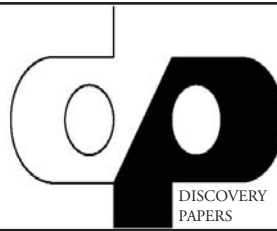


YOUR LOVE IS BETTER THAN WINE

SERIES: FAIR AS THE MOON, BRIGHT AS THE SUN



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Song of Songs 1:2-2:7
2nd Message
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Chapter 1, verses 2-4, of the Song of Songs:

Bride

**Let him kiss me with the kisses of his
mouth—**

for your love is more delightful than wine.

Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;

your name is like perfume poured out.

No wonder the maidens love you!

Take me away with you—let us hurry!

Let the king bring me into his chambers.

Chorus

We rejoice and delight in you;

we will praise your love more than wine.

Bride

How right they are to adore you!

Some love songs begin with a subtle simplicity, but not this one. The horn section is at full volume, the timpani are pounding, and the message of these opening verses is clear: the bride is head-over-heels in love with her man, and she wants him to gather her in his arms and take her to his bed. This is a song about intimate experiences and feelings between a husband and wife. It is a song about Godly passion, and we will discover as we consider it that Godly passion is honorable, powerful, and intoxicating.

There is no narrator in this text. Instead, three voices make a series of poetic speeches, and at times it is difficult to know who is speaking. The voices are those of the groom, the bride, and a group that I will call the chorus. Commentators occasionally disagree over when one speech ends and the next begins, but we will do our best to make it clear as we read through it.

The language of the song is often intended to convey feelings rather than factual information. For example, in the text we just read, the bride is asking that her king come and take her to his bed chamber. We don't need to assume that he is literally a king. It is possible that he is, but irrespective of whether he ruled any kingdom or not, he is a glorious, royal figure in her eyes.

Similarly, there are times when the setting seems to switch from rustic to palatial, and it is hard to know how the change can occur so quickly. Yet we don't need to assume that anything actually changed except the perspective of the speaker. "We may be in a shepherd's tent, but in my eyes it is a palace." It is sort of like saying, "I am in heaven when I hold your hand."

Godly Passion Is Honorable

The first characteristic of Godly passion that I want us to consider is that it is honorable. Throughout history, faithful Christians and Jews have tried to resolve the tensions posed by human sexuality with stern warnings and denial. But these attitudes have surely changed. Very few people in the Church today are taught that human sexuality is shameful, and Christian books and teachings on the gift of sexuality abound. But the message that sexual activity is inherently sinful has been internalized by many people. You may approve intellectually of husbands and wives delighting in one another, naked and unashamed, but find that your inner response to such experiences is conflicted.

The role of the chorus is important and helpful on this point. Sometimes called the Daughters of Jerusalem, the chorus exists at times to sort out the speaker's feelings on things. Sometimes it exists as the voice of the author, and sometimes the voice of the author, more penetratingly, is the voice of God telling how we should understand what is taking place. I think that is true in verse 4, where we read, "We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine." This is God's voice speaking His approval of this husband and wife gathered in one another's arms, ready to make love. The voice of God has the power to break apart an unhealthy connection of sexuality with shame. His blessing offered to the couple in this poem can bring blessing and new freedom as the text speaks to us.

Godly Passion Is Powerful

The second characteristic of Godly passion is that it is powerful. There is certainly a physiological basis for that. The biology of reproduction is the starting point that drives us toward what Ray Stedman used to call "the urge to merge," but the real power of Godly passion comes from the promise of being known and loved. The delight of physical touching is linked to one's heart being touched. Two bodies making love are one body, but the biblical description of marriage in which two become one is much more profound than that.

Verses 5-8.

Bride

Dark am I, yet lovely,

O daughters of Jerusalem,

dark like the tents of Kedar,

like the tent curtains of Solomon.

Do not stare at me because I am dark,

because I am darkened by the sun.
My mother's sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I have neglected.

Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze
your flock

and where you rest your sheep at midday.

Why should I be like a veiled woman

beside the flocks of your friends?

Chorus

If you do not know, most beautiful of
women,

follow the tracks of the sheep

and graze your young goats

by the tents of the shepherds.

Consider what this young woman is saying about herself. She objects to her appearance (“Don’t look at me.”)—a form of self-rejection we find everywhere in our culture. She views her family (“My brothers were angry with me,”) as a source of her unfortunate life circumstances. She has worked hard to the benefit of others while losing herself in the process (“My own vineyard is neglected.”). She can say of herself, “I am dark and lovely,” and she knows she is worth something, but she struggles to believe the best about herself.

As Christians, we know that everybody struggles with the same thing, and we know that only God can address that struggle. Ultimately, it is the Lord who sees beauty where no one else can see it and fixes what is broken. But to those of us whom He has gifted with marriage, He has also given one person who can speak His voice in a way that no one else can. It is God’s voice that will heal us. But if you are married, you have the opportunity to serve the Lord by speaking great truths into the experience of the one to whom you are married. You can be His servant in your beloved’s life in a way that no one else can. And that is what this young woman cries out for. She is in distress, and she is looking for her beloved to affirm her.

