

# Fruitful Wooing in the Partnership of Life

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 08 April 2018

Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 0 0 ] But we're going to turn now to our reading this morning, and we're going to read together in the Song of Songs. That's our final study in our little short series on some of these wisdom books in the Bible.

And here's a book that teaches us wisdom about how to love. Now, it's about page 561 or thereabouts. We're going to read mainly from chapter 3, but let me just read the first couple of verses.

To get you into the flavor of this song. The Song of Songs. That means the best of songs. Like the King of Kings or the Lord of Lords.

The Song of Songs. Which is Solomon's. Might be by Solomon. Could be to Solomon. Could be about Solomon. It could be in the general theme of Solomon.

We don't really know. But it's the best of songs. And it begins like this. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. For your love is better than wine.

[ 1 : 0 3 ] Your anointing oils are fragrant. Your name is oil poured out. Therefore, virgins love you. Draw me after you. Let us run. The King has brought me into his chambers.

We're going to flick on now and begin reading at chapter 3, verse 6. Which is the section at the very heart of the song. You can look over the outline on page 2 of the sheet during the offering.

And you'll see the shape of the song. This central section describes the wedding of these two. The lover and the beloved. The bride and the groom.

And it's described in high exalted terms. As if it was the wedding of a king and queen himself. Everybody wants a royal wedding, don't they? Everyone wants to be a princess. And that's what this is describing in those terms.

The wedding and the consummation that follows. What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke? Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense.

[ 2 : 0 3 ] With all the fragrant powders of a merchant. Behold, it is a litter of Solomon. Around it are 60 mighty men. Some of the mighty men of Israel.

All of them wearing swords and experts in war. Each with his sword at his thigh against terror by night. King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple.

Its interior was inlaid with love. By the daughters of Jerusalem. Go out, you daughters of Jerusalem. And look upon King Solomon.

My King Solomon. With the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding. On the day of the gladness of his heart. Describing the coming of the bride and groom to this wedding.

As though it was indeed the greatest king in all the earth. And he says, behold, you are beautiful, my love. Behold, you are beautiful. Your eyes are doves behind your veil.

[ 3 : 0 7 ] Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shore news that have come up from the washing. All of which bear twins.

And not one among them has lost its young. Your lips are like a scarlet thread. And your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.

Your neck is like the Tower of David built in rows of stone. On it hang a thousand shields. All of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns.

Twins of a gazelle that graze among the lilies until the day breaks and the shadows flee. I will go to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.

You are altogether beautiful, my love. There is no flaw in you. Come with me from Lebanon, my bride. Come with me from Lebanon.

[ 4 : 09 ] Depart from the peak of Amarna, from the peak of Senir and Hermon, from the den of lions, from the mountains of leopards. You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride.

You have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride. How much better is your love than wine and the fragrance of your oils than any spice.

Your lips drip nectar, my bride. Honey and milk are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon. A garden locked is my sister, my bride.

A spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits.

Henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon. With trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes. With all chief spices. A garden fountain.

[ 5 : 15 ] A well of living water and flowing streams from Lebanon. And these are her words now. It should read she. She says, awake, O north wind.

And come, O south wind. Blow upon my garden. Let its spices flow. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits. I came to my garden, my sister, my bride.

I gathered my myrrh with my spice. I ate my honeycomb with my honey. I drank my wine with my milk. And everybody said, eat, friends.

Drink. And be drunk with love. Amen. May God bless to us this which is his word.

Well, let's turn then to the Song of Songs. And you might find the outline helpful to have in front of you. In our brief foray into the wisdom books of scripture, we have looked at wisdom for how to live from Proverbs.

[ 6 : 36 ] On how to lose with Job. On how to lament in the book of Lamentations. And most recently on how to be limited. Ecclesiastes teaches us the limitations of our own mortality.

But finally, we're coming to look at wisdom about how to love. Wisdom in this whole arena of sexual love. Which I'm calling fruitful wooing in the partnership of life.

That is in marriage between a man and a woman. Which is the only sexual partnership in the Bible. And the only one that Jesus himself approves of and teaches about. But of course the Bible does teach about it a great deal.

