

Beneath The Banner



A Look at the Song of Solomon

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One of my many reading interests centers on the church of Christ and what the believers held to be important during the first 1,000 years of the church.

Although I have studied church history, but the reality is, my mind-set focuses on Martin Luther forward and that pays little attention to what was going on in the 1500 years before that.

Thus I was slightly startled to read that if one were to take the commentaries and sermons that were written during this first 1000 years, and by volume alone judged the importance of what they considered the most important books of the Bible, they would be as follows.

#1. **Genesis.** I doubt that I would have selected that one but in hindsight, it makes sense to me. The gospel takes place in a context and the context begins with creation and makes clear at the start that this universe was not our doing, it is not ours, and they we humans are not creators of this world, [even though we are creators within this world, but are created beings. Genesis also reveals that the Creator has spoken and moves through history.

#2. **Psalms.** These poetry tools of worship and truth reveal the inter longings, dreams, and fears, and angers of people in their journey through life and their questions, concerns, and love for the one who has given them breath and a mind to reflect on the majesty of the creation around them and the power of the one who holds in all together. I get it.

#3. **Song of Solomon.** To discover that this particular book was so vital to the church was to say the least, a shocker. I would never have guess that. I would have placed that at the bottom of list rather than third. Obviously, I must not understand this book. Thus I decided to read it afresh and to think my way through why it was considered so significant.

Confessedly, it is a difficult book to preach about so I do not believe I have ever heard a sermon on it. The Lover in the Song telling his beloved that she looks like his horse, or has pointed straight forward breast like a gazelle, does not preach well on a Sunday morning. The pastor who attempts it would be walking through a mine-field.

The glossed over quick interpretations usually fall in two categories. The first in that the poems are about God's love for the people of Israel. The second is that it is about Jesus' love for the church. A lesser known interpretation is that the Song is about the nature of the trinity and the key portion of that interpretation if found in Chapter 8. "Then, if I found you **outside**, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me." The "outside" was looked upon as the incarnation of Christ and the going 'outside'.

Unfortunately, my Hebrew skills have diminished over time. In the study of languages, however, there are differences in both the languages of the world as well as the personalities behind the language. Some languages are noun based and the function of the language is to pass on data or facts. Others, like Hebrew are verb based and the task is to pass on 'experience'.

Now I happen to be a lover of Hebrew humor. I find it qualitatively superior in tying together both truth and humor. Thus, this story:

A man goes into a restaurant that he eats at daily, and has been doing so for years. He orders basically the same thing for lunch each day, a bowl of soup and some crackers. He often has the same waitress. One day the waitress sees him sitting there looking at his soup but he is not eating any of it. She approaches him and says, "Is there anything wrong with your soup? Is it too hot? too cold? too spicy?" The man looks at her and says "taste it". The waitress says "Ah, Ha! You do not have a spoon."

Now most of us I would guess would simply ask for a spoon. This waitress was given the opportunity for discovery and thus the "Ah Ha moment"

Have you ever noticed in the Scriptures that Jesus often responds to questions with either another question or a story? His task is much more than to pass on data or information that one could text to someone. Rather, he shares part of himself and allows the self-discovery of what he is sharing to sink in and to allow the "Ah-Ha moment".

In the same way, stories are often told that may seem unrelated but in time, one connects the dots. Have you ever been told a joke and did not get it? Then a week or so later, you get it and you say to yourself "Ah Ha, that is what that meant?" Never explain a joke, just give it time.

With all this in mind, let me share with you my take on why the *Song of Songs* was so important to the early church. I cannot state strongly enough that one should never be dogmatic about what the scriptures are not dogmatic about.

Here is a sampling between the Lover and the Beloved from the Song beginning with Chapter 4.

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!

Your eyes behind the veil are doves.

