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SONG OF SOLOMON

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CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| How to Use This Guide | 5 |
| Introduction—The Song of Solomon: Lyrics of Love | 11 |
| One—The Biblical Big Picture (Song of Solomon: An Overview) | 15 |
| Two—Longing (1:1–2:7) | 27 |
| Three—Seeking (2:8–3:11) | 43 |
| Four—Finding (4) | 59 |
| Five—Further Finding (5) | 77 |
| Six—Enjoying (6) | 95 |
| Seven—Further Enjoying (7) | 109 |
| Eight—Expressing (8) | 123 |
| Study Aids | 145 |

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

Lyrics of Love

“Love-lyrics to adorn a wedding celebration”¹ — that’s how one commentator describes the Song of Solomon. The book probably isn’t meant to be a single unified story. Instead, it’s a collection of song lyrics written originally to be sung at wedding feasts. It speaks without embarrassment of the passion between a man and a woman as something to be celebrated. It may also point beyond human love to the love between God and His beloved people.

The book is treasured by both Jews and Christians even though it lacks obvious religious content. Readers are drawn to its poetry that speaks of marriage not as it often is after the fall of Adam, but as it was meant to be. The Old Testament is unflinchingly honest about sex in a fallen world — including polygamy, marital strife, jealousy, rape, and prostitution. Here in the Song of Solomon, however, we glimpse what God intended sex to be: rich in pleasure when pursued faithfully and honorably. Its presence in the Scriptures underscores that God created sexuality with all its passion and physicality as something good. Its message is especially needed in a world blighted by sexual impurity. “God in His wisdom has included in the Canon of Holy Scripture one whole book on this important matter which, in every generation, suffers tragic abuse.”²

Authorship

Its opening verse names the book “Solomon’s Song of Songs.” Christians and Jews over the centuries have traditionally seen Solomon as the book’s author (see 1 Kings 4:32), though his authorship isn’t entirely certain. That opening Hebrew phrase could mean “the Song of Songs by Solomon” (its author) or “the Song of Songs for Solomon” (the king to whom the scribe dedicates the collection). King Solomon, son of David, is mentioned in 1:5; 3:7,9,11; and 8:11-12, but nothing in the book declares clearly that Solomon wrote it. On the other hand, Solomon was well-known as a writer of songs and proverbs, so he could be the author.

The characters in the Song

Three main voices alternate in the Song—a young woman, a young man, and, here and there, the united voices of a group of others.

Both bride and groom are probably quite young, perhaps even in their midteens (the typical age for marriage in ancient Israel), and most likely betrothed. In the ancient world, betrothal was binding, unlike a modern engagement. In the early chapters of the Song we can see the betrothed couple taking their first tentative steps to explore their love up until full union in 5:1.

The woman is by far the most prominent person in the lyrics, and her personality and passions are most revealed. She's called a "Shulammite" in 6:13. Some see this as a feminine variation of Solomon's name, or perhaps an indication that she's from the town of Shunem in northern Israel ("Shulammite" deriving from "Shunammite"), or even a variation of "Jerusalemite."

The woman refers to the man as a "king" (1:4,12; 7:5), though she also sees him as a shepherd (see 1:7). In both cases she may be speaking figuratively—he is to her like a king, like a shepherd. The man is shown specifically as the woman's pursuer in 2:4,8-14; 4:8; 5:2,4; and 7:8.

The lyrics address other characters as "daughters of Jerusalem" (1:5), "daughters of Zion" (3:11), or "young women" (1:3); they're seen as friends of the bride. In addition, there are "others" speaking in 8:8-9 who appear to be the woman's brothers. These united plural voices function somewhat like the chorus in an ancient Greek play, commenting on the actions of the bride and groom.

The characters in the Song may or may not have been real individuals, such as Solomon. We're given few details about the two lovers except their thoughts and emotions, but we connect with them because their feelings and actions are typical of men and women in passionate love. They come across as real because their ardor is so deep.