And it very much does approve of it. Not least the sexual aspect of marriage. Which of course is what this book in front of us particularly focuses on.

And I say that right at the start because there have been various attempts to interpret this book as something other than what it plainly seems to be. Which is the evocative and indeed erotic poetry celebrating the sexual union of a bride and groom.

[ 7 : 44 ] Many have allegorized it. So as to claim that it's not really about a man and woman at all. In fact it's about Israel and God.

Or it's about Christ and his people. The lengths that some have gone to do that allegory would almost surprise you I'm sure. Cyril of Alexandria for example said that the woman's two breasts in chapter 1 verse 13 are the Old and the New Testaments.

And the sachet of myrrh in between the breasts are Christ himself. And it tends to go on in that kind of way. Others though have tried to avoid having to tie down the details like that.

But rather still want to see the whole song in more general terms. As the love between Christ and his church. And again what that means is they have to downplay completely the intimate details that are in fact the distinctive feature of the song.

Sometimes that is because of a rather prudish approach. And sometimes though it's not that. It's a desire to find Christ in every part of scripture.

[ 8 : 55 ] And it's rather difficult to do that in erotic imagery. And so you have to find some other way to make this imagery speak about Jesus. We don't have time this morning to go into all the detail of that sort of thing.

But I do in general recommend Palmer Robertson's book which is in our bookshop there. The Christ of Wisdom. And I agree with what he says. When he says we need not fear or shrink from the natural interpretation of what this book purports to be.

It's a love story. It is the best of songs. That's what song of songs means. And he says it is celebrating the greatest theme among earthly experiences that humans could ever sing about.

And that is right and pure sexual love within marriage. Seeing the song he says in the context of God's redemptive history in scripture means that no need exists to find Christ in the song in any other way than as the redeemer and restorer of the original marriage relationship first celebrated by Adam and Eve.

The intimate relationship of man and woman shines forth as one of God's greatest creative acts. And Christ's restoration of this relationship by his death and resurrection shines forth as one of his greatest gifts to redeemed humanity.

[ 10 : 15 ] The purpose of the song he says is therefore to focus on the love between redeemed man and woman in the context of Christ's recreated work. And he adds as a summary of the song this conclusion.

Love he says is beautiful. The biblical pattern of human love is the most beautiful. As the redeemed in Christ men and women have the privilege of entering into this most beautiful of relationships with a wisdom that only God can provide.

So here's a book to teach us about the true way of joy in sexual relationships written by the maker himself. And its primary purpose therefore is pastoral.

That is it's to shepherd God's people in the pure and passionate way of right sexual relationships. And as such it's a message needed by all whether you're married or unmarried.

Whether you're not yet married or indeed will never be married. Because Christ's apostle tells us doesn't he in Hebrews 13 that the marriage is to be held in honor by all. And the marriage bed indeed to be undefiled.

[ 11 : 24 ] That means that we all need to know about these things. And we all need to be able to help one another be wise about these things. Paul tells Titus doesn't he that older women are to teach younger women how to love their husbands properly.

Paul himself teaches the Corinthians very plainly about sex. Proverbs gives detailed instructions to a young man about the right way with women not the wrong way with women.

Read Proverbs 5 verse 15 and following for example. But you see where Paul and where Proverbs teach didactically. The song teaches dramatically.

The one is explicit explanation but the other here is implicit teaching by experience. The former requires prose but the latter requires the poetry of this song.

In order to teach how to love like king and queen of the world. And if ever a culture needed this kind of divine instruction then surely it is our culture today which is full of so much confusion.

[ 12 : 31 ] It needs so much corruption of sexual relationships. And where our anonymous world of electronic virtual reality places so many temptations.

Massive temptations. So accessibly. So immediate. In front of us all. And where the materials being used in our schools. Even among the youngest of children are so explicit.

So provocative. Most of you if you actually saw it would be horrified. So how much better says Palmer Robertson rightly. If young people learn what male and female relations are in the context of a godly community.

That listens to God's word. As it speaks about human sexuality. This word of the Lord he says could save many people from a tragic relationship.

And at the same time enrich a married life which happens at the proper time. So if you're inclined to think that this sort of subject is not proper for the church's public teaching.

