6 STUDIES
+ LEADER NOTES

SONG OF SOLOMON

# A Seal Upon Your Heart


PATHWAY
BIBLE GUIDES

*"Set me as a seal upon your heart,*
*as a seal upon your arm.*
*For love is strong as death ..." (Song of Solomon 8:6)*

King Solomon infamously maintained a harem of women who turned his heart away from God, so why is the Bible's only piece of love poetry named after him? Does the Song have anything to say to single people? And where can God be found in a book that barely alludes to his name?

The Song of Solomon presents two kinds of love—one delightful, one dangerous—and reveals the confronting reality of the nature of God's love. These 6 studies, useful for both groups and individuals, will deepen your understanding of this mysterious part of Scripture and how it should guide you today.

PATHWAY
BIBLE GUIDES

Straightforward Bible studies for small groups


ISBN 978-1-925424-96-6

PATHWAY
BIBLE GUIDES

# A Seal Upon Your Heart

## SONG OF SOLOMON

BY KAMINA WÜST

matthiasmedia
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

*A Seal Upon Your Heart*
Pathway Bible Guides: Song of Solomon


Matthias Media
(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)
Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au
Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au
Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)
Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com
Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com
Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.



Series design by Annesa Fung.
Cover design by Carol Lam.
Typesetting by Lankshear Design.

# Contents

Before you begin . . . . . 3

1: Lovers and others (Song 1:1-2:7) . . . . . 7

2: Two kinds of lover (Song 2:8-17 and 3:6-11) . . . . . 13

3: Seeking and (not) finding (Song 3:1-5 and 5:2-8) . . . . . 19

4: Together in the garden (Song 4:1-5:1 and 5:9-6:3) . . . . . 25

5: The gravity of love (Song 6:4-8:4) . . . . . 31

6: Set me as a seal upon your heart (Song 8:5-14) . . . . . 37

Appendix 1: Solomon and the Song of Solomon . . . . . 45

Appendix 2: The daughters of Jerusalem . . . . . 51

Appendix 3: Marriage and the Song of Solomon . . . . . 55

For the leader . . . . . 59

# Before you begin

*The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.* That's the full title of the Song of Solomon (1:1). It lets us know that to understand the Song of Solomon, we need to understand King Solomon.

Solomon is a complicated character. He was loved by God at his birth and he received special wisdom from God upon taking the throne. He built God's temple in Jerusalem and reigned over the most prosperous period in Israel's history. He is the attributed author of many of the Proverbs which contain wisdom on the themes of love, sex and marriage.

However, Solomon didn't follow his own wise teaching. He allied himself through marriage with many foreign nations, starting with Egypt (1 Kgs 3:1), the nation of which God had said to his people, "you shall never return that way again" (Deut 17:16). He not only worshipped the gods of his wives personally; he also raised public altars to these gods and led the people of Israel into idolatry (1 Kgs 11:1-8). Following Solomon, Israel's subsequent kings went from bad to worse. God eventually punished Israel by allowing their enemies to conquer Jerusalem, destroy the temple and send the people into exile from their promised land. The seed of this destruction was Solomon's sin.

When the people eventually returned to Jerusalem to rebuild, they fell into the same old sin—they married women from the surrounding nations and began to worship their gods (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-27). This was five centuries after Solomon lived, but his name was still the byword for this type of sin. Nehemiah rebuked the Israelite men: "Did

not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin" (Neh 13:26). This was Solomon's legacy when it came to love.

The Song of Solomon is part of this legacy. It paints a picture of Solomon that resonates with the way he's described in 1 Kings 1-11—as a polygamist who collects wives for political advantage and to display his wealth and power. Yet it also presents a picture of a different kind of lover: one who invites rather than coerces, who knows his lover intimately rather than treating her as a chattel, and who is exclusively devoted to his one love rather than having many women. For the Israelites who were perpetually led astray by their loves, it's a powerful warning to avoid the example of Solomon and love wisely, in a way that honours God.

While the Song is about romantic love and lovemaking, it isn't only meant for people in relationships. The Song speaks of loneliness and longing, of sexual brokenness and boundaries transgressed. Reading it in a mixed group of God's people acknowledges that we all have thoughts and experiences to contribute to a discussion about love and sex, regardless of our relationship status. The Song provides a safe and scriptural starting point for frank discussions among brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Song of Solomon is poetry, and poetry works on its readers in a different way than prose. Rather than making explanatory statements or giving step-by-step instructions, poetry uses imagery and metaphors to evoke the readers' emotions and call up associations with our own experiences. This can be an uncomfortable experience for Christians who are trying to faithfully discern God's message. It's wise to be wary of imposing our own ideas onto Scripture. However, the Song is not an instruction manual or a code to be cracked. By its very nature it's *meant*

to tantalize, to confuse, to stir up emotions, to evoke experiences. Reading the Song faithfully involves embracing its mystery.

