

# Mutuality, Mystery, and Marriage: Love in the Song of Songs

A SERMON BY DAWN GENTRY

When I was a teenager, I wrote dozens of love songs. Sappy, insipid love songs. Actually, I shouldn't even call them love songs, since most were about heartbreak more than love. As my young life progressed between various relationships (let's just call them crushes), there were months of pining, dreaming of what could have been, mourning what was lost, or . . . you get the picture. I was educated in the ways of love by music, movies, and *Teen Beat* magazine. Perhaps I am not alone in this matter, which would explain the popularity of so-called chick-flicks and the Hallmark Channel. Love songs made up the soundtrack of my life and, more often than not, emphasized loss and longing over long-term relationships.

This emphasis on love songs should not be surprising, since poetry has been the universal language of love for centuries. The oldest known example of love poetry is a Sumerian text titled *The Love Song for Shu-Sin*. It's from about 2000 BC, thus predating Solomon by about 1000 years.<sup>1</sup> While the Song of Songs is traditionally attributed to Solomon, most modern scholars believe it is more likely a collection of poems assembled long after Solomon, perhaps between 500 and 300 BC. Commentators Athalya Brenner and Marvin Pope assert that at least one author is female<sup>2</sup> and discern a "plurality of voices" as well.<sup>3</sup> Whoever its author, the Song of Songs is a love poem in the tradition of other ancient near-eastern writings, and its provocative language (while sometimes guarded) leaves no question of the author's intent.

While God is not mentioned in the Song,<sup>4</sup> the book is one of the most theologized and preached in all of scripture. The long-presumed allegorical interpretation probably facilitated its acceptance into the canon.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Ellen Davis suggests the Song's frequent use of quoted scripture texts, "in many cases connected phrases, vivid images, and terms too specific for their other contexts to be forgotten by those familiar with Biblical language," as reason for its approval.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the reason for its inclusion in the canon, the Song is a lyrical and extraordinary addition to an already diverse collection of scripture texts.

Regardless of its often-preached status through the centuries, I can count the number of sermons I have heard on this book on one hand. This is odd, in a sense, because in the conservative churches of my youth, marriage was expected, desired, and normative. But the romantic, even erotic voice of the Song was unwelcome on Sunday mornings. Sex was not a topic for the worship assembly, unless we were being reminded to save it for marriage. Sex was one of many dangers we were expected to "just say no" to, including especially serious matters such as drugs and alcohol, as well as other activities such as dancing and mixed gender swimming. Evidently the True Love Waits people had not read the Song's explicit language closely enough to realize that both lovers are single.<sup>7</sup> The scandalous reality of their singleness stands in sharp contrast to the cultural values

of evangelical purity culture in which I raised my teenagers. I'm ironically thankful not to have realized this when they were still at home asking questions about sexual morals.

In fact, the Song shows us a "love unconnected with marriage or procreation," as opposed to some parts of the OT which view women as breeders or property.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the description of these young lovers is offered with no "reticence, moral judgment, or great deference to legal or social constraints."<sup>9</sup> Another scholar agrees, noting the Song simply delights in "physical beauty and sexual attraction."<sup>10</sup> While many twentieth-century preachers have ignored its message, its very presence in the canon and its healthy emphasis on mutual, pleasurable sex is worth consideration for modern Christians, whether married or single.

The Song's language speaks plainly, but also draws many metaphors from nature. "Winter is past," says he (2:11) as they revel on a green couch under beams of cedar (1:17). With spring's arrival they are free to roam the vineyard again (2:15). Indeed, the rural setting with its description of flowers and fruit trees in bloom reminds us of the garden—Eden—which was lost, but is now found. The Song's poets engage all the senses to describe their delight in love: the taste of apples and raisins (2:5), figs (2:13), honey and milk (4:11), and the best wine (7:2); the smell of spices (1:13, 4:14), pine (1:17), blossoms (2:13), and oils (4:10); the sound of singing, of turtledoves (2:12), and even her voice (2:14); and the touch of a lover who "would not let him go" (3:4), whose "right hand embraced" (2:6, 8:3), and whose kisses are praised throughout (1:1, 4:3, 11, 7:9, 8:1). The passages where the lovers describe each other (e.g., 5:10–16, 7:1–9) are so explicit it seems likely to be a narration of their touch, and not just their sight.