[ 13 : 38 ] I would ask you to think again. Of course I'm mindful of the context this morning. We're a mixed congregation of ages and stages. So don't worry. There are details that we won't go into this morning.

Which we would go into and should go into. With married couples themselves. Or with a husband in life. Exploring this song themselves. Privately.

There's a place for that kind of erotic exploration. But it's not here. Not this morning. And by the way. That goes for a general rule as well. Please. The rest of us don't want to see youngsters.

Or indeed oldsters for that matter. Pawing over each other in church. You'd be very surprised how much I can see from up here. I see it all. And some of it I don't want to see.

Save that for the appropriate place. I'm all for it. Just not here. But the church must reclaim what is a wonderful and beautiful gift of God for humanity.

[ 14 : 39 ] What's given for true human flourishing. And that is the enjoyment and the celebration of sex within the purity and the propriety and the passion of God-given direction about our sexuality.

And the world needs to hear a better story. It needs to hear the best story of love and sex in the way of the Creator. And we are the people of the Redeemer.

We need to know that story too. Which is the best story. What the Song of Songs is teaching about. So I want this morning to pick out some key themes.

Release the Word. I'm going to be studying the whole book in detail all through this coming term. So they will be the experts. You can go and ask them towards the summer. They'll tell you. But I've given you a general outline on the sheet.

And I think there is a general development in this song. It is one song. It's not just random. I think it does hang together. But of course it is poetry. It's not prose. It's not going to have the logic of a simple story.

[ 15 : 41 ] But it is clearly centered on the marriage and the consummation. That's what we read of in chapter 3 verse 6 to chapter 5 verse 1. And either side of that you have poetry expressing the longings, the anticipation for marital intimacy.

As well as the struggles which go on, by the way, even after marriage. And then the affirmation of a committed, contented monogamy.

As the way of completeness. As the way of shalom. That's the word used in chapter 8 verse 10. When at the end of the song you have the Solomon and the Shulamite united together in shalom.

It's a deliberate word play. Telling us that that is the way of peace and completeness and contentedness. So the release of the word is we'll have a more detailed, more complex outline from Rupert Hunt Taylor.

That's what you'd expect from Rupert. But for the rest of us, this we'll have to do this morning. Anticipation, arousal, consummation, arrival and affirmation. One last thing.

[ 16 : 46 ] In our ESV Bibles, you'll see that the song is divided into parts spoken by he and she. By the bride and the groom. And then there's various bits by the narrator and the crowd who are watching.

There are two main protagonists. I think that's right. Some people divide the song into a more complicated way with three main protagonists. Where the lover and the beloved are being intruded in upon by the evil Solomon.

Who's trying to steal the girl away. I think that's wrong. It's too complicated. I don't think it really works. So it's best, I think, to take it as it stands in our Bibles. Okay, five themes then that we're faced with in this song of songs.

The best of songs about love. And of course, as soon as I'm trying to distill it down to five themes, I'm turning poetry into prose. So you lose a lot of the whole essential evocative truth.

So it's not enough. You have to read this yourself. I want to encourage you to do that. What we're doing this morning is just giving you some signposts and guides. But here's the first. The song conveys poetic praise of sexual love.

[ 17 : 52 ] We need to take the subject seriously, but also the medium. It is poetic. So we're not to be like some who, as one writer says, have made their way through the text like flat-footed Philistines.

No, this is poetry. And so in some respects, it's going to be idealized. It's going to be fantastical. And that's why there are all these royal references. We talk that way too about romance, don't we?

Every girl wants their prince charming. Every girl wants to be a princess on her wedding day. That's why everybody's obsessed with royal weddings. We want to live through the royal weddings. It's on all the papers.

You know, that's what's going on here. Don't get confused about all the references to Solomon. It's not the real Solomon. It's two lovers, bride and groom, whose love makes them like prince and princess.

They're going to become kings and queens of all that they survey. Well, that's what romance does, doesn't it? It makes you feel like that. If it doesn't do that for you, you need to read the Song of Songs a bit more.