Structure and unity

Most interpreters don't see the Song as a filled-out story with beginning, middle, and end. Most see it as a collection of independent love poems or love songs. Others see tighter unity as a single work, and some have even seen the Song as a kind of drama, at least in part. For most observers today, however, trying to view the Song as a story or drama ultimately proves unsatisfactory. They see it rather as a song cycle or poem cycle. Like most poetry, it is full of repetitions and metaphors.

Because the book's structure is uncertain, Bible versions vary widely in the way they label the various parts. In this guide, as you study through the Song of Solomon, you'll find a few suggested section titles from various sources. Since various Bible translations (through their insertion of headings within the text) approach the book's structure differently, it can help broaden your view of the Song to see these different heading placements.

Style

The Song of Solomon is esteemed for its poetic greatness, its “haunting beauty.”³ “To relish reading the Song of Solomon . . . we need to forget about prose literalism and take flight on the wings of the fantastic and poetic imagination. The writer of the Song of Solomon is a poet who pulls out all the stops.”⁴

The Song is packed with imagery, some of which seems foreign to us three thousand years after it was written. When we read about doves, fawns, and warriors’ shields, we need to ask ourselves, “What associations and feelings did this image trigger for its first readers?” “Figurative language is not concerned with precision of content. Indeed, imagery both reveals and conceals the object of comparison. To say that the woman’s eyes are like doves raises all sorts of questions that are difficult to answer. . . . In what way are her eyes like doves?”⁵

Getting used to the Song’s intense use of metaphor becomes easier as we learn to accept the Song on its own terms. We have to avoid imposing on it the standards by which we would judge a modern love song. To assist you in this process, this study differs from what you may have experienced in other LIFECHANGE studies. You will dive deep into the metaphors used throughout the book and reflect on the marital themes communicated through them.

Who is speaking when?

In the Hebrew of the Song of Solomon, there’s no indication of where one speaker ends and another begins. Sometimes it’s unclear where these transitions occur. To help modern readers with this, many Bible translations have inserted speaker identification headings into the text. Translations vary as to where they place these headings. The way the three major speakers are identified also varies widely. In this guide, you’ll find suggested transitions from speaker to speaker based on how they’re often identified.

How allegorical is it?

Throughout Jewish and Christian history, the Song has often been seen primarily as an allegory of God’s love for His people, or Christ’s love for His bride, the church. In modern times, the book more often has been taken at face value, as a passionate and lyrical celebration of love between man and woman. Any allegorical aspect has been dismissed or downplayed.

To some degree this is simply a matter of putting first things first. The poetry was probably originally written for wedding celebrations. Its first meaning is about human love. “There may be more than the literal, but that is not up for discussion until the meaning of the plain sense of the text is accepted.”⁶

Some of the current resistance to an allegorical interpretation of the Song has been a reaction against seemingly wild excesses of this approach in the past. Today, many aim for an interpretation that focuses on the first meaning of the poems while remaining cautiously open to a secondary allegorical interpretation. Recognizing the historical tradition of viewing the Song allegorically, this guide includes some modern allegorical commentary on the Song.

In our study here, we want to be fully aware of what the Song of Solomon tells us about marital love and intimacy, but also allow ourselves to be pointed toward a higher dimension. Human beauty and intimacy, as good as they are, can't ultimately satisfy. "This is not to denigrate them, but rather to recognize them for what they are. They are pointers to another world, another dimension."⁷ As Paul tells us in Ephesians 5, God created sexual love to point beyond itself to a glorious eternal reality. While they shout about human love, the lyrics in the Song of Solomon also whisper to us about God.

1. Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 27.
2. Edward J. Young, quoted in J. A. Balchin, "The Song of Solomon," in *The New Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 579.
3. Gledhill, *Song of Songs*, 20.
4. Leland Ryken and Philip Graham Ryken, eds., *The Literary Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), introduction to Song of Solomon, "The book at a glance."
5. Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 14.
6. Dennis F. Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," in *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 5, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 1205.
7. Gledhill, *Song of Songs*, 14.

