

## Introduction

The great nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon described the Song of Solomon as the Most Holy Place. He compared the historical books of the Bible to the outer courts of the temple, and the Gospels, Epistles, and Psalms to the Holy Place: the place that only the priests could enter. His point was that, to a greater and lesser extent, all these books bring us near to God. But the Song of Songs is *the Most Holy Place*, the inner sanctum, a holy of holies. It ‘occupies a sacred enclosure into which none may enter unprepared.’ That’s because in the Song we meet Christ. The garden portrayed in the Song is a location created in the imagination, in which we may spend time with Christ and enjoy His love. The language of human love is intended to evoke an experience of divine love, and inspire in us a response of love. The Song channels our desires towards their true end, our Creator and Redeemer.

Throughout most of the history of the church, the Song of Songs has been seen as a picture of God’s love for His people and Christ’s love for His church. Some commentators focused on the relationship between God and the individual soul; others saw the Bride in the Song as the church as a whole. But all agreed the Song used the language of human love and marriage (perhaps a specific marriage of King Solomon) to evoke God’s love. Only in the nineteenth century did scholars start to regard it primarily or exclusively as a celebration of human sexuality. This view dominated the scholarship of the twentieth century. But there are signs the tide is turning again back to the classic view.

Read in the light of the wider Bible story, it is hard to avoid the allusions to God’s relationship with His people. So many

other passages speak of God's love in marital terms or liken our infidelity to adultery (Exod. 34:15; Ps. 45; Isa. 54:5, 62:5; Hosea 1-3; Ezek. 16; Jer. 11:15, 12:7; Eph. 5:22-32; Rev. 19:6-9).

But there are also indications within the Song itself that it's intended to picture God's relationship with His people. Some descriptions of the woman seem more like descriptions of a landscape. She is likened to the land of Israel because she represents Israel. The woman also comes to her wedding out of the wilderness in a column of smoke (Song 3:6, 8:5), just as the people of Israel came to covenant with God at Mount Sinai out of the wilderness, led by the pillars of cloud and fire. Moreover, the poem is full of garden imagery that takes us back to Eden – the place where God walked with humanity. The tabernacle and temple were also full of garden imagery. Written into the architecture of the temple was the promise of a restored Eden. And that promise is also written into the poetry of the Song. No wonder Spurgeon thought of it as the Most Holy Place.

In this book I've drawn from the rich history of reflection on the Song of Songs. I've lightly edited the extracts, mainly by replacing archaic words and shortening sentences. I've used an ellipsis (...) to indicate where I've removed larger sections, but, to avoid cluttering the text, I've not used one where I've merely left out a few words or sentences.

More or less every verse of the Song is covered to provide a good introduction to the Song. And included are contributions from commentaries/reflections from the fourth to the nineteenth centuries to give readers a good feel for how Christians have traditionally read the Song. But my main aim has been to provide a collection of devotional treasures that point us to the love of Christ. My goal is that we might draw near to God through the Song.

A number of extracts make connections between the exalted language of the Song and our everyday experience in a way that enables us to put it into practice. But, in many ways, I think the primary aim of the Song is to *inspire* us not to settle for a

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half-hearted sense of Christ, but to pursue Him more – to know His love not just in theory, but in our own experience. If that's something you want, then read on!

As we prepare to enter the holy territory mapped out in the Song, let's join with the twelfth-century Benedictine abbot William of St. Thierry in this prayer.

As we approach ... the marriage song,  
the song of the Bridegroom and the Bride,  
to read and to weigh your work,  
we call upon you, O Spirit of holiness.  
We want you to fill us with your love, O Love,  
so that we may understand love's song –  
so that we too may be made in some degree participants  
in the dialogue of the holy Bridegroom and the Bride;  
and so that what we read about  
may come to pass within us.  
For where it is a question of the soul's affections,  
one does not easily understand what is said  
unless one is touched by similar feelings.  
Turn us then to yourself,  
O holy Spirit, holy Paraclete, holy Comforter;  
comfort the poverty of our solitude,  
which seeks no solace apart from you;  
illuminate and enliven the desire of the suppliant,  
that it may become delight.  
Come, that we may love in truth,  
that whatever we think or say  
may proceed out of the fount of your love.  
Let the Song of your love be so read by us  
that it may set fire to love itself within us;  
and let love itself be for us  
the interpreter of your Song.

# 1.

## Gregory the Great on the Song of Songs 1:1

*The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.*

Our experience of earthly desire is designed to enflame our longing for God. Gregory the Great says this is what the Song of Songs does for us if we read it aright: it uses the language of human love to ignite our passion for God. Gregory (c. 540-604) was an early pope, the first from a monastic background. He was the pope who first sent missionaries to southern England.