[ 18 : 52 ] And I guarantee, men, if you want to be treated like a king, then the best way is to start by treating your lady like a princess. That's the way it has to be if you want that sort of thing. And the point here, of course, is that any bride and groom, whoever they are, can be as happy and fulfilled as the greatest king and queen in all the world.

And that's what this wedding scene that we read describes, is that the bride is arriving like a bride in a royal carriage, in a great procession, in the litter of Solomon, the greatest king in all the earth.

And in chapter 3, verse 11, she says, Go and look at my King Solomon. Look at my bridegroom, the king. Their bridegroom is just an ordinary bloke.

He's a shepherd, you'll understand if you read the Song. But to her, he's the greatest king in all the earth. It's a great thing, men, isn't it, that our partners can sometimes look at us through those royally rose-tinted spectacles.

Just as well, really, isn't it? Thank God for that. But of course, there's another side to that too, isn't there? Because this lover can, and he does talk to her, as the greatest princess who's going to be his queen.

[ 20 : 02 ] Just look at the poetry, the description in chapter 4. Behold, you are beautiful, my love. He's heaping upon her, compliment after compliment. He's speaking about her great sexual allure to him.

And he's making her feel like the greatest queen of all the earth. And of course, that is what makes her want to give herself to him so wholeheartedly. And notice all the way through chapter 4 there, he is praising her unique allure to him.

He's not comparing her to other women. He's using rich language of all the beauty of nature, all the images of power and of value to describe her unique beauty to him.

And all the way through, he repeats, you're my bride. Come with me, my bride. Come away with me. And it's that beauty of that exclusive relationship that yields that kind of intoxicating royal love.

Indeed, this is better even than the love of the real Solomon. When you get to the end of chapter 8 in verses 11 and 12, she mentions Solomon. His vast wealth might be referring to his harem of a thousand women.

[ 21 : 20 ] He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. That may be what the thousand pieces of silver refer to. But she says, Oh, you can keep all that, Solomon. Because I have my vineyard, my own body and its sexual fruit.

And it's for my lover alone. That's why the story ends in the last two verses of the song with these mature lovers again, still in the garden of love together, alone.

God-given sexual love. It's not only royal, but it's righteous. It's right in every way. It's the way God meant it to be. And that too is in the rich poetic imagery of this song.

They are like king and queen of the whole world, making their love in a garden paradise. But what the song is telling us is they're back in the garden of Eden. At the heart of the book is that scene of marriage and consummation that we read, where the garden is at last unlocked.

Where the fountain which has been sealed is now flowing with living water. And its fruits are being eaten and enjoyed. Its spices are being savored.

[ 22 : 34 ] Its milk and honey and its wine are being delighted in. This is not describing a trip to Dobby's Garden Center to buy some plants for the garden, followed up by a cream tea with honeycomb afterwards.

If you're still very confused about that, come and speak to me afterwards, and I'll explain it if you're over 21. But clearly this is highly charged imagery, isn't it? But notice also it's very reminiscent of Genesis chapter 1 and 2, the Garden of Eden.

And that's true all through the song. The fruits of the trees, the streams of life, the beauties of nature. They're back in the place where God made man male and female and joined them together as sexual beings.

And it was then, do you remember, and only then, in the creation account, that God saw all that he had made. And not only was it good, it was very good. And the man and the woman were naked and unashamed.

That is, as Alec Mateer translates that word, naked and nothing at all was out of place. There was no disappointment, no failure of expectation. You see, the language is saying that this is what God made man as male and female for.

[ 23 : 55 ] Rightly ordered sexual love. And it's beautiful and it's wonderful. Nothing is out of place. It's very good. When it is like this, shepherded rightly by God's guiding hand.

That is what leads to human flourishing. That is what we are created for. It's reversing the dark forces of the evil one who wanted to draw man away to forbidden fruit that did not bring fulfillment, did not bring joy, brought emptiness, brought destruction.

So that's the first thing. The song is a poem in high praise of right and proper sexual love. Rightly done, it is a taste of paradise on earth.

It's very good. It is unashamedly God's gift to humankind. And above all, it is redeemed as a gift for his redeemed people.

And so secondly, we should not shrink from the realities that the song expresses concerning the pleasurable practice of sexual love. Delight in the human body, enjoyment of its sexual aspects is good.

