

The Joy And Pain of Love

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn back to the song of Solomon and to the passage that we read. I'm going to read again from verses one and two of chapter two, but we'll be thinking a bit more broadly regarding this passage.

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys, as a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women. 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.

Tonight's a little bit different because normally I would do, well, I would aim to do a complete sermon in one evening, but tonight we're just absolutely not going to do that. So this sermon's going to be in two parts this week and next week. So we're going to make a start this evening and we'll just have to see how far we get and hopefully we'll make our way through, hopefully we'll make our way through as much as we can, but we won't get to the end of this sermon. We'll be picking it up later on next week.

I just want to check, it's my screen working okay Tom, are you able to bring up what I have in front of me on the screen? There we are, that's it, perfect. That was what I wanted to see. Okay, so you will maybe know that for many people today there's a lot of things in the Bible that people would regard as irrelevant to life. That's one of the challenges that we face as Christians, a lot of stuff that's important in terms of scripture and that's important to us as Christians is seen as irrelevant to many people in the world around us. So when we talk about things like sin, holiness, worship, Sabbath, church, even the idea of God, all of that seems pretty unimportant to the world around us, particularly in the West in our increasingly secular society. And you can prove that just by looking at the news headlines, you're not going to see any news headlines today talking about the Sabbath or talking about holiness or anything like that. However, there is still one great Bible theme that people value. One great reality that the Bible prioritizes and which the people around us would all agree is one of the most important things of all, regardless of what they think of Christianity, they would still agree that this thing is crucial. And the thing of course is love. Love still really matters to the world around us and love really matters in the Bible as well. And perhaps the greatest celebration of love that we have in the Bible is this fascinating book called The Song of Solomon or The Song of Songs. As you saw in the video regarding the Bible project, that phrase, song of songs is a Hebrew way of basically saying that this is the best song of all. That was the way you expressed a superlative in Hebrew. Song of songs means the greatest of songs. So if you think about the Bible, all the different songs you have, you've got 150 Psalms, you've got many other songs throughout the Bible of them all, this is the greatest. But if this is the greatest song in the Bible, why is it that we hardly ever read it? And even more so, why is it that today we hardly ever preach on it? Well, I think one of the reasons for that is because there's different views in terms of how this poem should be understood. You saw a little bit of that mentioned in the video that there's kind of a traditional view and then there's a more recent view that people have. The traditional view is that the song of Solomon should not be taken literally.

Instead, it should be seen as an allegory depicting the relationship between Christ and the church. So on that basis, it's not about human love, it's not about a guy and a girl getting together, it's about the love between Christ and his church. And that for a long time was the dominant view across the church. And if you were to go back 50 years, you would find that sermons on the song of songs were very common in the free church and across many other churches as well. But now, people tend to take a different view. And people think that the song of Solomon should be taken much more literally and it definitely should not be understood allegorically.

[5 : 09] So that view is basically saying, no, no, this is not really about Christ and the church. It's about the love between a man and a woman. It's providing a model of what true love should look like in contrast to all the brokenness of the human relationships that existed in the Old Testament times and that still exist today. So there's these kind of two camps in terms of how you interpret this book. And just to give you an example of it, you can pick up one book and it'll say something like this. This is from a commentary written by James Durham. James Durham was a great Scottish theologian who lived about 400 years ago and he said, this song is not to be taken properly or literally. That is, as the words do at first sound, but it's to be taken and understood spiritually, figuratively and allegorically.

There can be no edification in setting out human love. There can be no parties mentioned besides Christ and his bride to whom this song can agree. It cannot be understood properly but figuratively and that not of any other but of Christ and believers. So that's our classic example of the kind of traditional interpretation.

