

SONG OF SONGS

FRIENDSHIP ON FIRE

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON
and **IAIN M. DUGUID**


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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING THE SONG OF SONGS

Throughout its history, the Song of Songs has been regarded as a challenging book to understand, and it has always had two broad schools of interpretation: one that reads it primarily as a description of the relationship between God and his people, and one that reads it primarily as a text that honors the value and significance of human love and sexuality. Each interpretive school has had representatives who follow a serious grammatical-historical approach, alongside others who discover by free association all kinds of potential applications in its beautiful imagery. The approach followed in this study will be to see the Song as belonging to the genre of wisdom literature—a genre that often speaks about God’s design for human relationships, which are a key part of wise living in this world. It is no surprise, then, that an entire book of the Bible is devoted to the most important of those relationships: marriage.

The **main purpose** of the book is to affirm the importance and value of love and sex within the limits of an exclusive marital relationship between one man and one woman. The book contrasts this with other, competing views of love and marriage. Throughout much of history, marriage has been viewed as a means of building political and economic strength through the uniting of families and nations—as a relationship in which love is irrelevant. It has sometimes been viewed in the church as a less spiritual alternative to celibacy, while in our own day “love” is often viewed as sufficient reason for sexual activity without reference to God’s design for marriage and its exclusive relationship. The book’s wise teaching on love and marriage is therefore profoundly relevant for all people; it challenges every culture in a different way. We have all fallen short of God’s design for our sexuality in one way or another.

At the same time, any book about marriage also has much to teach us about our relationship with Christ. Marriage itself has the primary purpose

of teaching us about the relationship between Christ and the church (see Eph. 5:22–32), and as the Song convicts each of us regarding our failures in the area of sexuality, it points us to the perfect purity of our righteous husband, Jesus Christ. Christians who see Jesus in the Song of Songs by way of allegory are thus not entirely wrong, although sometimes their specific interpretations may be forced. It is unlikely that the sachet of myrrh between the woman's two breasts in Song 1:13 was originally intended to refer to Christ's coming between the two Testaments, Old and New, for example. Yet Christ is indeed to be found on every page of the Song of Songs, just as he is throughout the rest of the Scriptures.

The **author** of the book is unknown. On the basis of the superscription in 1:1, many have thought it to be written by Solomon about himself and his wife, but that interpretation misses the difference in form between the superscription of the Song and other similar superscriptions that *do* ascribe authorship to Solomon—such as Psalm 127:1. A more accurate translation of Song 1:1 is “The finest of songs: about what is Solomon’s”—and, therefore, about what is *not* Solomon’s as well. Solomon can hardly be presented as the ideal model of one-man/one-woman exclusive marital faithfulness, given his own acquisition of one thousand wives and concubines (see 1 Kings 11:3). Indeed, for all his money and power, Solomon doesn’t understand true love at all. As depicted in the Song, Solomon’s wedding day is all about himself (Song 3:6–11), which places it in complete contrast to the mutual joyful self-giving that is the theme of the Song. Solomon may be the owner of a vineyard at a place called “Husband of a multitude” (or *Baal-hamon*—8:11) that brings him a thousand shekels—a shekel for each one of his wives and concubines—but his vineyard is managed for him by others (see v. 11). In contrast, the woman is free to manage her own vineyard and to give it to the one she loves (see v. 12); her affections cannot be bought for any price (see v. 7).

An attribution of authorship to someone other than Solomon does not require the assumption made by some commentators that the woman in the Song is part of Solomon’s harem while also engaging in a relationship with her shepherd-boy lover; that view creates significant moral questions about her behavior and is entirely unnecessary. It is sufficient that, as in 1 Kings 11, Solomon represents a way of approaching marriage as a means to achieve political and economic success, without reference to love. The

Song's teaching is diametrically opposite to this approach: true love cannot be purchased and is of immeasurable value (see Song 8:7), and it delights to give itself self-sacrificially in marriage, as we see when the man and the woman joyfully leave, cleave, and become one flesh (cf. Gen. 2:24).