[ 25 : 12 ] It's to be feasted on. It's to be celebrated in the song. If you read chapter 4, verses 1 to 7 there, as we did, you'll see on the outline there are three other such evocative descriptions of the body, both male and female.

It's based on a kind of Arabic love poetry called Wasif. It's a kind of sensual undressing of the lover. Now there's no prudery here, is there?

There's nothing repressive or in any sense embarrassed about right sexual expression. We might blush, reading some of it together this morning, especially as we come to the conclusion in chapter 4, as the lover works his way down from the eyes to the lips to the breast to the mountain of myrrh or up the body in chapter 7, where the woman's body is like a palm tree with clusters of grape, clusters of fruit, and I will climb the palm tree and pick the fruit.

These are highly charged metaphors, aren't they? They're intimate, they're suggestive, they're explicit even. There's no prudery here, no prudery anywhere in the Bible. But notice, and this is important, it's not crude either, is it?

The metaphors serve at the same time to hide the body even as they display the body. Rather like tasteful clothing, it can be alluring, it can even be revealing, but it doesn't have to be vulgar or indiscreet.

[ 26 : 44 ] Or the best love stories, the best films, they're evocative, they're suggestive, but they don't have to be in your face, overly explicit. So this is erotic love, rightly directed between bride and groom, not misdirected as lust, not in a wrong relationship.

So this poetry is love writing, it is love-ography, not porn-ography, not immorality writing. So the Bible's not afraid of bodily pleasures, including erotic pleasures, rightly enjoyed within the sexual union of marriage.

Because of course, the Bible teaches that the body is good. That's so different from much of the ancient Greek philosophies that taught a great dualism between bodily things which were bad and evil, and spiritual things of the mind which were good and higher.

That's why I think sometimes some early writers on the song got confused. They felt they had to choose between bodily, which was bad, or spiritual, which is good. And of course, then they wanted to spiritualize and allegorize the song.

But the Bible doesn't know that distinction, not at all. Man is a whole being. We're taught, aren't we, to worship God not only with our minds but with our whole hearts, with our bodies. That's our spiritual worship.

[ 28 : 07 ] Our whole hope as Christians is for a bodily resurrection, not just the spiritual one. And so the song is unashamedly expressive of bodily pleasures in sexual relationship.

And it's unembarrassed to describe these, albeit tastefully, but intimate details of sexual activity. And so these are worthy things, I think, for husbands and wives to explore in the right place.

So don't shy away from this very real concern of Scripture. Remember in 1 Timothy 4, Paul tells us very plainly that it's not godly, it's demonic to disparage marriage and sex and bodily pleasures and to abstain from bodily pleasures.

No, says Paul, you're not to be ascetics like that, but you are to receive with thanksgiving these good gifts that God has given to people. So Christians should not be ascetics.

That's a demonic idea. And nor, by the way, if we read this song rightly, nor should we be sloppy men or frumpy women unconcerned about our bodily appearance.

[ 29 : 21 ] Read the poetry. The princely lover's body is described as polished, polished like ivory. His beloved is perfumed. She's bejeweled.

Your cheeks are filled with lovely ornaments. Your neck with strings of jewels. Please note, by the way, you read through the song very carefully, you'll find no nasty body piercings or face piercings, let me tell you, in case you were wondering.

But plenty of beautifying. And note that. It's important. It's not super spiritual to be a sloppy man or a frumpy woman.

Appearance is valued by God. It's part of the expression of our masculinity or our femininity. And that's celebrated very greatly here in the song. Some Christian girls, I think, get very confused.

They misunderstand what Peter says in 1 Peter 3 about outwardly adornment not being the main thing as though that was irrelevant. No, no, no, no. That's wrong. That's to misunderstand. What Peter's against there is a sort of a wrong assertion, manipulation, power addressing and so on.

[ 30 : 29 ] But it's a right desire to want to make the best of what God has given us. And it's a very practical matter too. Let me say this to you, young folk. If you want to find a partner in life, it will help if you look as if you want to find a partner in life and not that you couldn't care less.