You can pick up another book. This is taken from a well known book called Introduction to the Old Testament. It gives an introduction to all the books of the Old Testament written by Ray Dillard and Thremaer Longman who are professors. Well, Ray Dillard's passed away now, but they're both professors, Old Testament professors in America and they say the book's primary aim is not to portray the relationship between God and his people but rather to extol sexual love between a man and a woman. So we're left thinking, oh great, how are we supposed to understand this book? I've got both those books on my shelves at home. You pick up one, it says this is how you interpret it, you pick up the other and it says something completely different. Some say it's not literal, it's all about Jesus. Others say it is literal, it's not really about Jesus at all. Which one is right? Well, very often you will find that when you've got two competing camps that in many ways are kind of opposites to each other. I think the answer is almost always in the middle and I definitely think that that's the case here. I don't think that Song of Songs is only about Jesus in the church and I don't think that it's only about human love. I think it's about both. And I think part of the difficulty that gives rise to this sort of dichotomy, this choice between these two views, is that people come to this poem, this great description of love and they ask, what is this love pointing us to? Is it pointing us to Jesus or is it pointing us to the love that exists between a husband and a wife? People look at this book and they ask the question, what is this pointing us to? But I think that there's a better question for us to ask. Instead of us asking what is this love pointing us to, we should be asking where does this love come from? And the answer to that question is that it comes from God and that's the great truth that the Bible emphasizes, not just the Song of Solomon, but the whole Bible emphasizes that love comes from God. The video highlighted that, that love is a gift from God. God is the source of love. In fact, God is love. Love is at the core of who God is. Love is a gift from God. So when we see this beautiful description of love in this song, we are learning amazing things about the gift of love that can be shared between humans. But we are also learning amazing things about the God from whom all love comes. And I think the two go hand in hand as we interpret this book together.

So what is the book saying? Well, if you look at it, you can see very quickly that the song is made up of dialogue. You can see that there's different people speaking and the ASV helps to bring that out. You can see in the headings, you can see in the screen there that a head of each version pops in little headings to tell you who's talking. So she, he, she. And part of the reason they're able to do that is because the Hebrew grammar helps to indicate the gender of the person who's speaking. And they all speak at various points.

But mostly it's the man and the woman who are talking. In the middle of the book, the woman has a dream and it's hard to know exactly how long the dream lasts. It might be all the way through to the end of chapter six. But there's this kind of dialogue going on throughout the book. And the big question is, who is who? Who's the he and who's the she? And especially, where does Solomon fit in to it all? The she seems to be a woman from the country. She's a Shulamite. We see that in 613. But we don't exactly know where that is. It tells us in chapter one that she's dark. We read that. Does that mean that she's foreign? We don't know for sure. The he is a shepherd. There's lots of descriptions of impasturing his flock. We read them like that in 1, 7 and 8. And then there's Solomon. He's mentioned a few times in chapter three. It mentions his wedding. And so the question arises, is Solomon the man throughout the song? So when it says he is that Solomon? Or is he the husband taking a bride? Some people say yes. Some people say no. And there's various interpretations. I want to just give you three summary positions. Option one is to say that the whole book is about Solomon and a bride. So the he is Solomon, the she is his bride.

[11 : 38] And that would make the shepherd a metaphor for Solomon. Some people will be of that view. Other people would say that it's a shepherd and a country girl. And Solomon is kind of an intruder. And you could see that that was hinted at in the Bible project video that Solomon seems to be kind of portrayed more negatively. And that's a possible interpretation as well. Or a third option is that it's all about a shepherd and a country girl. And Solomon is referred to not so much as intruder, but just as a comparison. So in kind of the sense that the shepherd and husband is so special, he is like the king. So these are various viewpoints. It's the kind of situation where there's pros and cons for all three. Maybe you've got a strong opinion. Maybe you've never thought about this before. You can kind of debate it later whether you're a one, a two, or a three. I think I'm probably a number three. I definitely like the idea. I don't know, it's just because I'm from the country, but I like the idea of a country girl falling in love with a hardworking shepherd and they get married. That to me sounds like a pretty cool love story. The key point is that all of this emphasizes that we don't really know all the details of what this song is referring to. And that's an important point. You know, you come into this, this book, we don't really know all the answers to what everything is referring to, but that is okay. Because it's a song and songs don't need to have every single detail explained. The point is not the detail. The point is the big themes. And we can see that in songs today. So I'm sure many of you know the Proclaimers song 500 miles. Fantastic song. Everyone's got it in their heads right now. You've heard it before. You can ask yourself, okay, Proclaimers song 500 words. I'm going to walk 500 miles. Which 500 miles is it? Is it Glasgow to London?

