



Song of Songs

Video Transcript

Introduction

00:00-01:36

The Song of Songs. It's a well-known, but not so well-understood, book of the Bible. It's eight chapters of love poetry. And while there is an introduction and a conclusion, the book doesn't have any kind of rigid literary design, and that's because it is a collection of poems. They're not meant to be dissected or taken apart. They're meant to be read as a flowing whole and simply enjoyed.

The first line of the book tells us that it's "the song of songs," which is a Hebrew idiom like "the holy of holies" or "the king of kings." It's a Hebrew way of saying "the greatest thing." So this is the greatest song of all songs.

Then we're told, in the first line, that this "song of songs" is of Solomon, which could mean that he's the author. His name does begin the book after all. But as you read the poems, you discover that the main voice is that of a woman called "the beloved." And while there is also a male voice, it does not seem to be Solomon's. Solomon is mentioned a couple times in the poems, but he's never a speaker, and you do have to admit, Solomon is a very odd candidate as the author of this book given the fact that he had 700 wives. For the lovers in the Song of Songs, they are the only ones in the world for each other.

So the "of Solomon" likely means "in the wisdom tradition of Solomon." He was known for his wisdom, his poetry, his love of learning about every part of life, and Solomon became the father of wisdom literature in Israel. And so his legacy is here carried on through a collection of love poems that explore the human experience of love and sexual desire.

Chapter 1

01:37-02:16

The opening poem introduces us to the basic theme of this book. We hear the voice of the young woman who delights in her man, a shepherd. Now, she's not married to him yet, but it becomes clear that they are engaged and they cannot wait to be together.

From the introduction, the poems flow back and forth from the woman's voice to the man's, shifting from scene to scene without any kind of clear, linear sequence or storyline. The poems move in these symphonic cycles, and key images and ideas get repeated and developed. So one of the basic themes uniting the poems is the intense desire that this couple has for each other, expressed through their constant seeking and finding.

Chapters 2-8:5

02:17-03:17

So after the opening poem, they're separated but on the hunt for one another. So the woman calls out, or she'll wake up from a dream or go looking for her lover, and more than once they'll find each other, they'll embrace, and then right when things start to get a bit racy, the scene will suddenly end, and the new one will start. They're separated, looking for each other, and on it goes.

Another repeated theme is the joy of the couple's physical attraction for one another. So multiple times, they'll pause and describe each other with these elaborate metaphors. And here, it's very helpful to know that these images and metaphors in Hebrew poetry are not primarily visual. If you try and paint a picture of these people based on the metaphors, you will end up with something that looks very, very strange. What you're supposed to do is reflect on the meaning of these images as they relate to the man and the woman.

So you'll read through the poetic cycles, and the tension will keep building, and their desire and joy and attraction, and this spiraling repetition is a poetic way of heightening and focusing on the mystery and power of sexual love.

Chapters 8:6-14

03:18-04:49

It all comes together in the conclusion, which pauses to summarize what these poems are all about. "Love is as strong as death, its passions are as severe as the grave. Its flashes are of fire, a divine flame. Many waters cannot extinguish love, rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, he would be utterly scorned."

The poem highlights the power and the intensity of love, how it's both beautiful but also dangerous. Like fire, love can destroy people if it's abused or be life-giving if it's protected. Ultimately, love expresses the insatiable human longing to know and be fully known and desired by another. Love is one of the most transcendent and mysterious experiences in human life, and as a part of the Bible's wisdom tradition, this book says it's a gift from God.

After this, there's an odd poem about Solomon trying to do what the previous poem just said was impossible: to buy love. The woman rejects Solomon's offer, and then the book concludes with the man and the woman. They're separate once more, on the hunt for each other. He calls to hear her voice, she begs him to run away with her—and that's how the book ends. Just totally open-ended. But that's a lot like love, which never truly concludes because there's always more to discover and pursue in your beloved. And so true love has no end, and neither does this book.

Conclusion

04:50-06:58

Now, through history, the big question raised by the Song of Songs is, "What on earth is love poetry doing in the Bible?" There have been three main interpretations of this book throughout history. In Jewish tradition, it's been read as an allegory, each character a symbol. So the woman is Israel, the man is God, and their love is a symbol of the covenant between God and Israel made at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

This view flowed into the Christian tradition, but the characters were swapped. So it's about Christ's love for his people, the Church. And this interpretation was inspired by Paul's words in Ephesians 5, that a Christian husband's love for his wife is a symbol of Christ's love for the Church.

What's interesting is that in the last hundred years, archaeological discoveries among Israel's ancient neighbors and Egypt and Babylon has turned up all kinds of ancient love poetry that's very similar in language and imagery to the Song of Songs. We see that love poetry was a meaningful part of Israel's cultural environment, which has led most scholars today to view the Song of Songs as what it presents itself to be: an arrangement of Israelite love poetry reflecting on the divine gift of love.

But that doesn't mean that it's only ancient love poetry. There's a key feature of these poems that sticks out when you read them as a part of the Old Testament, and that's the overwhelming use of garden imagery. There are powerful echoes of the garden of Eden and the idyllic scene between the married couple in the early chapters of Genesis. So the image of the man and the woman naked and vulnerable

but completely unified and safe with one another, this resonates in the background of the Song of Songs. It's as if in these poems, we are witnessing the love of a couple whose relationship is untainted by selfishness and sin.

And so ultimately, the Song holds out hope that even though our own relationships are so often distorted by selfishness, love is a transcendent gift. And it's meant to point us to something greater, to the gift of God's love that will one day permeate and transform his beloved world. And that's what the Song of Songs is all about.