So the song teaches us about bodily pleasure and bodily beauty and the enjoyment of it. And it celebrates that beauty and it celebrates that sexual pleasure.

The end of chapter, the section we read in chapter 5, verse 1 has the whole chorus celebrating the sexual union that is now taking place. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.

This is a good thing and the community should celebrate it. And it celebrates the ongoing permanence of the exclusive marriage relationship.

The song ends, the very last two verses, with the lovers now married and mature, again, in urgent, passionate love in the garden. Make haste, my love, be like a young stag, she says to her old stag.

[ 31 : 45 ] Well, many studies, by the way, have shown that sexual enjoyment is more enjoyable and more satisfying inside marriage that is stable and lasting than outside marriage.

That's not what Hollywood or the BBC wants you to think, but that's the truth. Well, of course it's the truth because it's God's way. And we're the people who know the truth. And we're the people who are to show that to the world.

We need to show the world a better story of marriage and sexual relationships. It'd be a great thing, wouldn't it, if all over the world churches were known as the places of successful, satisfying marriages and satisfied and fulfilling sexual lives.

Wouldn't it be great if churches were known by people as the place you have to go if you really want to learn to enjoy marriage and sexual relationship properly? They're the people who can tell you how to do it right.

That's our calling to the world, to be pillars and buttresses of the truth in a world that's going utterly to seed. Well, there's more we could say about these things, but we must go on because the song, although it does in some way idealize and romanticize sexual love, at the same time it is also utterly realistic about it.

[ 33 : 06 ] So third, it deals honestly with the painful problems of sexual love, the many struggles that there will be in this whole arena of a fallen, sinful world.

There's a dark side. But the opening words of the woman in chapter 1, verse 5, are expressing her own struggles with self-image.

Don't look at me. And even abuse in the home from folk in her family. Now friends, both of these things are real problems in the world today and both of these things are real problems even in the Christian church today.

There are going to be threats aplenty to pure and proper love. You read about foxes that come in and spoil the vineyard. You read about dangers of a world where sex is so easily corrupted.

There's the dark forces of the city watchman in chapter 5, verse 7 who in her dream misuse the bride, perhaps even sexually assault her. There's the ongoing struggle for chastity, for continence in the poetry before the marriage takes place.

[ 34 : 14 ] The longing for greater intimacy but the need to hold back. Turn, my beloved. Hold off. Not yet. Well, that's often very, very hard because sexual arousal is very powerful.

And even after marriage the song is playing. That's not nirvana. Sexual problems and tensions will arise. Chapter 5 describes that. It describes the refusal of intimacy leading to a rift, leading to hurt but eventually being healed as sexual union restores.

So don't kid yourself. If you're not yet married and you long for marriage you think that'll be the answer for all your struggles in this area. Think again, friends. It's not the end of the struggles. It's just a different kind of struggle in a different setting.

And sexual relationships within marriage therefore needs care and attention and hard work. Otherwise, marriage itself will eventually suffer and die. Don't make any mistake about that.

Sexual expression is the glue that God has given to keep marriage alive, to keep it real, to keep it together. together. That's why Paul says so plainly you mustn't neglect it.

[ 35 : 25 ] You must invest in it. There are women who don't take that nearly seriously enough and some men.

But nearly every marriage disaster and failure begins in this area, begins in the bedroom. That's the truth. So you need to make sure you read chapter 5 and understand it and ponder it.

But also read chapter 6 and 7 and find the hope in the restoration that is possible and that does come. And the point is, you see, for all the imagery of the garden and Eden, the truth is we're not yet back in paradise on earth, are we?

This is still a fallen world. We live in still fallen bodies. And there will be painful problems in this whole area of sexual love. There'll be stress and struggles before marriage and in marriage.

There'll be some who are deprived of marriage who long for it. There'll be others who lose the marriage they had early through death or sadly through divorce. There'll be many enemies, many disruptors of God's good and beautiful template for human sexual love.

[ 36 : 39 ] And we're so aware of that, aren't we? All around us in the world today. So there's great realism in the song about these problems. And therefore also there's great realism about the need for protecting the purity of sexual love.

