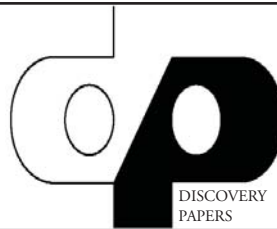


# THE RADIANT BRIDE

*SERIES: FAIR AS THE MOON, BRIGHT AS THE SUN*



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Song of Songs 6:4-7:10  
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Human beings are born with a strong inclination to misunderstand themselves. On the one hand, we deflect responsibility for failure and try to hide our weaknesses. On the other hand, we are often blind to God's renewing work in our lives.

Understanding increases, however, when we draw near to others in Christian community. Those who can speak the truth in love are critical in the discovery of both brokenness and blessing. God said it is not good to be alone, and from the beginning, marriage and self-discovery have gone together. The destructive consequences of sin are evident in God's words to Eve: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16) Longings for love open us up to be hurt. But it is also true that, in Christ, husbands and wives have a profound opportunity to speak of God's presence in the other. We hurt one another in marriage, we discover ourselves in such hurting, and we have the opportunity to be a blessing in marriage and discover the presence of God as well. We need connection for self-discovery. Song of Songs tells the story of such a connection and some of the lessons that were learned in the course of it.

One of the distinctive characteristics of this poem is the series of highly stylized personal descriptions—your eyes are like doves, your lips are like lilies, your neck is like a tower, and so on. It is a style of poetry that was common in the ancient near east, and it is even somewhat characteristic of Arabic poetry today. Three such speeches are delivered by the groom as he describes his bride, and we will consider them together as we study our text today.

The first of these stylized speeches is in chapter 4. On their wedding night, the groom gives a wonderful description of his bride and how taken he is with her. It is a rapturous beginning as two become one—bodies are uncovered and delighted in, a locked garden is entered by invitation, and the voice of God's blessing surrounds them. It is reminiscent of Eden, and it is beautiful.

Chapter 5 tells a story of disconnection, indifference, and hurt. That is somewhat reminiscent of Genesis as well, isn't it? But then the bride speaks in exalted terms of her husband, and they are brought back into right relationship with each other.

Now the groom makes his second speech, and he repeats some of the language found in his first one. Verses 4-10:

**GROOM**

**You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah,  
lovely as Jerusalem,**

**majestic as troops with banners.**

**Turn your eyes from me;**

**they overwhelm me.**

**Your hair is like a flock of goats  
descending from Gilead.**

**Your teeth are like a flock of sheep  
coming up from the washing.**

**Each has its twin,  
not one of them is alone.**

**Your temples behind your veil  
are like the halves of a pomegranate.**

**Sixty queens there may be,  
and eighty concubines,  
and virgins beyond number;**

**but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,  
the only daughter of her mother,  
the favorite of the one who bore her.**

**The maidens saw her and called her  
blessed;**

**the queens and concubines praised her.**

**CHORUS**

**Who is this that appears like the dawn,  
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,  
majestic as the stars in procession?**

There are similarities to the wedding night speech, but there are significant differences as well. For one thing, the bride is no longer a demure maiden. She has become a woman of significance and personal authority, worthy of her husband's respect. The description of her eyes in this passage compared to the earlier one is interesting. In chapter 4, he said, "Your eyes are like doves behind a veil," but here he says, "Turn your eyes from me. They overwhelm me." She has the penetrating, overwhelming gaze of a confident woman, one he is not sure he can always handle.

In his previous speech, the groom spoke not only of the bride's face but of her neck and breasts as well. That speech expressed his invitation and hope for them to join physically. But this speech makes no reference to that at all. Here he speaks only of her face, and he compares her to the most beautiful women of that day—the queens and concubines and women of court—and he says "You are better than all of them. In fact, they admire you." She is confident and beautiful, and he gazes on her with

tremendous respect.

I think it is helpful to hear him be able to speak of her that way. When we first encountered the bride in chapter 1, she was uncertain and doubted her worth (verses 5-7). Now her husband sees not only what has been true of her all along but also what is true of her now. He can see what God has done in her life—the growth and significance she has attained—and it's as if he is looking at her and asking, "Who *is* this person?"

He may ask the question for his own sake, or he may ask so that others will hear him say what he is going to say, but he almost certainly asks for his bride's sake. He has learned to see her from the inside out, majestic as the stars in procession, and he is grateful for her character and strength.

When Leslie and I were first married, she entered the world that I already inhabited. She became part of my church, she made friends with my friends, and she became part of a setting in which I was known. But now I find that often I am the one entering her world, where it is her character that people admire and respect, her presence that they seek, and I get to join her in her setting.

I think that is what these verses suggest. It is important for husbands and wives to look carefully, to see the other person honestly, to discover and delight in the growth God is bringing about, and then to speak about what we see. We have a great opportunity as husbands and wives to serve God and each other in this way.

Verse 13:

#### CHORUS

**Come back, come back, O Shulammitte;  
come back, come back, that we may gaze  
on you!**

**Why would you gaze on the Shulammitte  
as on the dance of Mahanaim?**

Though the context of verse 13 is uncertain, it appears that the bride is taking part in a folk dance of some sort. The *Mahanaim* is the "Dance of the Two Companies," and it may have been part of some historical celebration. The words, "Come back, come back," actually mean "turn around," but they could also mean "swirl around" or "dance in a circle." So we can imagine the women dancing in a circle and calling the bride to join them in the dance.