The **structure** of the book is built around the wedding ceremony and the consummation of the lovers' relationship, which take place in 3:6–5:1 and give focus to the book's **themes**. Prior to the wedding, the lovers anticipate with eagerness the "house" (i.e., the family) they will build (see Song 1:16–17), but they know that they need to wait for the appointed time before engaging in sex. Waiting is a very important theme within the first part of the Song (see 2:8–17), and the repeated refrain that is addressed to other young women (the "daughters of Jerusalem") adjures them sternly not to stir up or awaken love until it pleases (see 2:7; 5:8; 8:4). The crucial event that is being awaited is marriage, which is the necessary context in which the God-given power of our sexuality may be unleashed safely. From its opening lines, the Song declares the goodness of God's gift of sex within marriage. The book begins with the woman longing for the man to kiss her—not simply to speak to her or lead her in a Bible study (1:2–3). She longs for the day when she will lie next to him and enjoy his caresses (2:5–6). The lovers delight in describing each other's beautiful bodies—not merely their eternal souls (5:10–16; 7:1–9). The Song affirms the appropriateness of the desire that both men and women have for sex within marriage. Sex is a good gift that God has designed to bless and strengthen our marriages.

Yet at the same time, the Song is not primarily about sex. It is actually very restrained in its descriptions of sex and uses beautiful poetic imagery to paint an impressionist rather than a realist portrait. The book is much more centrally about passion—the "Oh my goodness; I'm crazy about you" dimension of love (see Song 1:15–2:4). This is all the more remarkable given the virtually complete absence of descriptions of such emotions in the marriages that appear in the Old Testament. Many marriages fill the pages of Scripture, some good and some bad, but none of them embody more than a glimpse of the flashing fire of the love described in the Song (8:6)—with one exception: the Lord's all-encompassing love for his bride, Israel. Israel was very far from being the perfect spouse; on the contrary, she was repeatedly unfaithful to the Lord. Yet, as the story

of Hosea reminds us, the Lord pursued Israel and bought her back from her lovers (see Hos. 1–3).

Only the truly fiery, passionate love that God has for us accounts for our salvation. God pursued us to the point of his own Son's death on a cross, when he bore the weight of all our sins, so that he might present us to himself as a spotless bride on the last day (see Rev. 21:2). By doing so, God has not merely given us an example of love for us to follow in our own marriages (as we see in Ephesians 5:25–28); he has himself atoned for our many failures to love in this way. His perfect desire for his bride is now credited to us, no matter what our own history of sexual and marital unfaithfulness may be, and we are loved by him just as we are. As a result, we are given the courage to try again to love our spouses in the way he has taught us and are freed from the guilt and shame that so easily holds us captive. In this way, as it guides us to behave wisely in our relationships and convicts us of our failures to live wisely in this world, the Song always points us to the Christ who is our perfect wisdom, righteousness, and strength. His unparalleled love for us is all our hope and glory.

OUTLINE

1. Title (1:1)
2. Prologue (1:2–2:7)
 - A. Introduction (1:2–14)
 - i. Desire (1:2–4)
 - ii. Uncertainty and Request (1:5–7)
 - iii. Response and Reassurance (1:8–11)
 - iv. Desire (1:12–14)
 - B. A litany of love (1:15–2:7)
 - i. Mutual Affirmation (1:15–2:3)
 - ii. The Delights and Dangers of Love (2:4–7)
3. Before the Wedding: Joined and Separated (2:8–3:5)
 - A. Morning (2:8–17)
 - B. Night (3:1–5)
4. The Wedding (3:6–5:1)
 - A. Question (3:6)
 - B. Solomon's Glory (3:7–11)

- C. The Beloved's Glory (4:1–7)
- D. Consummation (4:8–5:1)
- 5. After the Wedding: Separated and Rejoined (5:2–6:3)
 - A. Night (5:2–8)
 - B. The Lover's Glory (5:9–16)
 - C. Restoration (6:1–3)
- 6. Contemplation and Renewed Consummation (6:4–8:4)
 - A. Contemplation of the Beloved (6:4–10)
 - B. Response (6:11–12)
 - C. Contemplation of the Beloved (6:13–7:10a)
 - D. Response (7:10b–11)
 - E. Renewed Consummation (7:12–8:4)
- 7. Epilogue (8:5–14)
 - A. The Overwhelming Power of Love (8:5–7)
 - B. The Incomparable Value of Love (8:8–12)
 - C. The Unending Nature of Love (8:13–14)