In the Song of Songs, the language of what appears to be physical love is employed that the soul may be revived from her numbing cold by means of her usual manner of speech, so that she may grow warm again and so be spurred on to the love that is above by the language of the love here below. Now in this book there is mention of kisses, there is mention of breasts, there is mention of cheeks, there is mention of thighs. We should not ridicule the sacred narrative for using such language. Rather, let us ponder how great God's mercy is. For when he mentions the parts of the body and thereby summons us to love, note how wonderfully and mercifully he works within us. He has gone so far as to embrace the language of our vulgar love in order to enkindle our heart with a yearning for that sacred love. Yet God lifts us by understanding to the place from where he lowers himself by speaking. For we learn from dialogues of the love here below with what intensity we should burn in the love of Divinity.

Let us consider this book carefully lest we linger over exterior meanings when we hear the words of exterior love. Otherwise

the very crane employed to lift us will instead burden us and thus not lift us. In these bodily words, in these exterior words, let us seek whatever is interior. And when we discuss the body, let us become as if separated from the body. Let us attend this sacred wedding of the Bride and Bridegroom with an understanding of the most interior kind of charity, which is to say, with a wedding gown. Such attire is necessary since if we are not dressed in a wedding gown, that is, if we do not have a worthy understanding of charity, then we will be cast out of this wedding banquet into the exterior darkness, which is to say, into the blindness of ignorance.

By means of this passionate dialogue let us cross over to the virtue of impassibility. For just as Sacred Scripture consists of words and its meaning, so too a picture consists of colours and its subject matter. And he is dumber than dumb who pays such close attention to the colours of the picture that he ignores the subject depicted! So if we embrace the words expressed in an exterior way and ignore their meaning, it is as if we were ignoring the subject depicted by concentrating only upon the colours.

- Think about your own experience of love, whether that is one of joy, frustration, or pain. How does this point to God's love for you?

## 2.

### Richard Sibbes on the Song of Songs 1:1

*The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.*

Richard Sibbes describes how Christ came in human flesh so that He might be our bride, and the Holy Spirit comes to persuade us to consent to the marriage. In this marriage we not only receive Christ, but all that belongs to Christ. Sibbes (1577-1635) was a leading Puritan preacher and theologian.

The Holy Spirit is pleased here to condescend to our weaknesses. That we might help ourselves in our spiritual state by our bodies, he speaks here of heavenly things after an earthly manner, and with a comforting mystery. As in other places the Holy Spirit sets out the joys of heaven as a sweet banquet, so here he sets out the union that we have with Christ by comparing it to the union of the husband with the wife. That we might better understand what this union is, he condescends to our weakness, that we might see that in a mirror what we through our corruptions could not otherwise discern. This book is nothing other than a plain demonstration and setting forth of the love of Christ to his church, and of the love of the church to Christ. The Holy Spirit is pleased by bodily things to set out these spiritual things, which are of a higher nature, so that by thinking and tasting of the one we might be stirred up to translate our affections (which in youthful age are most strong) from the heat of natural love to spiritual things, to the things of God. All those who are spiritually-minded (for whom chiefly the Scriptures were written) will take special comfort and instruction in this way ...

There is a civil contract between a husband and wife which firmly resembles the spiritual contract between Christ and his church.

That this civil contract may hold, both parties must consent. So it is between Christ and his spouse. He was so in love with humanity, that he has taken our nature upon him; and thus his incarnation is the ground of all our union with Christ. His incarnation is the cause of our union with him in grace here, and our union in grace is the ground of our union in glory. Now, that we may be a spouse to him, he gives us his Spirit to testify his love to us that we might give our consent to him again and also that we might be made into a suitable spouse for him.

Likewise in marriage there is a sharing of all good things. So it is here. Christ here in this spiritual contract gives himself, and with himself all good things. His Spirit is the church's. His happiness is the church's. His graces are the church's. His righteousness is the church's. In a word, all his privileges and prerogatives are the church's. As the apostle says, 'All things are yours, and you are Christ's' (1 Cor. 3:21-23), for all are Christ's, and all that are Christ's are yours by this spiritual contract (Hos. 2:19-20).

But what have we to bestow upon him in return? Nothing at all; neither beauty nor riches, nothing except our miserable and base condition that he took upon him.

This is a well-spring of much comfort, and a ground of much duty. Christ, who has all things, condescended so far down to us, to take us to be his spouse. What then can we lack when we are connected to the fountain of all things? We cannot want any protection, for that is covered in this well. We cannot want any good thing, for he will supply what we need. We have free access to him, just as the wife has to her husband.

- Think about what belongs to Christ that now belongs to you because you are part of His bride.

### 3.

#### Teresa of Avila on the Song of Songs 1:2

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!  
For your love is better than wine;*

We would never have the temerity to ask to be kissed by God, says Teresa of Avila, if God Himself did not encourage us to do so in the Song of Songs. Teresa sees the kiss as a sense of God's peace, a peace which give us the courage to serve God in a hostile world. Teresa (1515-1582) was a Spanish mystic and reformer within the Carmelite monastic order.

'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.' O my Lord and my God! What words for a creature to utter to its Creator! Blessed are you for having taught us in so many different ways! Who, O my King, who would dare to speak in this way without your permission? It is astounding! ... Yet the soul inflamed and intoxicated with love cares for no other meaning, and only desires to utter these words, since you do not deprive us of this privilege. God help me! Why should we be so amazed? Is not the reality still more wonderful? Do we not draw close to you in the most blessed sacrament? ...