Yet for those who grew up being warned *against* sexual expression, getting married does not necessarily flip a switch to "turn on" the passionate love described in the Song. The all-or-nothing approach, often expected of teens in various generations including my own, did not well prepare some of us to enjoy our spouses fully in the marriage bed. In regard to sexuality we are too often torn between these extremes of fiercely repressing or blindly obeying the desire to have sex and, in that regard, perhaps the Song can help us find a better way.<sup>11</sup> A middle way where we accept the body we have in order to fully appreciate the body we share with another. When we abandon the "cultural blinders" that cause us to ignore the message of the Song, we might find "that this ancient text has something new to teach us about how to redeem sexuality and love in our fallen world."<sup>12</sup>

## Mutuality—A Reversal of the Curse

One clear redemptive move in the Song is its mutuality between lovers in contrast to the fall and punishment of Gen 3. Pope asserts that in the Song, "love has its end in itself" and is not merely a tool for procreation. The lovers have an "alliance" and live in a "free and reciprocal face-to-face relation" where they

“alternate [taking] initiative.”<sup>13</sup> This mutuality leaves no room for “male dominance, female subordination, or stereotyping of either sex.”<sup>14</sup> Alicia Ostriker agrees, noting the “egalitarian image of mutual love and desire” which reflects a “powerful connection which is not subordination.”<sup>15</sup> These readings of the Song look back to the earlier creation account where God “created humankind in his image . . . male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27) and then gave them both dominion over the earth, where “indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). This mutual sexuality is celebrated by Adam and Eve “without shame,” a vision to which modern married couples can aspire.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, and importantly, the song overturns the punishment given to the woman in Gen 3:16 (“your desire shall be for your husband . . .”) by using nearly identical language in Song 7:10 (“his desire is for me”). “Man and woman now meet in full mutuality,” affirms Davis. “As [the lovers] come together in the garden of the Song, every terrible exile, from Eden and Jerusalem, is reversed.”<sup>17</sup> Brenner affirms this assessment, claiming you cannot understand one or the other fully without reading them in tandem.<sup>18</sup> “The love relationships in the Song of Songs are a return to a psychological (internal) Eden through the redeeming power of love,” concludes Brenner. “In that garden, gender inequality, together with material and social conflicts between the sexes, pale into insignificance.”<sup>19</sup> This describes a “new creation” existence to which we can aspire. Wouldn’t you like to live into the reality of the Song rather than “settling for the reality of [our] fallenness”?<sup>20</sup> For Christians who wish to lean into God’s “new creation” rather than concede defeat to the fall, the redemptive message of the Song is indeed good news.

### **Mystery—A Return to Eden’s Intimacy**

Another way love and marriage can be redeemed through the message of the Song is by embracing the mystery of intimacy. Though modern scholars focus on the straightforward reading of the text, for many hundreds of years it was viewed almost exclusively as an allegory of Christ’s love for the church (or God’s love for Israel).<sup>21</sup> Yet the allegorical reading is not inherently bad. As one encounters meaning behind the plain text of the Song, it is allowed to point forward in the grand narrative of scripture.<sup>22</sup> This metaphorical interpretation may then instruct modern readings as we consider the inherent mystery of married, sexual intimacy. Pope notes, “it is in the reality of this human love that the reality of the divine love is shown.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than dismiss the allegory altogether, Pope insists that if we fail to see and understand the sacred element of the text, it becomes only a secular, sexual, profane poem. Yet, if we fail to see and understand the sexual element of the text, it becomes only an allegorical poem about Christ and the church. “They can only be understood together,” he concludes.<sup>24</sup>