Is it the North Coast 500? Which road is it? Is it the M1? Is it the M6? Is it the A9? What's it referring to? Of course that's silly. Because none of that matters. None of that is the point of the song. The point is not which 500 miles is it? Is it the North Coast 500? Is it heading down South? Is it going across to Europe? The point is not which 500 miles. The point is that distance doesn't matter. And I think the same is true when we're reading the song of songs. People think, people look at it and often they look for too much detail. And you'll see that in some books that you might read about it. So some people who will picture it as an image of Christ in the church have sometimes really stretched things quite far in terms of the connections they make. So for example, we read in chapter one where the woman said, I'm dark. And so people say, oh, well that means she's dark with sin. Now that's an example of reading something into the text that's not there. It just doesn't say that. It says she's dark because the sun. She's been exposed to the sun. And so you could read too much into it and say, you know, well, that's, you could read it and say, oh, that means she's dark with sin. It's not saying that. Other people in chapter five, you know, it talks about drinking wine. Chapter five verse one and people are like, oh, drinking wine, that refers to the Lord's supper. And of course it doesn't say that either. That's reading too much into it. And so we have to be a little careful not to go too far. But at the same time, people who focus on a literal interpretation can also go too far. And they interpret everything in a kind of sensual way that risks going beyond what the text is saying. And the key point in it all is that we need to focus on the main message rather than the details. The main message is seen in the big themes that this book presents. And in terms of themes that run through the whole of this book, what

I want to highlight is that throughout this song, there is tension. So you see intimate togetherness when the man and the woman embrace. But you also see painful loneliness when she goes looking for him and can't find him. We see the individual beauty of the man and the woman, but we also see personal vulnerability. The woman's been rejected and hurt in her past. She feels conspicuous about her appearance. We see community joy. The woman look on and delight in the love that's growing between this man and the woman. But at the same time, we see community abuse in her dream. The woman is attacked by the city watchman. We see deep fulfillment. There's beautiful descriptions of the joy of being together. But we also see intense longing. The man and the woman long to be together. And that's telling us two things, two absolutely crucial things about love. Love is the greatest source of joy. Nothing will thrill you like love. But love is also the greatest source of pain.

Pain will hurt you like love. And that's why her title is the joy and pain of love. The greatest song in the Bible is full of tension. It's telling us that love is amazing. But it's also telling us that love is painful. And I think every single one of us knows that that's true. If you love someone and that love thrives, then the results are just wonderful.

But if you love someone and that love is broken, then it leaves you in agony. And this is such a brilliant reminder that the Bible is so real and so relevant even to the deepest levels of human experience. If you've had that joy of loving someone and being loved in return, the Bible knows exactly what that feels like. And if you've had the pain of loving someone and it not being reciprocated or loving someone and being separated from them, the Bible knows exactly what that feels like as well. It is so real and so relevant. Now with all of that in our minds, I want us to learn five lessons from this song. Now, as I said earlier, we're not going to get all the way through this tonight. So we're just going to see how far we get and I'll stop at seven o'clock and we'll probably have reached maybe number three or so. But we'll see how far we get and we'll just pick up the rest next week. It just means you have to come back next week and those of you who are on holiday, you'll just have to extend your holidays. Or you could join online if you prefer. Our five lessons are as follows. Number one, the individual is special. Two, beauty is precious. Three, vulnerability is good. Four, togetherness is essential. Five, love is to be longed for. Let's just go through these one by one and see how far we get. First of all then, the individual is special. One of the great emphasis of this song is how special the man is to the girl and how special the girl is to the man. It's beautifully described for us in chapter two, the verses that we read at the start. A rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. That's the girl speaking.

[20 : 19] Then he replies, as a lily among brambles sows my love among the young women. And now she speaks again, as an apple among the trees of the forest. Apple tea among the trees of the forest sows my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in this shadow and his fruit was sweet to my taste. Now the great emphasis being set before us here is that you can have a huge crowd of women, but to this man, that girl is different. She stands out. She is special. And it's the same for her. You can have a forest of men, but he's different. He is the apple tree. Now I don't think that all of that is to make us think that these two are like kind of movie star, good looking people. And that was maybe my one kind of hesitation with the video there, because it presented the man as very handsome and the woman as very pretty. And I don't think that that's necessarily being set before us here, because in chapter one you'll remember that the woman says, don't gaze at me because

I'm dark because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me. They made me keep her of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept. In those verses, she's not saying I'm beautiful. She's saying, I don't think I look very nice. She thinks she's ugly. She thinks she's been exposed too much that she's not kept her own vineyard.