Part of the mystery of the Song is that its story is unfinished. In the final verse of the Song, the woman tells her beloved to *run*—away from her, or into her embrace? It's not clear how their love story will end. Imagine how this spoke to the Israelites as they tried to rebuild their broken temple. Where was God? How long would he remain silent? Would he redeem his people, or had he abandoned them?

The Song didn't offer concrete answers. It offered them a picture of God-pleasing love, reminded them of the Solomon-like sin they were prone to fall into, and warned them to guard their hearts against anything that would invoke God's jealousy.

While the Israelites in the Song's time didn't know the end of the story, the Bible goes on to tell it. God would redeem his people through Jesus' death and resurrection. Now we wait until he comes back to claim those who love him. While we wait, we have the same calling as the Israelites: to guard our hearts and stay faithful to God.

Let's step into the story and seek the love that leads to 'happily ever after'.

# 1. Lovers and others

## SONG OF SOLOMON 1:1-2:7

### Getting started

Who are the characters in the Song of Solomon? Without looking at the Bible, list or guess as many as you can think of.

## Light from the Word

There's some debate about the identities of the characters in the Song. Let's investigate!

Read Song 1.

1. List every character that appears in these verses (try to ignore the headings in the Bible). Is it possible to narrow this down to a definitive list of characters? Where is it hard to tell who's who?

2. Read verses 12-17 again carefully. In these verses:

   - Where is the king?

   - Where is the woman's beloved?

   - Where are the couple together?

3. In verse 6, the woman mentions her "mother's sons" (i.e. her brothers). What's your impression of their attitude towards her?

4. The woman says she hasn't "kept" her "own vineyard". Do you have any impressions of what this could mean?

5. Historically, the horses that drew Pharoah's chariots would all have been stallions. What would be the effect of letting a mare loose in a crowd of non-neutered male horses (v 9)? How does this image shape our impression of the woman's encounters with men (e.g. in verse 7)?

Read Song 2:1-7.

6. Notice how the lovers' words mirror each other in 1:15-16 and 2:2-3. Poetically, what does this reflect about their relationship?

7. From 2:2-3, how do the lovers view other men and women? (Notice also how they address each other in 1:7 and 1:8.)

8. From 1:1-2:6, how does the relationship between the woman and the beloved contrast with the woman's interactions with other characters?

In 2:7, the woman sternly warns the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up or awaken love "until it pleases". To understand what she means, it's crucial to know what it means for love to be "pleased".

To appreciate this, we need to understand *personification*: the poetic device wherein a non-human thing (i.e. love) is given a human quality (i.e. 'being pleased'). Hebrew poetry uses this device a lot, particularly in the Psalms. When abstract concepts are personified in the Psalms, we naturally make sense of their behaviour in relation to the moral compass of the poetry, which is provided by God's law and the goodness of his created order.

The moral compass in the Song of Solomon is embodied in the woman. The Bible uses her voice to narrate the Song and express its teaching. When love is "pleased", we should understand that this means "pleased by the standards of what's good in the Song"—and the woman's experience will reveal to us what that 'good' love is like.

Hold onto this idea for now. In study 2, we'll see that there are two kinds of love in the Song: one that is very good, and one that is not good at all. These two types of love will help us understand why the woman warns the daughters of Jerusalem so strongly.

## To finish

Is there anything from Song 1:1-2:7 that surprised you? Is there anything from Song 1:1-2:7 that you still don't understand? (Write it down so you can come back and reconsider after reading more of the Song.)

##  Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for the gift of love in all its shapes, and for giving us the Song of Solomon to enable us to think about love in a fresh way.
- Ask God to help us be open-minded and willing to examine our own hearts as we explore love in the Song of Solomon.

# 2. Two kinds of lover

## SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-17 AND 3:6-11

### Getting started

Can you think of a situation in which love could be a *bad* thing? Can you think of any stories from the Bible where love led to something bad?

## Light from the Word

Read Song 2:8-17.

1. Notice how much of this passage is taken up by the voice of the beloved (vv 10-15). What types of things does he say to the woman?