Those who have experienced “one flesh” in a committed marriage—where one plus one equals one, not two—may understand how the sexual encounter can move us closer to God. The mystery is illustrated by the Song’s celebration of “a love so intense [it is] perhaps as close as mortals can come to

participation in something divine.”<sup>25</sup> Another scholar agrees, noting that love in the Song is “simultaneously natural and spiritual.” Along with other mystical traditions, we may “speak of God as the beloved . . . [just as those] in love see the beloved’s face and form as holy,” highlighting this intersection between sexual and sacred.<sup>26</sup> The Song provides us with words that help us “meet God as Lover, as the mystics have always known.”<sup>27</sup> The intimacy known by Adam and Eve in the garden includes an unbroken, intimate relationship with both God and each other. Likewise, the Song’s imagery alludes to “a return to the garden from which we were first exiled.”<sup>28</sup> In her book *Embracing the Body*, Tara Owens suggests that Adam’s “knowing” Eve in Gen 4 is “the first reparative act outside the garden of Eden . . . [it is] a hope for more intimacy restored.” In the same way, married, sexual intimacy can point us back toward the “intimacy in which we’re intended to live, intimacy with each other and with God.”<sup>29</sup>

This inherent mystery of marital intimacy should not surprise those familiar with NT texts on marriage. When Paul addresses husbands and wives in Eph 5, he explains that the reason for a husband’s sacrificial love is that she is a “member of his body” (5:30). Paul even describes the marriage relationship as a mystery as it illustrates Christ and the church (5:32). While some scholars prioritize the topics of headship and submission in this chapter, Paul’s focus is not on headship, but on oneness. Husband and wife are “one flesh,” which enriches our understanding of Paul’s words in Eph 4 that Christ is the *head* “from whom the whole body . . . is working together” (4:15–16). Marriage is meant to be a “picture of one being . . . an image of unity.”<sup>30</sup> The Song’s poetry reflects the mystery of oneness and unity between lovers, and in so doing, returns the reader to Eden’s intimacy.

### **Marriage—A Reflection of God’s Love**

This mystery of married love through sexual intimacy may help us understand the depth of love God has for us. Even though we may not know God’s essence or “*how* our penultimate human love is like God’s,” Robert Jenson reminds us that God’s love helps us “know truth” about the love we share in marriage.<sup>31</sup> Our sexuality is an important factor in that truth, even if painful memories or unhealthy relationships sometimes overshadow its benefits. “Our sexuality is an essential part of being human,” notes Owens, “a part that has been sadly unintegrated by the church and scandalously over exposed by society.”<sup>32</sup> Human sexuality is one way we can embody the reality of being created in the image of God, male and female. As our sexuality draws us together in “connectedness and intimacy,” we reflect the “image of the interwoven Trinity.”<sup>33</sup> Our willingness to redeem sexuality from society’s misuse can allow God’s love to be reflected through us into the lives of others.

When Brenner describes love in the Song, she acknowledges it, somewhat amusedly, as a “basically fulfilling experience if not always easy to handle.”<sup>34</sup> Marriage can sometimes be challenging, but we can still embrace the “enjoyment, celebration, and sensuousness” that sexual intimacy provides.<sup>35</sup> “When lovers

have joy in the garden,” Davis reminds us “all the ruptures that occurred in Eden are healed.”<sup>36</sup> These ruptures may include emotional abuse, unrealistic expectations, repressed shame, failed communication, and many more. We recognize our brokenness outside the garden. “Apart from our relationship with God, we are deeply aware of our own loneliness, the fact that we’re cut off from something we deeply desire.”<sup>37</sup> This longing that remains—even in the best of marriages—points us toward a desire to experience God’s love through intimate fellowship.

