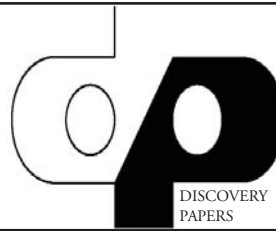


LIFE LESSONS

SERIES: FAIR AS THE MOON, BRIGHT AS THE SUN



Catalog No. 5311
Song of Songs 7:11-8:14
7th Message
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May 11th, 2008

Among the most famous of the Sherlock Holmes stories is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in which the absence of a barking dog provides the clue that solves the mystery. The great detective's attention was drawn to investigate a conspicuous absence, and I think we will discover that what is absent in Song of Songs can draw our attention to some very important truths as well.

Song of Songs is an intensely relational book, but the focus is solely on the bride and groom. There is no language of family or connectedness, and that is striking for a number of reasons. To talk at any length about the nature of marriage outside of the context of family and community would be unusual in any culture, and it is especially unusual in Hebrew culture. The Old Testament is a story of families, and for such a culture to have produced a poem like this is very interesting. We note the absence significantly.

Chapter 1 of Song of Songs begins with the bride calling enthusiastically for her husband to kiss her (verse 2: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth"), and the scene quickly moves toward passionate lovemaking. Now we come to the end of chapter 7 and find another scene in which the bride calls for her husband to be with her and for their lovemaking to be expressive and joyful. Verses 7:11-8:4:

Bride

**Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside,
let us spend the night in the villages.**

**Let us go early to the vineyards
to see if the vines have budded,
if their blossoms have opened,
and if the pomegranates are in bloom—
there I will give you my love.**

**The mandrakes send out their fragrance,
and at our door is every delicacy,
both new and old,
that I have stored up for you, my lover.**

**If only you were to me like a brother,
who was nursed at my mother's breasts!**

**Then, if I found you outside,
I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.**

**I would lead you
and bring you to my mother's house—
she who has taught me.**

**I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the nectar of my pomegranates.
His left arm is under my head
and his right arm embraces [caresses] me.
Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.**

Their lovemaking is spontaneous and exhilarating; it partakes of God's blessing as surely as the fragrances and colors of spring evidence His gifts. This is the story of an honorable marriage, constrained only by community standards for public displays of affection. Passion is both remembered and anticipated. The story of these lovers ends where it began, and the phrase "his left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me" is also found word for word in chapter 2.

And so we come full circle, beginning and ending with two people head over heels in love with each other. The story of the bride and groom is complete, and now we encounter a post script that contains three lessons.

Verses 5-7:

Chorus

**Who is this coming up from the desert
leaning on her lover?**

BRIDE

**Under the apple tree I roused you;
there your mother conceived you,
there she who was in labor gave you birth.
Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy [fervor] unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.**

**Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.**

Verse 5 pictures the couple, perhaps after their weekend

getaway, walking side by side with the bride leaning on the groom. For the first time in this poem we see them not face to face, interacting only with each other, but side by side, facing forward, ready to interact with others.

Verses 6 and 7 are the most famous in this book and are often quoted in literature of all kinds. The bride strongly states that love is so powerful that it needs to be harnessed and governed by public promises made. "Place me," she says, "as a seal on your heart and on your arm." A seal is a public recognition, an emblem of firm conviction and promise. Relationship consists of more than private declarations, so a public promise is made, and there is a community that can call us to account. It is not unlike today's cultural practices of obtaining a marriage license and wearing wedding rings and displaying wedding photos in our homes. Love is so powerful that it needs to be, at times, held in place for its best good by other people looking on and knowing the truth about the relationship. Love's wild power requires firm anchors, not just intoxicating weekends in the country, and young folks are warned against starting too soon precisely because love's ability to sweep us away is so strong.

In verses 6 and 7, the bride compares the power of love to destructive forces such as fires and floods and even death. We live in a world in which destructive things often seem the most powerful. Pain is unrelenting, and death always seems to win. We grow old, and our gray hair and wrinkles are a reminder that the future holds reduced possibilities for us. But love is more powerful. Love that begins as romance and develops a servant's heart, that gives itself away rather than seeking only what it wants, is the antidote to the destructive nature of death and decay. Love's fire cannot be extinguished. 1 Peter 4:8 tells us that love covers a multitude of sins, and 1 Corinthians 13:8 tells us that love never fails. Faith, hope, and love last forever, and the greatest of those is love.

So the first lesson is that love needs to be constrained by public promise, and it is more powerful than all the destructive powers of the world, even death.

The second lesson concerns helping a young girl grow to maturity. Verses 8-10:

CHORUS

**We have a young sister,
and her breasts are not yet grown.
What shall we do for our sister
for the day she is spoken for?
If she is a wall,
we will build towers of silver on her.
If she is a door,
we will enclose her with panels of cedar.**

BRIDE

I am a wall,

**and my breasts are like towers.
Thus I have become in his eyes
like one bringing contentment.**

The speakers are probably the young girl's brothers. She has not yet reached puberty, but they know that one day soon she will face all of the dangers and possibilities of sexuality, and their concern, wisely, is for her character. They know they need to help their sister defend herself against the possibilities that await her. They want to help her become a young woman who believes the best about herself and knows when and how to say "no" so she will not be swept away by peer pressure and the expectations of others. They want to help her become a wall in the most appropriate sense, someone who can stand strong as a person. The hope for the young person is not the sheltering protection of older brothers but a strongly formed character that is prepared to stand up to life's challenges. And in verse 10 the bride endorses their viewpoint and says that her own self-knowledge and strong character have been a blessing in her marriage.

