

Commentary: The Story of the Song of Songs

The Song of Solomon is the best of all Solomon's 1005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). It is a love story of an unlikely marriage between a young rural girl, called the Shulamite, and Solomon, the King of Israel. The story follows them through three main areas of the relationship—dating [or courtship] (1:2–3:5), marriage (3:65:1), and, finally, as they deal with the difficulties of settling into married life (5:2–8:14).

But this is more than an earthly love story; it is a song of divine love, the love of Christ for his Church, and it is the story of how the Church (and the Christian), through the struggles of life in a fallen world, responds and lives in union and communion with Jesus, the "lover of my soul."

It is the story of how Jesus graciously pursues his Church and cultivates his relationship with us, how patiently he waits for us, draws us and causes us to love him (1 John 4:19, see also Luke 19:10). It is the story of how Jesus' love for us persists and protects us from our own folly and indifference (5:2ff, see also Luke 22:32), and seals us in an everlasting union (8:6, see also Jeremiah 31:3).

To understand the rich spiritual lessons of the Song of Solomon, we need to work through its language and imagery and draw out its narrative plot.

Falling in love with the Saviour (1:2-3:5)

This section of the story deals with the courtship of Solomon and the Shulamite. She comes to the relationship with emotional scars, deep hurts from her brothers have made her cautious and distrusting (1:5). She is shy and recoiling. She hides, and she raises barriers that keep him away, and many little things come between her and the one she loves (2:14–15). To him, however, she is the "most beautiful among women" (1:8; 5:9; 6:1; "no flaw" 4:7). He pursues and wins her heart.

Healing for a bruised Saint (1:2-7). Bruised and hurt as we are in a fallen world, the believer has tasted the love of the Saviour and nothing else satisfies, his love is better than the joys of wine (vs. 2; also Psalm 34:8). We pray for his kisses (vs. 2), for his drawing

power over us (vs. 4), and for his speaking voice (vs. 7, Psalm 35:3b). See page 3.

A dynamic spiritual experience (1:8-2:17). The back and forth between Solomon and the Shulamite in this section shows us that contemplative prayer is the greatest remedy for our spiritual insecurities. As we talk to God in prayer and listen to him in his Word, our love for him, and our zeal to pursue him are increased, for in him alone we find peace in this changeful life (3:1-5).

United in Love with the Saviour (3:6-5:1)

As the wedding procession begins, the bride is overcome by the luxurious wealth, unrivalled beauty and absolute security that she finds in her bridegroom (3:6-11). As he sees her coming, all he can say is “you are beautiful, my love... there is no flaw in you” (4:1,7). He calls, “Come with me” (4:8).

She responds by inviting him to take possession of “his garden” (4:16), and the quick succession of verbs shows the happy consummation of the marriage union; “I have come... I have gathered... I have eaten... I have drunk” (5:1).

This picture of the royal wedding shows the sacred intimacy in our relationship with our Saviour. It highlights the bond of our relationship with Jesus and the pleasure that he has in us.

The bond of union with Christ. “My sister, my spouse,” points to a love among equals (sister), and at the same time, the intimate love of marriage. The repetition of “my sister, my spouse” (9, 10, 12) confirms the nature of this relationship—it is a marriage union bound by siblinghood.

The pleasures of union with Christ. The image of the garden speaks of the beauties and pleasures of the Church—“the planting of the Lord” (Isaiah 61:3; Psalm 1:3). It is a place of mutual intimacy, fellowship and enjoyment (see John 15:4).

Living in Love with the Saviour (5:2-8:14).

Life for the married couple is not as smooth as anticipated. Indifference, complacency and lethargy bring about a refusal of the advances of her new husband (5:1-6:3). He withdraws, but leaves the smell of his fragrance on the door to draw her out.

Panicked by the thought of losing him, the Shulamite sets out to look for him (5:2–8). Fellowship is joyfully restored, and she discovers him again in “his garden” (6:3). His girl is unique, his undefiled, “is singular” (6:4–10).

Her pursuit of him is rewarded with surprising joy, and she is so taken up with her beloved that the others call her to “come back” (6:13a)—four times. But she is out after her beloved. They ask him also, “what do you see in the Shulamite?” (6:13b).

From these questions, a beautiful exchange between Solomon and the Shulamite develops, in which she gives with an open declaration of longing and love (7:10–8:4). It begins with verbs, urgent and action-packed (“let us go...” 7:11–12), which sets the scene for a settled and rewarding marriage (7:13).

Despite our fixed creeds and confessions, the lived experience of the Christian is a series of ups and downs. The refusal, restoration, and reward in this story are mirrored in the spiritual life of the Christian over and over again, as they were in the life of Israel (see the book of Judges).

What we learn about ourselves –Our changeful nature. Just as the Shulamite changed throughout the book, so also we should see our own tendency to spiritual ups and downs, as well as our spiritual laziness and indifference. It should also instil in us a sense of urgency to be diligent in our walk with our Saviour (1 Peter 4:7, 5:8).

What we learn about our Saviour –His unchanging nature. The Shulamite learns that her beloved has not changed. The love he expressed at the beginning remains the same; it has sealed the relationship, and nothing can destroy it. Like the relentless power of death, which overcomes all and everyone, it holds tenaciously like the grave (8:6–7).

Conclusion

The book ends with commitment, in a dialogue between the girl and her beloved. She has learned to rest in the truth that she belongs to him and his heart desires her (7:10). She has come then to “dwell in the garden,” suggesting that she permanently and happily resides there (8:11–14).