In order to move toward this goal and reflect God’s love in our marriages, only daily self-sacrifice will do. Paul describes this love as “looking to the interests of others” and “emptying oneself” (Phil 2:4–7). Owens expands on Paul’s definition, saying that true marital intimacy cannot happen “without repeated movement toward one another, a practicing of the self-giving love and vulnerability that builds oneness . . . [which happens] over years of choosing for one another in all areas of our lives.”<sup>38</sup> Making choices on behalf of our spouse includes our realization that “not all longings are meant to be fulfilled”<sup>39</sup> and frees us of the unrealistic expectation that our spouse can or should meet every need, or fulfill every desire. Even in the Song, she sometimes “sought him, but found him not” (3:2, 5:6). Our marriages do not “complete” us, contrary to what the romantic comedy “Jerry McGuire” would have us believe. Our marriages serve as a testing ground that can help us become more like Christ, as we lay down our lives daily for those we love.<sup>40</sup>

While our marriages are imperfect and incomplete, they still obtain the capacity to reflect the love of God which is perfected and completed in Christ’s sacrifice for us. While the sexual intimacy of marriage can add to our incomplete knowledge of God, someday we will “know fully, even as [we] have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). As the Song reminds us through its garden imagery, the curse has been reversed and Eden’s intimacy can be regained in Christ. We can embrace mutuality, vulnerability, and authenticity in our marriages. Our daily decisions to put spouse before self manifest the perfect, faithful love of God, which never fails. And God is still in the business of making all things new.

## Notes

1. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/750/the-worlds-oldest-love-poem/>.
2. Athalya Brenner, *Song of Songs*, OTG (Sheffield: JSOT, 1982), 13–18; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 22–25.
3. Brenner, *Song of Songs*, 29. See also John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 481.
4. Also true of the book of Esther.
5. “The Song of Solomon,” *Harper Collins Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Meeks (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 903.
6. Ellen Davis, “Losing a Friend: The Loss of the Old Testament to the Church,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scripture*, ed. Alice Bellis and Joel Kaminsky (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 93.
7. Collins, *Introduction*, 483. Note the woman’s search for her lover in 1:7, 3:2, 5:7, and 7:10—they do not cohabit.
8. Alicia Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext,” in *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (2<sup>nd</sup> series), ed. Brenner and Fontaine (Sheffield: Academic, 2000), 44.

9. Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 2005), 1.
10. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 205.
11. Tara M. Owens, *Embracing the Body: Finding God in our Flesh and Bone* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 212.
12. Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), 86–87, quoted in Brenner, *Song of Songs*, 92.
13. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 203.
14. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 208.
15. Ostriker, “Holy of Holies,” 37, 50.
16. Brenner, *Song of Songs*, 27.
17. Davis, “Losing a Friend,” 94.
18. Brenner, *Song of Songs*, 79. Brenner credits Phyllis Tribble noting this juxtaposition first.
19. Brenner, *Song of Songs*, 84.
20. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 209.
21. Davis, “Losing a Friend,” 93.
22. Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 5.
23. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 204. Cf. Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18, Hosea 1–3, Esther 5, Matt 22:37–40, John 13:35, 1 John 4:19.
24. Pope, *Song of Songs*, 202.
25. Collins, *Introduction*, 484.
26. Ostriker, “Holy of Holies,” 37.
27. Davis, “Losing a Friend,” 94.
28. Davis, “Losing a Friend,” 93.
29. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 214.
30. Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 164. See also Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 216.
31. Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 13.
32. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 130.
33. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 210.
34. Brenner, *Song of Songs*, 28.
35. Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 138.
36. Davis, “Losing a Friend,” 94.
37. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 215.
38. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 216.
39. Owens, *Embracing the Body*, 152–23.
40. On this idea, see Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), whose premise is that marriage is designed to make us holy, not happy.

**DAWN GENTRY** holds an MA from Cincinnati Christian University and an MDiv from Emmanuel Christian Seminary. She has been active in church leadership, especially in children’s and worship ministry. She is on the faculty of Nebraska Christian College near Omaha, Nebraska, and also teaches adjunctly at Milligan College in eastern Tennessee. Dawn and her husband, Harold, live in Johnson City, Tennessee. Their daughter, Elizabeth Gentry, is the author of another sermon in this edition of *Priscilla Papers*.