For if, my Lord, a kiss signifies peace, why should not souls ask this of you? What more can we beg of you than what I plead for now, O my Master, that you would kiss me with the kiss of your mouth? ...

O holy Bride! Let us ponder the kiss for you, which is that sacred peace with God that encourages the soul to wage war with worldliness, while remaining perfectly confident and calm

within itself. Happy are those who enjoy this grace! It consists in such a close union with God's will that God and the soul are no longer divided, but their will is one – not in words and wishes only, but in deeds as well. When the Bride sees that she can serve the Bridegroom better in any way, so ardent are her love and desire that she disregards any difficulties raised by her mind nor does she listen to the fears which her mind suggests. Instead, she allows faith to act, seeking no profit or comfort of her own, having learnt at last that her welfare consists entirely in this conformity to God's will ...

One speech of this sort should be enough to make us belong completely to you. Blessed be you, O Lord, for nothing is lacking on your part! In how many ways, and by how many means, do you show your love! By your works, by your bitter death, by the tortures and insults you bore, by the pardon you grant us. And it is not just these acts alone that communicate your love, but the words you speak and teach us to speak in this Song of Songs. These words so pierce the soul that loves you, that I do not know how the soul could endure them were it not for the fact that you give us your help, not according to our merits, but according to our needs. I ask, then, O Lord, no more of you in this life except that you 'kiss me with the kiss of your mouth' in such a way that, even if I wished, I could not separate myself from union and friendship with you. Grant that my will may be subject to you, and may never swerve from your will. May nothing prevent my truly declaring: O my God and my glory, 'your love is better than wine' (1:2).

- Ask God for a felt sense of His presence in your life today.

## 4.

### Hudson Taylor on the Song of Songs 1:2

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!  
For your love is better than wine;*

Hudson Taylor wrote a series of articles on the Song of Songs, which were later published under the title *Union and Communion*. He believed Christians often fall short of an experience of God that could be theirs, because they are unwilling to surrender themselves wholly to God. Taylor (1832-1905) was a pioneer missionary to China and the founder of the China Inland Mission (now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship).

This recorded experience gives, as it were, a divine warrant for the desire for manifestations of his presence which we can sense – an experience of his love. It was not always so with her. Once she was content with his absence – other society and other occupations sufficed her. But now it can never be so again. The world can never be to her what it once was. The betrothed bride has learnt to love her Lord, and no other company than his can satisfy her ... Now her joy in him is a heaven below.

But again she is longing, and longing in vain, for his presence. Like the ever-changing tide, her experience is ebbing and flowing. It may even be that unrest is the rule, satisfaction the exception. Is there no help for this? Must it always continue so? Can he have created these unquenchable longings only to tantalize them? Strange indeed it would be if this were the case!

Yet are there not many of the Lord's people whose habitual experience corresponds with hers? They know not the rest, the

joy, of abiding in Christ. And they know not how to attain to it, nor why it is not theirs. Are there not many who look back to the delightful times of their first betrothals, who, so far from finding richer inheritance in Christ than they then had, are conscious they have lost their first love? ... Others, who may not have lost their first love, may yet be feeling that the occasional interruptions to communion are becoming more and more unbearable, as the world becomes less and he becomes more. His absence is an ever-increasing distress. 'Oh that I knew where I might find him!' 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine.' 'Would that his love were strong and constant like mine, and that he never withdrew the light of his countenance!'

Poor mistaken one! There is a love far stronger than yours waiting, longing for satisfaction. The Bridegroom is waiting for you all the time. The conditions that prevent his approach are all of your own making. Take the right place before him, and he will be most ready, most glad, to satisfy your deepest longings, and to supply your every need ...

Could there be a sadder proof of the extent and reality of the Fall than the deep-seated distrust of our loving Lord and Master which makes us hesitate to give ourselves entirely up to him, which fears that he might require something beyond our powers, or call for something that we should find it hard to give or to do? The real secret of an unsatisfied life lies too often in an unsundered will. And yet how foolish, as well as how wrong, this is! Do we fancy that we are wiser than he? Or that our love for ourselves is more tender and strong than his? Or that we know ourselves better than he does? How our distrust must grieve and wound afresh the tender heart of him who was for us the Man of Sorrows! What would be the feelings of an earthly bridegroom if he discovered that his bride-to-be was dreading to marry him, lest, when he had the power, he should render her life insupportable? Yet how many of the Lord's redeemed

ones treat him just like this! No wonder they are neither happy nor satisfied! ...

Our attention is here drawn to a danger which is pre-eminently one of this day: the intense activity of our times may lead to zeal in service, but to the neglect of personal communion with Christ. But such neglect will not only lessen the value of the service, but tend to incapacitate us for the highest service. If we are watchful over the souls of others, and neglect our own souls ... we shall often be disappointed with our powerlessness to help our brothers and sisters ... Let us never forget that what we are is more important than what we do. All fruit borne when not abiding in Christ must be fruit of the flesh, and not of the Spirit.

- Is there an aspect of your life that you are not surrendering to God?