That's the fourth thing and it comes in many ways but particularly in this three-fold refrain, do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. Sexual expression must come only when love is awakened properly, when desire comes properly is how Palmer Robertson translates it.

And that's certainly the emphasis in the first two cycles of the poem before that right consummation in the wedding. There's a right and a necessary separation that must restrain sexual love until the proper time of marriage.

And of course that's very hard which is one reason it's very foolish to put unnecessary pressure on yourselves or on other couples by having great long, long, long romances or long, long, long engagements.

Don't do that because once sexual love is aroused it is powerful. It is heading for the goal line like Hugh Jones in the Calcutta Cup with a ball under his arm and he will not be stopped even with two giants on his back until he has a touchdown.

[ 38 : 00 ] That's the reality isn't it? So be careful be realistic. Don't get onto the pitch unless you really are in the game and once you're in the game do not think naively that you'll be happy to just run around that pitch forever and never be heading towards that trial line.

Purity needs protecting and you can't protect the purity of sexual love before marriage by procrastination. Don't be silly.

But purity needs protecting also within marriage as Hebrews says the marriage bed must be kept pure. And Paul says one of the ways that happens is by keeping it active.

And that's why the fourth movement of the song is here to show us the consequence of distancing intimacy and to show us the joy that comes only when that intimacy is restored.

And it's this protection of the purity of the sexual relationship in its right and exclusive place it's that alone that leads to the security of lasting marriage.

[ 39 : 11 ] That's what's expressed at the end of the song from chapter 8 verse 5 onwards. The picture of the lover leaning on her beloved. It's a complementary partnership of stable and fruitful love.

Love that is as strong as death. Love that it says in verse 6 is the very flame of the Lord himself. Love which is unquenchable by the floods the forces of evil.

And that's what the bride teaches to all the youngsters in chapter 8 verses 8 to 10. Don't be an open door sexually she says. Be a wall. Keep yourself for one alone.

That was me she says until the proper time. And that's how then we find peace, shalom, completeness and contentment in exclusive marital love.

It's the protecting of the purity of that sexual love that will let that love bear its proper fruit in all its glory and fulfillment in the way that God intended it to.

[ 40 : 13 ] In the lifelong covenant of married life. And that mention of married covenant brings us to the final thing that the song gives us which is also so very important and that is the prophetic picture.

That sexual love points beyond itself to something even greater. One of the striking things about the song is that every word in it is speech. It's deeply personal.

It's relational language. And that kind of communicative intercourse is the essence isn't it of proper relationship of which sexual intercourse is the most intimate relational communion of all human relationships.

And so what the song is teaching us is about the experience of deep covenant communion from the inside. Now we've in our recent studies in Deuteronomy we've been talking all about covenant making as treaty making and covenant is that.

It's all bound up with matters of faithfulness and of fidelity and of obedience as is the marriage covenant. But it's more than that too isn't it? Even in Deuteronomy we saw that the focus was always on the heart.

[ 41 : 26 ] That's at the very heart of covenant the love of the heart. And the song of songs you see is highlighting that affective side of covenant.

It's showing us covenant making as love making as well as as treaty making. And so it's teaching us the very nature of covenant love itself.

You see as soon as you've said that you realize that you can't exclude God even from the subject of sexual love. Because you see here we're reading about sexual love and a covenant of marriage in a context of a whole Bible where covenant love is supremely and above all things about the love between God and man.

And so those who have always read the song instinctively devotionally they're onto something and they're right. It's not necessarily because they were embarrassed by sex and wanted to make less of sex.

It's actually the opposite because they wanted to make more of it because they understood that it pointed to something even greater. They understood sexual union in a sort of sacramental way if you like.

[ 42 : 42 ] An earthly reality that conveys something that is eternal and heavenly. And the Bible does emphasize unashamedly that deeply affective experiential love between God and his people.

As Barry Webb puts it to love God truly is not simply to keep his commands. It is that but not simply that but to thirst for him as a deer thirsts for flowing streams and to long for him as a bride longs for her bridegroom for that is how we ourselves are loved by God.

And that renewed intense desire for God longing for God is part of what it means to be redeemed to true human nature in the image of the Lord Jesus Christ who himself thirsted hungered for God with a passion with deep affection.