SONG OF SOLOMON: AN OVERVIEW

The Biblical Big Picture

*I am my beloved's
and my beloved is mine.*

SONG 6:3

1. For getting the most from the Song of Solomon, one of the best guidelines is found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, words which Paul wrote with the Old Testament first in view. He said that all Scripture is of great benefit to (a) teach us, (b) rebuke us, (c) correct us, and (d) train us in righteousness. Paul added that these Scriptures completely equip the person of God “for every good work.” As you think seriously about those guidelines, in which of these areas do you especially want to experience the usefulness of the Song of Solomon? Express your desire in a written prayer to God.

For Thought and Discussion: How would you summarize what you already know about the Song of Solomon? What have been your previous impressions of the book? What impressions of the book have you picked up from others?

Optional Application: After His resurrection, when Jesus was explaining Old Testament passages to His disciples, we read that He “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Ask God to do that kind of work in *your* mind as you study the Song of Solomon so you’re released and free to learn everything here He wants you to learn — especially in the marriage relationship in which He has placed you. Express this desire to Him in prayer.

2. In Jeremiah 23:29, God says that His Word is “like fire” and “like a hammer.” He can use the Scriptures to burn away unclean thoughts and desires in our hearts. He can also use Scripture, with hammer-like hardness, to crush and crumble our spiritual hardness. From your study of the Song of Solomon, how do you most want to see the fire-and-hammer power of God’s Word at work in your own life and marriage? Again, express this longing in a written prayer to God.

3. Think about these words of Paul to his younger helper Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). As you study God’s Word of Truth in the Song of Solomon, He calls you to be a “worker.” It takes *work* — concentration and perseverance — to fully appropriate God’s blessings for us in this book. Express here your commitment before God to work diligently in this study of the Song of Solomon.

4. In one sitting, read through all of the Song of Solomon. Read at a steady pace, and don’t worry about anything you don’t understand; just keep reading to get a fresh overview of this short book as a whole. From this quick reading, what are your strongest impressions of the book?

5. a. Glance again through the pages of the Song of Solomon, and notice the repeated phrases — which is typical of many songs. What repeated phrases, images, or ideas do you find in these sets of verses?

2:6; 8:3 _____

2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4 _____

2:16; 6:3; 7:10 _____

4:1; 5:12 _____

b. What other notable repetitions do you find?

6. How would you define *love* as this word is used in the Song of Solomon? Look in particular at 1:2, 2:4, 3:5, 4:10, and 8:6-7.

7. Look carefully at the words of Proverbs 5:15-19. How would you compare that passage's teaching with the theme of the Song of Solomon?

8. Review the Bible's first words regarding sexuality and marriage in the following passages from Genesis. How does the teaching in each of these passages form a foundation for the theme of the Song of Solomon? And what other relationship, if any, do you see between the two?

Genesis 1:27-18 _____

Genesis 2:18,21-23 _____

Genesis 2:24-25 _____

Much of the Song of Solomon reads as if it were taking place in Eden at the time of Genesis 2:18-25. There is an innocent exuberance to the writer's experience of human love that hearkens back to before the Fall.

9. Each of the following Old Testament passages deals in some way with marriage. In what ways does each one relate to the theme and message of the Song of Solomon?

Proverbs 18:22 _____

Proverbs 19:14 _____

Malachi 2:13-16 _____

Marriage’s Biblical Glory

“Old Testament Hebrew has no word for a bachelor. There were not supposed to be any.”¹ Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and the other great figures of the Old Testament were all married. Jeremiah was the only prophet we know of who was definitely unmarried. The priests were married. The high priest — the one person who could enter the Holy of Holies, the throne room of God — was married.

The sign of an Israelite man’s commitment to God was circumcision, a surgery performed at the point of his intimate contact with his wife. This too was a sign that the act of marriage was holy.

Weddings play a key role in the Bible. The story of man begins with the union of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 2:18-25) and climaxes with the marriage supper of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:6-10). Jesus begins His earthly ministry with a miracle at a wedding (see John 2:1-11). John the Baptist calls Jesus the Bridegroom (see John 3:29-30). Jesus described His time on earth as an engagement

(continued on page 20)

(continued from page 19)

party. Paul says human marriage exists to help us understand the marriage of Christ with the church (see Ephesians 5:25-33).

10. In the New Testament, each of the following passages also deals in some way with marriage. In what ways does each one relate to the theme and message of the Song of Solomon?