This is the only place in Song of Songs where the bride is given a name. *Shulammitte* is most likely a title or name that refers to the region she is from. So the bride is dancing, and her husband watches and begins the third of his descriptive speeches. Verses 1-9a:

#### GROOM

**How beautiful your sandaled feet,  
O prince's daughter!  
Your graceful legs are like jewels,  
the work of a craftsman's hands.  
Your navel is a rounded goblet  
that never lacks blended wine.  
Your waist is a mound of wheat  
encircled by lilies.  
Your breasts are like two fawns,  
twins of a gazelle.  
Your neck is like an ivory tower.  
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon  
by the gate of Bath Rabbim.  
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon  
looking toward Damascus.  
Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel.  
Your hair is like royal tapestry;  
the king is held captive by its tresses.  
How beautiful you are and how pleasing,  
O love, with your delights!  
Your stature is like that of the palm,  
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.  
I said, "I will climb the palm tree;  
I will take hold of its fruit."  
May your breasts be like the clusters of  
the vine,  
the fragrance of your breath like apples,  
and your mouth like the best wine.**

While the poetic style and even some phrases are similar to his other speeches, there are some notable differences between this speech and the previous two. One difference is that he begins with her (dancing) feet and describes upward to her head. His earlier descriptions begin with the head and move down.

In addition, this time he describes her whole body. In chapter 4, he made only a brief reference to her body, and in chapter 6 he doesn't mention her body at all—only her face. But here he describes all of her, and he is very comfortable doing so. She is fully dressed, but in his mind's eye he can see all of her, and he is comfortable with who she is. There is no hesitancy, no locked garden here. There is no sense that lovemaking is a mystery to them; it is familiar territory.

I even think there is a fun-loving character to his words. How can you say, "Your breasts are like clusters of a tree and I'm going to climb that tree" without a sense of warmth and humor? It is reminiscent of a Steve Miller Band lyric: "You're the cutest thing I ever did see. I really love your peaches, wanna shake your tree. Lovey-dovey all the time!"<sup>1</sup> There is a kind of freedom and ease that

comes from knowing each other well and enjoying each other's company. In a sense, he is saying, "I like watching her laugh when she dances. I will lie with her and breathe her apple-scented breath."

If we look at the groom's words in chapter 6 and chapter 7 together, they really make a marvelous statement, don't they? We see how much he respects her, how much he admires her, how much he even fears her ("Turn your glance from me. When you look at me like that I'm not sure I can handle it. You are as bright as the sun, as fair as the moon.") All of this language of respect and comfort and connectedness and fun taken together is very powerful. And we have the opportunity as husbands and wives to speak this way to each other.

Now, most of the time our marriages aren't on this high plateau of admiration and peaceful connection. But it is something to hope for and to work toward; to that end, the Song of Songs can be a great encouragement. And as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, we can speak such words of affirmation to one another. We don't need to be married to tell others how much we believe in them, what good we see being accomplished by the Spirit of God in their lives, how much we enjoy their company. We have the chance to encourage one another in all kinds of settings.

In verse 9, the groom says, "Your mouth is like the best wine," and the bride responds,

#### **BRIDE**

**May the wine go straight to my lover,  
{flowing gently through the lips  
of those who fall asleep (NASB)}.**

There are some translation questions there, but I think this is the best translation. She imagines them together as lovers and as those who sleep easily near one another. Verse 10:

**I belong to my lover,  
and his desire is for me.**

The word translated "desire" in verse 10 is used only two other times in the Old Testament. Genesis 3:16 is God's statement to Eve: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you," and it refers to a painful state of co-dependency in which one person is drawn to another who pushes away. The word is used in

a similar way in Genesis 4:8 where, again, it references the hurt of sinfulness.

I don't believe that the author of Song of Songs intended that readers like us would connect those dots back to Genesis. But this book draws our attention to more profound things than just the story of two people who love each other. Generations of readers have discovered the love of God in this story as well. We read of a husband honoring his wife, and we hear the voice of Christ honoring His Bride. The bride and groom resting peacefully in one another's arms remind us of the peace and rest and acceptance that Jesus offers to us as His children and as His Bride. And the word "desire" that is used elsewhere in the context of tragedy and sin and pain in marriage is here reversed; here it is the man who desires his wife ("His desire is for me."). Now the word has a context of hope. Song of Songs is a story of redemption, of God bringing beauty where there was brokenness. And even though its human author probably never intended such theological reflection, the story sings greater songs with deeper profundity than even "proper exegesis" of the text might suggest.

Marriage provides a powerful opportunity to speak truth into the life of one other person. We can reflect to that person what is good and growing and admirable. We can walk together on a path of self-discovery and be a blessing to each other along the way. But we can also talk about the love that is everlastingly and unfailingly for us. We can talk about the God who knows and loves us, who renews and establishes us. We can speak about rest that lasts forever.

*Lord, we need help in discovering ourselves. I pray that each of us will be a good voice for someone else and we can say what is true for their sake. I pray for that experience in marriage and in friendship. I pray that we will find ourselves again with our vision made greater and more often reminded of who You are to us and how much Your love is for us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

#### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Steve Miller Band. "The Joker." 1973

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