So I don't want you to think like, you know, whatever, George Clooney and whoever else, movies star Jennifer, Aniston and whoever. Don't think in these terms. It's not that kind of, I don't think it's that kind of presentation that's been given to us. They're not the finest specimens of human physique. What's been said to us is the thing that matters is that they're incredibly special to each other. It's not that the world is setting them up as the most beautiful man, the most beautiful woman that's ever lived. That is irrelevant. What matters is how they feel about each other. To the shepherd, this weather-beaten country girl is different. She's the one who stands out to him, to him, she is special.

To this country girl, this shepherd who most definitely would have been rugged and weather-beaten, she's the one that she notices. And the great emphasis is that in their love story, the individual is special. They're different. They stand out to one another. And it's a great reminder that love is not just about finding anybody. It's not like the animal kingdom where any female will do. Instead, there's a deep specialness about the individual. And that specialness of the individual is a core human instinct. Whether you're a Christian or not, wherever you stand in terms of your relationship with God, you will know that each individual matters and that each individual is special. That's why nobody looks at what's happening in the Ukraine and they, ah, well, there's plenty more people, there's plenty more Ukrainians.

Nobody thinks that. Every single individual is so precious. But in terms of love, there's an important emphasis that this song makes that I think has been lost in our culture today. Our culture agrees that the individual is special, but the great emphasis in the culture around us today is that my specialness is the priority. My specialness needs to be recognised. My specialness needs to be celebrated. And first and foremost, love is about affirming me. And that's why today you see all around us that for people, if they don't feel affirmed in their own specialness, they will interpret that as hate. They'll think that somebody who doesn't affirm them hates them. The emphasis of this song is the opposite. It tells us that the individual is special, but the priority is not me celebrating my specialness. The priority is delighting in your specialness. The love in this song flourishes because the man and the woman don't really care about themselves. Instead, they just delight in the specialness of each other. And that's such a brilliant lesson for what relationships should be like today. Even friendships. So whether we're talking relationships as couples or whether we're just talking more broadly as friendships, the same lesson applies. The individual is special, but don't use that to demand attention for yourself. Use that in order to look for the best in someone else. Use that to delight in what makes them special.

[25 : 34] The individual is special. Number two, beauty is precious. The song is full of descriptions of how beautiful the man and the woman are. Here's an example in verse 15. Behold your beautiful my love, behold your beautiful, your eyes are doves. Behold your beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful, our couches green, the beams of our house, our seethe, our raft, our rafters, our pine. Now, some of these descriptions are a little bit culturally unusual. You saw that in the video that sometimes they use language that we would never use.

So for example, chapter four verse two compares the girl's teeth to a flock of sheep that are coming out of the tank. But not only that, they are sheep that have twins. So they're big mama sheep. Now, I've never used that line on you now. And not sure it would work very well. We're in a different culture. And we think in different ways. That's absolutely fine. It's to be expected. The key point is that throughout this song, it's absolutely clear that beauty is precious. And that's true. Human beauty is incredibly precious.

But the key point is that with that preciousness comes privacy. The song is very intimate in its descriptions. But it's very rarely explicit. The language is metaphorical and poetic, but it's not graphic. And they hinted on that in the video that we saw from the Bible project.

Even the most intimate descriptions that we have in this song are all in the context of private moments shared by this man and this woman. It's all emphasizing the preciousness of beauty. It's something that's to be treasured, to be honoured, to be handled with great care. And this is so different to the culture that we live in today, where human beauty, especially female beauty, is treated so cheaply. It's something that can be thrown about, whether that's on your phone, in a newspaper or whatever. People crave human beauty, but they just want it on tap. Doesn't matter where you get it, doesn't matter who it is, it's just there for the taking. The culture around us has come to the conclusion beauty is nice, so let's make it cheap and freely available. This song says the opposite. It says human beauty, human physical beauty is precious, so handle it with great care. And number three, vulnerability is good. I've seen that that clock is slightly faster than that clock, so if I look at that way, I've got a little bit more time than if I look at that way.

I reckon we'll do number three and then we'll stop. Vulnerability is good. As we're saying, there's tension running through this song. And that repeatedly brings before us the issue of vulnerability, particularly in regard to the woman. Let me read from chapter three, which we didn't read earlier, but there's verses on the screen here for you. On my bed by night, I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city in the streets and in the squares. I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him but found him not. The watchman found me as they went about the city.