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LESSON 1

APPROACHING THE SONG OF SONGS

Song of Songs 1:1–2:7; 4:1–16; 5:2–8

THE BIG PICTURE

For centuries, the Song of Songs has both fascinated and baffled students of Scripture. Some scholars—perhaps almost embarrassed by its unabashed celebration of erotic and romantic love—have veered quickly into purely allegorical interpretations and concluded that the contents of this book must be interpreted spiritually as pertaining to Christ and the church. In more recent years, there has been a correction to this, as biblical scholars have begun to acknowledge a more objective and literal approach; such scholars have emphasized the way that the Song of Songs boldly and frankly puts love on display as something to be celebrated, enjoyed, and passionately embraced—in the context of marriage, of course.

Our study will seek to bring out the best of both these approaches; we will seek to learn from this book’s positive presentation of human sexuality, romantic love, and marital bliss as being good gifts from a loving creator God. Yet as we do, we will see how this celebration of love honestly illustrates the finite nature of human love and is meant to point past it to the deeper love of a gracious God for his people—a love that went to sacrificial depths through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. As we follow Iain Duguid’s interpretation and commentary, we will assume his conclusion that the author of the book is unknown to us and will thus refer to it as the “Song of Songs” rather than the “Song of Solomon.” This study will celebrate the poetic composition and arrangement of this marvelous literary work, as

it moves sequentially through the book and seeks to take it at face value, while also studying it in the broader context of Scripture—the focal point of which is God’s redemptive work on behalf of sinners through Christ the Son.

In this lesson, we’ll take an initial big-picture look at some representative passages from the Song of Songs.

Read Song of Songs 1:1–2:7; 4:1–16; 5:2–8.

GETTING STARTED

1. Have you ever heard teaching or preaching from the Song of Songs in a church context or read study materials about this book? If so, what insights have you gleaned about it in the past? What questions do you still have about this book? Is there anything about it that confuses you?

2. What are some lies about sexual intimacy that are propagated in your culture today? Why are these lies harmful? Why is sex—and sexual sin—so powerful . . . and such an important area of life for Christians to consider carefully and biblically?

Song of Songs, pg. xx

I take the Song of Songs to be a poem by an unknown and anonymous author about two idealized people, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and committed love is great but, like all loves in this fallen world, far from perfect.

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. As you read through the passages from Song of Songs 1, 2, and 4, what details struck you about the mood and focus of the speakers in them? What are they celebrating—and why?
4. How is human love elevated in the passages you read? What warnings are offered in them? What parts of the passages discuss potential pain and heartbreak in a relationship?
5. What seems to be the overall context of the Song of Songs? Who are the main characters? What other characters seem to be present in some of the poetry, dialogue, and songs?

fulfilled in the relationship between Jesus Christ and his people? How do you think that taking this approach to the book might help you as you study it?

15. According to answer 71 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the prohibition against adultery contained in the Ten Commandments “requires the preservation of our own and our neighbor’s chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior.” In what way do you think the Song of Songs is able to preserve “chastity” even as it openly and boldly celebrates sexual love, joy, and satisfaction?

APPLYING THE TEXT

16. From the passages you have read today, what applications could you begin to draw about the beauty and blessing of love that occurs within the context of marriage? Why do these passages show us that we should understand marriage to be a good and blessed gift from our creator God?

17. What warnings emerge within the passages you have read for this lesson? Why should we understand human sexuality and romantic love as being not only a great blessing but also an area for great caution and godly wisdom?

18. How is this book beginning to remind you of the ultimate fulfillment you have in Jesus Christ—your Savior and great Bridegroom? In what ways can the best human relationships illustrate for us the realities of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

PRAYER PROMPT

As you prepare for more in-depth study of the Song of Songs in the coming lessons, begin your prayer today by thanking God for the gift of this wonderful collection of poetry. Praise him for the good gift of human love, which is so unashamedly celebrated here in his Word. Praise him for the great love that he has shown to sinners through the sacrificial death of Jesus the Son. Ask him for the wisdom to learn from this book—through both its practical teaching and its gospel hints and reminders!

One Perfect Love, pg. xx

The Song is designed to show each of us how far short of perfection we fall, both as humans and as lovers, and to drive us into the arms of our true heavenly Husband, Jesus Christ, whose love for his bride is truly perfect.