So yes Palmer Robertson is right that the primary purpose of this song is for God to grant his redeemed people in Christ to taste the wonders of sexual relationship as intended by God at their creation.

And yes he's right there's no need to find Christ in the song in any way other than as the redeemer and as the restorer of original marriage. But I do want to say even more than that because redeemed human marriage even is not the end of God's story of redemption is it?

[ 44 : 11 ] His salvation is more than just going back to Eden it's going on to a greater glory of a new Eden a greater Eden that's fulfilled not just in a garden of delights but in a garden city that is full of people from every tribe and language of nation every one of whom is part of the bride of Christ himself.

So as Barry Webb says the song is not only a taste of what was given at creation it's a sign of what will be consummated in the new creation.

It's a sign of the gospel and that is so so important because it reminds us you see whether we're married or not whether we're not yet married or whether we've never been married or never will be married that marriage and sex yes intended by God yes good and beautiful is not ultimate.

The New Testament is so clear on this not least in what Paul writes in Ephesians 5 marriage itself is prophetic it's a picture it points beyond itself to the thing that is ultimate and complete and that's why of course marriage and sex can never be idolized and separated from God and just worship for itself and that's also why marriage and sex can be foregone for the sake of the kingdom of heaven as our Lord Jesus Christ was not married for a kingdom where there will ultimately be none of the deprivation of singleness but nor will there be any of the delight of sex as we know it in earthly marriage so as one writer says so helpfully I think there is one book in the Bible all about sex as a rebuke to those who want to repress the sexual but only one as a rebuke to those who invested it with ultimate significance and therefore made an idol of sex which of course is what our culture has so manifestly done by divorcing

God from sex and the purpose of God for sex both as pleasure in the created order but also as a picture as a prophetic word of something far greater which is ultimate which is the love of God himself for his people and that's why sex has become so empty in our world and that's true of all of what C.S. Lewis called all our inconsolable longings in life in the human heart human love including erotic love always points beyond ourselves to love that undergirds all of reality and in whose presence alone all longing will be satisfied is how someone has put it so in the end we must speak of even human love even human erotic love and God's love we must speak of them together not by fanciful allegories but rather by recognizing in the fidelity and in the intimacy and in the joy of marital sexual union beautiful in itself for a time but recognizing in that a picture of the ultimate fidelity the ultimate joy the ultimate intimacy of God's own love for us his people and the eternal reality of that covenant love which will be forever in our Lord

[ 47 : 44 ] Jesus Christ whether we've tasted it here on earth from within and been married or looked on it from without having not been married but having supported marriage and rejoiced in marriage and witnessed even from outside the joy and the beauties and the and the fruitfulness of wholesome Christian marriage and therefore whoever we are able to anticipate what it pictures for us of something far far greater which will be for every one of us in the Lord Jesus Christ so this song is rightly called the song of songs the best of songs for all Christ's people whoever we are it's a book about how to love yes how to love in our sexual relationships in marriage for those of us who will have that joy and do have it here on earth but that particular love doesn't exhaust this song's value for us for all of us it teaches all of us about the nature of real love lasting love covenant love the flame of the

Lord the love which as Paul says will never end and it teaches us to want that love to love that love yes in our marriages in our friendships in our fellowship but above all to want it with God himself let me end then with Barry Webb's last words in his excellent chapter on the song in his book five festal garments the song of songs is there to stop love going out of our relationships with God and with one another it's a splendid garment to be worn not with awkwardness or embarrassment but festively with joy and deep thankfulness to him who gave it to us as holy scripture friends let's read it in a way that's appropriate for us whoever we are whatever stage of life or love we're in and let's wear its message with thoughtfulness and with real joy amen let's pray heavenly father we thank you that your love is of all loves the greatest and the best that you being the great lover and the one who alone can teach us to love in every circumstance of life within all our friendships our

Christian brothers and sisters yes also in the most private intimate exclusive love of the marriage bond itself help us all we pray whoever we are to be those who honor married love who help to keep the marriage bed pure and who therefore together as your people remain always a pillar and buttress of this great truth of your love in our world to lead us and to lead others into your eternal house of love who we ask it in Jesus name amen