship with God, we long for him. That's so powerfully expressed in Sam 73.

Whom have I in heaven but you and there's nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the sense of my heart and my portion forever.

[19:16] In our relationship with God, he is the one who stands out. The individual is so special. In our relationship with God, beauty is precious. He's so beautiful. He's the source of all beauty. In our relationship with God, vulnerability is good because we can be completely vulnerable before and we don't need to pretend anything or impress him and he will never, ever hurt us. In our relationship with God, togetherness is essential. We long for him. We need him.

And in our relationship with God, love is to be longed for. We long for him. As Augustine said, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you. And it's all reminding us that in God, we will find love that ultimately will heal all of our pain. And I think that's so crucial for all of us because love causes pain for everyone. Different people will experience different levels of that at different stages in life, but none of us can escape it. And if you feel pain from lost love or longed for love or whatever other pain life has inflicted on you, God is the one who is able to wipe away every tear and he's able to bind up every wound. There's so much in these five lessons that teach us about how we can approach God and about our relationship with him. But I want us to see something else. If we go back and think about the song of songs, one of the great emphases of that song is that love is two-way. It goes in two directions.

It's not just all about the girl talking about the guy and it's not just all about the guy talking about the girl. You get them both speaking and you can see there's this emphasis on the two-way relationship, the man towards the woman, the woman towards the man. Their relationship is two-way. Now, I think that allows us to think about the fact that not only are these five points true in terms of our relationship towards God, I think they're also true of God's relationship towards us. So that means that to God, the individual is special. That means you are special. In the billions of people that make up that vast crowd of humanity, you as an individual, you as the person that you are, you are special to God. In fact, you are unique. And in God's great collective bride, the church, you are so special. You are such a crucial part of that. Now, maybe the world around you makes you feel worthless. Maybe you look at everybody else and you think that they're doing a far better job than you. Maybe you feel like you're useless and rubbish and you look at yourself with just a sense of disappointment and frustration. God says, no, no, no. You're not worthless. I have made you, you are unique. You are so special.

To God, the individual is special. To God, beauty is precious. That means that your beauty is something that God delights in. Now, so often the world around us makes us all feel very ugly. And it's worse than ever today when you can kind of have all this filtered nonsense on social media, where everyone can present a false image of themselves to make some kind of artificial ideas of what beauty is supposed to be. The world we're living now just makes everybody feel ugly. But to God, there's no way he wants to filter you because you're beautiful to him. Your face is known. Your smile is lovely. Your heart is precious. Your voice is sweet. Your personality gives him delight. To God, your beauty is so precious. To God, vulnerability is good. Now, there have to be a wee bit careful here with what we're saying because at one level, God is utterly almighty. Nothing can touch him. Nothing can threaten him. He alone is God. But at another level, God has made himself vulnerable for you. I think Hosea speaks of that. I've quoted this verse many times.

[25:00] It's an incredible verse where God says to his people, how can I give up on you, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. We've said all along, you cannot have love without vulnerability. And I think the most powerful example of that that you can ever see is Jesus being beaten on his way to claiming

his bride. To God, togetherness is essential. So yes, we want to be with God and we think, yeah, that's, you know, that's at the heart of iniquity that we want to be with God. Yeah, that's true. But that's not the most amazing thing at all. The most amazing thing is that God wants you with him and he wanted you with him long before you ever even thought about him. That's the whole reason we've been created so that he could share his love with us so that we could be with him. And the great damage that sin has caused is that it separated us from God, separated us, separated us from God. But I've said this before, the first thing that God said after humanity sinned was, where are you? Because that's what was at the heart of what was wrong. There was a separation. And the whole plan of salvation that God initiated and accomplished through Jesus is so that he will never ever have to ask that question about you ever again. For God, togetherness is essential. God wants you with him. And if you ever feel lonely or rejected or forgotten, then please write that truth on your heart that for God, togetherness with you is essential. It's his whole goal.

And we can even say that to God, love is to be longed for. So we long for God because we love him. But the incredible truth of the gospel is that he longs for you too. Jesus proves that because he went so far to make that longing his prayer. Father, I desire that they also whom you've given me, may be with me, where I am. That's what Jesus longs for. That's why for Jesus, the time to celebrate will be the time when you are home with him forever. And all of that is showing us just the astounding greatness of God's love for you.

And that love that God has for you is a source of immense joy for God. But what we have to recognize is that that love that God has for you is not just a source of joy, is also a source of pain. God's love for you has brought him pain. In fact, the greatness of God's love for you has exposed him to the greatest level of pain. And that pain culminated on the cross, where God's love for you brought agony, anguish and death for God's Son.

That's how far Jesus will go for you. Because Jesus doesn't love you to the point of utter joy. Jesus loves you to the point of excruciating pain.

That's why it's on the cross that you see how special you are. On the cross we see how precious you are, how much God values you. On the cross we see how willing God is to be, how vulnerable God is willing to be for you, how willing he is to be vulnerable. It's on the cross we see how much God wants us all to be together with him. It's on the cross we see how much God longs for you.

[30 : 01] That's why our title is The Joy and Pain of Love. Because we've been saying that throughout the song there's this tension. Love brings joy and love brings pain. The truth is that love guarantees pain.

I think that's true. Just can't avoid it. Love is going to bring pain. It's true for those who've suffered broken relationships. It's true for those who've lost the person that they were married to, that whole lives. It's true for the person who's single. Love guarantees pain. There's no escaping it.

But in the gospel God is reversing that. Because on the cross pain guarantees love.

The pain of what Jesus suffered, suffered guarantees that you will know the fullness of God's love forever. And this is where we are given such a brilliant lesson from the song of songs because we've been saying that we highlighted that refrain that you get again and again and again, that you don't stir up awakened love until it pleases. Highlighting the fact that you can't force love. And this is one of the most incredible things that the gospel reveals to us. You can't force love. It's telling you that you do not need to force God to love you. Because he already does.

He already does more than even the song of songs can describe. You do not need to force God to love you. He already does.

[32 : 41] But that maybe the most important lesson is this. You don't need to force him to love you. He's not going to force you to love him.

Because love can't be forced. He's not going to force you to love him. Instead, he offers you love. He calls you to come with him.

The crucial question is, what is your answer going to be? I mean, let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your incredible love. And we can see so many reasons for us to love you. And yet all the time, your word is reminding us that long before we loved you, you have loved us. And that's what makes your love so perfect. And we thank you so much that through Jesus, we see pain that guarantees love. And we pray that for every one of us, whatever bruises and pain and sorrow we've experienced in our lives because of love, we pray that it's that we would just come to you to find the healing, the peace and the love that only you can give and with which nothing else can compare.

[34 : 34] I mean, we're going to close by singing together from Psalm 63 verses 1 to 8. Psalm 63 from the Sing Psalms version. I'm actually on the presenting road of myself tonight, so I'm going to come down and we're going to sing these amazing words which just speak of God's incredible love and mercy. And they also speak of just clinging to God and keeping his constant love in view. So let's stand and sing together.