[29 : 52] Have you seen him whom my soul loves? Scarcely had I passed him and I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house and into the chamber of her who conceived me. The great context, the great lesson that's been set out before us here is that in the context of love, vulnerability is good. We've got this beautiful description of the woman trying to find the man, struggling to find him and then the joy and relief when she does.

And so you've got this balance between the joy of being together, but to feel that joy, she also has to feel the pain of when he is not there. And that's the unavoidable reality of love.

The full joy of love can only be found by being vulnerable towards one another. And that's too at every stage of love. Even asking a girl out, you're either going to be over the moon or you're going to be crushed. It's one or the other. And in the song, the man and the woman experience the incredible joy of love but only because they're willing to be vulnerable with each other. Now, tragically, again in the culture around us, we can see that that vulnerability of love can so easily be abused, which is horrible, awful. But again, our culture, because of that comes to the wrong conclusion. Our culture looks at that and thinks, oh, well, because vulnerability can be exploited, therefore, vulnerability is bad. The result is that people keep their distance.

People set boundaries. People dictate the terms of their relationships. Now, at one level, that's wise because vulnerability must never be exploited. But if we say that vulnerability is bad, ultimately, we will end up people with people saying, I want you, but I don't need you.

And the result of that is that you have momentary closeness with no long term commitment. You have brief pleasure with no permanent protection. You have passing satisfaction with no lasting security. And whatever kind of relationship that is, it's not love.

[32 : 21] In the song, vulnerability is good. It takes their relationship beyond mere physical attraction. It shows us that their love goes far deeper than that. It's the acknowledgement that this man and this woman need each other. They're committed to each other. Their intimacy is always in the context of security. Both clocks are after seven o'clock now, so we'll leave it there. We're going to continue with points four and five next week, and we'll look in more detail next week at how all of this is pointing us to God's love towards us revealed in Jesus Christ. Just for one minute say that everything that we've looked at tonight is a reminder that if you want to learn how to treat a woman, if you want to learn how to treat a man, the best place to go is to scripture.

The Bible teaches us what our relationships should look like. The Bible teaches us how to be good husbands, how to be good wives. The Bible teaches us what we should value and what we should be cautious about in terms of relationships. This is relevant to all of us, those of us who are married, those of us who are single. Whatever stage we may be at in our journey in terms of relationships, it's reminding us that the Bible's teaching is so wise.

Because the Bible wants us all to enjoy all the fullness of a loving relationship. But at the same time the Bible wants us to handle one another carefully, and not to do all the ridiculous things that you will see either people around you doing or people doing on the media or whatever it may be. Whatever stage in life you're at, young, old, whatever it may be, I just want you to think about that. I want you to bear all of that in mind that what God reveals to us in scripture should be our guide in all of these things, to even the most intimate areas of life. So please don't think that following Jesus and being a Christian is just all talking theology or that it's just all about church or official stuff like that. The Bible's got something to say to every part of life, including the things that everybody would agree are the most important, our relationships with one another. It's just an amazing reminder of how full and wonderful and relevant and wise God's Word is. There's much, much more to learn from song of Solomon. You're going to have to come back next week if you want to hear it. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the amazing gift of love. And we thank you also that your Word teaches us about what that love should look like.

We pray for your forgiveness when we've ever either neglected or mistreated other people or whether we've gone and indulged in all the bad examples of intimacy and beauty and everything that we see in the world around us. We pray that you would give us pure hearts and minds and that you'd help us to see that your ways are the best ways. We want to pray for all the couples in our congregation and connected to our congregation. We pray that those who are married, those who are engaged, those who are going out with one another would grow in their love for one another and in their love for you. And we also pray for those who are single. We pray that they would also just know your love, your peace, your companionship, your intimacy, your nearness.

[36 : 36] And whatever our stage in life, we pray that we would all remember that ultimately everything is meaningless unless you're at the heart of it all. So help us at every stage of our lives to remember that. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Our closing Psalm is Psalm 138. We're going to sing the Sing Psalms version and we're going to sing from verse 4 to the end. We're reintroducing presenters in our evening services so Angus is going to come up and lead us. Let's sing these words, O Lord, let all earth's kings give praise when from your mouth they hear your word. Let's stand and sing together.