Verses 11-14:

BRIDE

**Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;
he let out his vineyard to tenants.
Each was to bring for its fruit
a thousand shekels of silver.
But my own vineyard is mine to give;
the thousand shekels are for you, O
Solomon,
and two hundred are for those who tend its
fruit.**

GROOM

**You who dwell in the gardens
with friends in attendance,
let me hear your voice!**

BRIDE

**Come away, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the spice-laden mountains.**

Here is the third lesson in our post script. Vineyards and gardens, as we've noted in previous passages, represent the bride herself. The reference to Solomon is less obvious. Sometimes, as in chapters 1 and 3, the bride speaks of her own husband, who is an ordinary man, as a king. She likens him to Solomon because her love causes her to see him as a royal figure. But it is also possible to read "Solomon" here as a reference to someone with every human

advantage at his disposal. It was common in that time for the wealthy and powerful to enter into marriage as a form of commerce. The daughter of one king would marry the son of another to form a political alliance, or a prosperous merchant would pay a “bride price” to acquire another merchant’s daughter in order to increase his own status. But the bride says, “You can keep your thousand shekels, Solomon. My vineyard is my own; I will give myself to the one I choose.” She believes that love and marriage are worthy in their own right, not just as means to an end. Then the husband calls to his wife, and she responds with a final invitation to intimacy.

So we come to the end of Song of Songs, and we find ourselves repeatedly drawn to what is missing in the story. When we began this study, we noted that God is never mentioned directly. But as we worked through the text, we discovered that the relationship between the groom and his beloved makes us think about God’s exclusive, jealous, loyal love for us and the passion with which we can respond to Him.

The absence of any connection between this relationship and any other thing is also a missing piece, if you will, that merits investigation. No relationship, if it captures our attention to the exclusion of all else, can succeed. If romance and the delights of love become our sole focus and do not encourage us to live our lives with love for other people as a result, the relationship cannot survive. Every relationship has to function in a setting where we pass on to others what we receive.

Sheldon Vanauken’s autobiographical book *A Severe Mercy* tells the story of two bright and attractive undergraduates, Van and Davy, who fell in love and married. They created what they called a “Shining Barrier” around themselves to prevent anything from ever separating them, and they determined to share everything in life. They even decided never to have children, since children would only distract them from their romantic idyll.

Some years after they married, they became friends with a group of Christians at Oxford University, one of whom was C. S. Lewis. Eventually they became Christians—Van because he was captivated by Christian ideas, and Davy because she was captivated by Christ.

Then tragedy struck in the form of a virus that took Davy’s life. Vanauken was devastated. His intellectual faith wasn’t working for him, and he wondered where God was in all of this. So he started corresponding with Lewis, and in one of his replies, Lewis wrote,

[Wise Christians of other times] would add that One

Flesh [marriage] must not (and in the long run cannot) ‘live to itself’ any more than the single individual. It was not made any more than he to be its Own End. It was made for God and (in Him) for its neighbors – first and foremost among them the children it ought to have produced . . . One way or another the thing had to die. Perpetual springtime is not allowed . . . You have been treated to a severe mercy. You have been brought to see (how true and how very frequent this is!) that you were jealous of God.¹

Van and Davy weren’t childless because they couldn’t have children but because they couldn’t be bothered with having children. Lewis said that a marriage that exists for God and for the community ought to have produced children. But what ultimately broke the “Shining Barrier,” said Lewis, was Vanauken’s jealousy of his wife’s love for God, and losing her was a severe mercy that would cause him to learn what is really worth knowing forever as a result.

Remembering this story in the context of Song of Songs reminds us that what makes a relationship strong is not its attention to itself but its love for God first, and then the love received from Him that we give to other people. The marriages that are the healthiest and most passionate in the long run are those in which we are here for each other when one of us has the flu, not just when we’re feeling amorous. Marriage is beautiful and lasting when we share concerns about both the mundane and the profound things of life. We help each other discover the spiritual gifts that God has given us and use them to engage the world around us. It’s not enough to focus on the two of us. The Lord God Himself is here first and foremost, and if we love Him, He will teach us to love what he loves, which is all the rest of the world. And we will find that if our love for each other is fueled by something other than selfishness, then it will grow greater as well.

Thank you, Lord, for a great journey through this old poem. Thank you for its valuable truths that have stood the test of time. Help us, Lord, to make more of You, to be more shaped by You, and to find that, if we seek You first in Your kingdom, we will get everything else as well. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

NOTES

¹ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: HarperOne, 1987), 209-210