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

*Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming from the washing.*

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

*Your lips are like scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely*

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

*Your neck is like a tower of David,
build with elegance;
on it hang a thousand shields,
all of the shields of warriors.*

*Your two breast are like two fawns,
like twin fawns of a gazelle
that browse among the lilies.*

*Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of incense.*

*All beautiful you are, my darling;
there is no flaw in you.*

*Come with me from Lebanon, my bride.
come with me from Lebanon.*

Descend from the crest of Amana,

*from the top of Senir, the
Summit of Hermon,
from the lions' den
and the mountain haunts of the leopards.
You have stolen my heart, my sister,
my bride;
you have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
How delightful is your love, my sister,
my bride!
How much more pleasing is your
love than wine,
and the fragrance of your
perfume than any spice!
Your lips drop sweetness as the
honeycomb, my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is
like that of Lebanon.
You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride,
you are a spring enclosed, a
sealed fountain.
Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
with choice fruitiest
with henna and nard,
nard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon,
with every kind of incense tree,*

*with myrrh, and aloes
and all the finest spices.
You are a garden fountain
a well of flowing water
streaming down from Lebanon.*

Beloved

*Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden
that its fragrance may spread abroad
Let my lover come unto his garden
and taste its choice fruits.*

A few observations about this poem at this point. Do you notice that the Lover sees everything? The lover sees the eyes, the hair, the neck, the teeth, the lips, the mouth, the temples, the neck, the breast. Do you notice also that the Lover is able to compare his beloved's features with the life around him i.e. the doves, the goats, the shorn sheep, the scarlet ribbon, the pomegranate, the tower of David, the fawns of a gazelle among the lilies. The young lover sees everything.

When I managed a Medical Center, one of my elderly board members said to me at the end of the meeting that he was going home and would be sure to "check out his wife" and admonished me to do the same thing. I looked a little puzzled at his remark and he told me that when he was younger and married but still maintained his one night of weekly poker games with the guys that he went home after having a little too much to drink, saw his wife sitting in a chair in the living room, and announced that he was home and was going to bed. He told me he

failed to notice that his wife was sitting there with a cast on her leg because she had taken a fall and had broken her leg.

“Worse mistake I ever made” he told me. So now when I go home, the first thing I do is to check her out and to make sure there are no cast. I would never be able to live through a failure to notice something like that again. So my advice to you is: Check her out! Notice everything!

Unlike my friend, this young lover of the *Song of Songs*, notices everything.

So, here is a question. How important is it to notice? The prophet Isaiah declares:

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord
Almighty
the whole earth is full of his
glory.*

Notice that the earth is no merely sprinkled with it, or contains a fair amount of it, but is FULL of his glory.

The problem? The people fair to see it. It is something akin to my board member who failed to notice this his wife had broken her leg and was wearing a cast as he stood before her.

Notice the second part of this chapter of the Song. There is a plea to “Come with me.” Just “come with me.”

The young Lover is in pursuit. We may want to call it seduction. Likewise, the beloved is also saying “come” to the north wind and “come” to the south wind that the fragrances may entice her lover to find her in the garden.

It is a poem of seduction. I often tell young people not to look for someone to make you happy, rather look for someone you want to make happy. Your making them happy is what will make you happy. The Song is about two people who are making themselves happy by making the other happy, and it all takes place in a garden. Their bed is the green grass and their ceiling is the trees branches above them. It is a perfect situation.

Does this garden scene remind you of any other garden scene in the Bible? The first one to come to mind is the Garden of Eden. That is the Garden that got left behind. What would the Song of Songs say to relate to that situation? I would suggest that the because the Song of Songs is located in the wisdom section of the Bible that its intent is to teach us how to live; the finding of ourselves and our happiness in the “other”.

But the Scriptures also refer to another Garden, the one in our future. In looking at the crucifixion of our Lord, Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” Paradise is the paradisiuim or “The King’s Garden”. This garden is walled in on all sides with the only entrance being through the King’s chamber.

All this being said, here is my take on the *Song of Songs*. It begins with the earth being full of the Glory of God. It is given to us to see, to hear, to taste, to touch, to smell and to enjoy. Thus when you see the glorious sunsets, it is not just a thing of beauty, it is the Lord’s way of seducing us or calling us to Himself. Likewise, for the sand on our feet, the birds that we see coasting on the air, or

the music they bring to us. The color and taste of foods is all about seduction. It is the Lord's calling us and part of what it means to be with us—Emmanuel!

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.—Genesis 1:31.

It is different for people who see creation through your Spirit, for you are seeing it through their eyes. Thus when such people see that these things are good, you are seeing that they are good; whatever created things please them for your sake, it is you who are arousing their delight in these things; and anything that gives us joy through your Spirit gives you joy in us.—St. Augustine, Confessions, 13.3146.

The more one recognizes the presence of the Lord via our senses, the greater the context of the gospel is understood. As the beloved declares in 2:4, “His banner over me is love.”

Step outside, breath the air, notice the colors, the sounds, the smells, the touch. Take it all in and feel the banner of love over you.