1 Corinthians 7:1-5 _____

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 _____

Ephesians 5:21-24 _____

Ephesians 5:25-33 _____

Colossians 3:18 _____

Colossians 3:19 _____

Hebrews 13:4 _____

1 Peter 3:1-6 _____

1 Peter 3:7 _____

Matthew 5:31-32 _____

Matthew 19:1-9 _____

The Song of Solomon is wildly enthusiastic about sexual love, and it takes for granted that this sexual intimacy will take place within a faithful marriage. The ancient Israelites who first heard these poems had a strict moral code. Premarital sex was forbidden. If two people had premarital sex anyway, they had to get married, and the man had to pay the bride-price to the woman's parents (see Exodus 22:16). Adultery was a sin so serious that it carried a potential death penalty (see Leviticus 20:10), because it involved breaking a precious covenant relationship.

Far from weakening this moral code, Jesus upped the ante by saying that God judges not just extramarital acts but even extramarital thoughts (see Matthew 5:28).

For Thought and Discussion: How important is sexual satisfaction in marriage?

So the Song of Solomon is not about free love. Still, it isn't a "moral social tract"² either. It celebrates true love, which is "as strong as death" (Song 8:6).

- 11. In the following Old Testament passages, the love between God and His people is compared to that between a bridegroom and bride. Look up these passages, and explain the part each could play in your interpretation of the Song of Solomon.

Isaiah 54:4-8 _____

Jeremiah 2:1-2 _____

Ezekiel 16:8 _____

Hosea 2:14-20 _____

- 12. Also review carefully Paul's New Testament teaching in Ephesians 5:22 and 5:25-32, which compares Christ's relationship to the church with that of a husband and wife. How might this passage play a part in your interpretation of the Song of Solomon?

Human marriage can be a window into heavenly reality. The apostle Paul tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church (see Ephesians 5:25-27). When he speaks of the union of husband and wife as one flesh, he says, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (5:32). Such words authorize us to reflect on the Song of Solomon in light of the love between Christ and the church.

For Thought and Discussion: In what ways should human love mirror God's love for His people?

13. From this quick overview of biblical teaching on marriage, what would you say are the most important principles to keep in mind as you seek to better understand the Song of Solomon?

14. It has been stated that because of the uniqueness of the Song of Solomon as a book in the Bible, it requires "a special sensitivity in the reader."³ How would you describe that requirement? What kind of sensitivity on your part is needed as you explore this book?

"The purity and sacredness of love represented here [in the Song of Solomon] . . . are greatly needed in our day

For Thought and Discussion: In what ways might it be helpful for Christians to seek a biblical perspective on the passion of married love?

where distorted attitudes about love and marriage are commonplace. God created sex and intimacy, and they are holy and good when enjoyed within the bounds of marriage. A husband and wife honor God when they love and enjoy each other.”⁴

15. As a further initial exercise in getting familiar with the Song, read through the following verses and record how each of the lovers is viewed. Again, don't worry at this point about trying to understand the imagery more deeply. Just record what you see.

a. How the woman is referred to or perceived:

1:9 _____

1:15 _____

2:2 _____

2:10 _____

2:13 _____

b. How the man is referred to or perceived:

1:16 _____

2:3 _____

2:8 _____

2:9 _____

2:14 _____

2:16 _____

2:17 _____

c. How the woman perceives herself:

1:5 _____

2:1 _____

For the group

In your first meeting, it may be helpful to turn to the front of this book and review together the section titled “How to Use This Guide” on pages 5–9.

You may want to focus your discussion for lesson 1 especially on these concepts, which are emphasized in the lesson’s questions:

- God’s design for marriage
- The role of sexuality in marriage
- The highest purposes in marriage
- God’s love for His people
- Marriage as a reflection of God’s love for us

Look also at the questions in the margins under the heading “For Thought and Discussion.”

1. Dennis F. Kinlaw, “Song of Songs,” in *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 5, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 1207.
2. Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 29.

3. *New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), introduction to Song of Solomon: "Characteristics and Themes."
4. *Life Application Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1990), introduction to Song of Solomon: "The Blueprint."