We can say to our life partner, “I choose you without reservation. I choose you above all others with all my heart for all my life.” We have a chance to affirm our spouse in a way that no one else can. That is one reason that unfaithfulness is so devastating. It destroys the opportunity to say, “You are uniquely special to me.” This singular opportunity to serve the Lord in one other person’s life displays the power of Godly passion.

Looking now at verses 1:9 to 2:1, we find the man and the woman in conversation, and the dialogue becomes more intimate and more intense as they grow nearer to one another.

Groom

I liken you, my darling, to a mare

harnessed to one of the chariots of

Pharaoh.

Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,

your neck with strings of jewels.

We will make you earrings of gold,

studded with silver.

Bride

While the king was at his table,

my perfume spread its fragrance.

My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh

resting between my breasts.

My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms

from the vineyards of En Gedi.

Groom

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!

Your eyes are doves.

Bride

How handsome you are, my lover!

Oh, how charming!

And our bed is verdant.

The beams of our house are cedars;

our rafters are firs.

I am a rose of Sharon,

a lily of the valleys.

As they draw near physically and speak tenderly to one another, we see that each is secure in the eyes and in the estimation of the other. They feel desire, and the emotional and physical intimacy reinforce one another. Passion is powerful when it connects all of one person to all of another person.

Occasionally married people will ask, “Why aren’t things the way they used to be? Why do we never talk or touch or laugh together anymore?” We don’t laugh because we don’t talk, and we don’t talk because we are no longer attentive to one another, and we are inattentive because we don’t touch... the whole thing is a circle, and everything about us together reinforces every other thing. Each element of the relationship grows or diminishes together. Marriage is a big idea—all of me given to all of you. There is no simple technique that can bridge distance between two people in one area without the work of engaging on all levels.

Verses 2-7:

Groom

Like a lily among thorns

is my darling among the maidens.

Bride

Like an apple tree among the trees of the
forest

is my lover among the young men.

**I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.
He has taken me to the banquet hall,
and his banner over me is love.
Strengthen me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.
His left arm is under my head,
and his right arm embraces me.
Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.**

In the beginning of chapter 1, the bride called to her groom (“Take me”), and now they are holding one another as lovers. And the bride speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem, saying, “Don’t awaken love until its time.” Do not play with fire. Wait for the right time and the right setting in order to receive every good thing that God intends in a relationship. As glorious as the good thing is, it is so powerful that it needs the context God made for it. This is one of the important lessons of this book, and we will give further attention to this warning in a later message.

Godly Passion Is Intoxicating

The third characteristic of Godly passion is that it is intoxicating. This point doesn’t necessarily lead to concrete applications, but it should help us to gain perspective, so I want to make some observations and ask God to make them clear to you.

There are several references to wine in this text. In verse 2 of chapter 1, the bride speaks of the love of her man being greater than wine, and in verse 4, the chorus, voicing God’s approval, uses the same language of intoxication. In chapter two, verse 4, the phrase “his banqueting hall” means literally “the house of wine” in Hebrew. Once again we see that, as they grow nearer to one another in every respect, there is a kind of intoxication taking place. They are being swept away, caught up uncontrollably in something bigger than themselves.

Traditional commentators who were uncomfortable with human sexuality allegorized the Song of Songs. They said it is about Yahweh and Israel, about worship, about Christ and His Church. But what is interesting is that they focus most of their attention on the most sensuous passages, the ones that speak of being swept away, overcome, intoxicated. For them, the holiest and most worshipful passages are those that suggest intoxication and loss of

control. They seem to be saying that when God is most fully present, we are least in charge.

Ephesians 5:18 says, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” Notice that it doesn’t say, “Do not get drunk with wine but always stay in control of things yourself.” It says we should invite the Spirit of God to take control and make our lives a surprise and a wonder.

Most of us at one time or another have been fools for love. Paul uses that language in 1 Corinthians 4 and says that “we are fools for Christ.” The lessons learned in romantic love can be a doorway to “foolish” discipleship. We are caught in something we cannot explain, and if the journey is predictable, we are not dealing with God as He really is.

A few months before Leslie and I were engaged, I was a senior in college and she was traveling in Europe. Every day I would come home hoping for a letter from her. I knew the mailman’s route and what time he should arrive, and I would stand by the mail box impatiently tapping my foot and looking down the block for him. Whenever a letter did arrive, I would read it over and over again. It was foolish behavior, but it was being foolish for love’s sake. I think being a fool for Christ is like that. His call is remarkable and wonderful, but it is less about our control and our ability to explain and more about mystery than we can know.

In 1941, a woman named Annie Johnson Flint wrote a hymn entitled “He Giveth More Grace.” One lyric has stuck with me because of its power to make my knees grow weak and to make me realize that I am dealing with something out of my control but more wonderful than I can describe:

*His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.¹*

Amen.

NOTES

¹ Annie Johnson Flint. “He Giveth More Grace,” ©1941. Renewed 1969 by Lillenas Publishing Co.