2. List the imagery that appears in verses 9-13 (i.e. the animals the lovers are compared to, and the elements of nature that are described). What feelings do these images evoke for you?

3. What does verse 16 reveal? Adding on to the impression of the central relationship that was formed in the first study, what do these details contribute to the picture we are building of this couple?

4. Based on verses 8-17, what kind of lover is the beloved? Choose three or four words to describe him.

Read Song 3:6-11.

5. Compare the picture of Solomon in 3:6-11 to the picture of the beloved in 2:8-17. Use these points to get started:

| | Solomon | Beloved |
|---|---|---|
| Where does he come from? | | |
| How does he travel? | | |
| Who comes with him? | | |
| How does he interact with the woman? | | |

6. For whom did Solomon make his "carriage" (v 9)? What is it made of (vv 9-10)?

7. Read Song 1:16-17 again. Who does the "couch" belong to? What is the lovers' house made of?

There's a wordplay in verse 10. Taken one way, it could mean Solomon's carriage was inlaid with love *by* the daughters of Jerusalem. But read another way, it says that the carriage was inlaid with *the love of* the daughters of Jerusalem. The first reading innocently depicts diligent artisans serving the king; the second unmistakeably implies that Solomon has soiled the inside of his carriage with lovemaking. It's worth noting that the word translated "litter" in verse 7 is the ordinary Hebrew word for 'bed'. The verse literally says, "behold, it is the bed of Solomon!"

Read 1 Kings 11:1-3, then read Song 3:11 again.

8. How do you feel about Solomon's 'wedding day' in light of 1 Kings 11?

9. Based on Song 3:6-11, what kind of lover is Solomon? Choose three or four words to describe him. Compare these words to the words you chose for the beloved. Do you get the impression these men are very similar, or different?

Read Zechariah 9:9.

In this verse, the prophet Zechariah calls the 'daughters' of Jerusalem and Zion (a poetic term for the people of Israel) to joyfully anticipate the coming of a redeeming king. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy when he entered Jerusalem (Matt 21:1-11).

10. How is the picture of a king's approach in Zechariah and Matthew similar to the depiction of Solomon in Song 3:6-11? How is it different?

## To finish

Look back over the words you and/or your group chose (under question 9) to describe Solomon as a lover. Have you had any experience with 'Solomon'-type love? Reflect privately and share with the group if you feel comfortable.

What does the picture of Jesus on a donkey reveal about how he relates to those he approaches?

## Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for the safety of his love and for the humility of our King Jesus, who loves perfectly.
- Ask God to keep working in our hearts as we consider the complexity of love, both as we wrestle with Bible stories about love and as we examine our own lives.

# 3. Seeking and (not) finding

## SONG OF SOLOMON 3:1-5 AND 5:2-8

### Getting started

"I love you, but we can't be together." It's a common trope for maintaining romantic tension in TV shows and movies—two characters are in love, but the relationship 'won't work' for some reason.

Can you share a story you know in which lovers are kept apart? How does that *feel*?

## Light from the Word

Some interpreters understand 3:1-5 and 5:2-8 to be describing the woman's dreams, while others read these as real events. If you think they are dreams, consider what they reveal about the woman's psyche and her experience of love. If you think these scenes took place in real life, consider what they contribute to the lovers' story.

Read Song 3:1-5.

1. Where does this scene take place? How does this compare to the setting of the scenes studied so far?

2. Verse 5 repeats word-for-word the warning from 2:7. Remember, "love ... pleases" refers to love that is good by the standards of the Song. So far, what type of love seems good? What might 2:7 and 3:5 be warning against?

Immediately after the first 'seeking-and-finding' sequence (3:1-5) comes the approach of Solomon's carriage (3:6-11; study 2). Following this, in 4:1-16 there is a scene where the lovers are together briefly. (Remember the headings in the ESV were added later; it's best to read the text on its own terms.) This scene will be considered in more depth in study 4. For now, we'll consider a few points that resonate with 3:1-5 and 5:2-8.

Read Song 4:1-8.

3. What is the beloved trying to get the woman to do (v 8)?

4. According to verse 8, what animals dwell in the mountains (where the woman is said to be)? What does this convey poetically about the woman's situation?

5. How does the tone of verse 8 compare with the tone of 2:10-13 (study 2)? What seems to motivate the beloved's invitation in 2:10-13, and what motivates it here in verse 8?

Read Song 5:2-8.

6. The woman repeats the refrain "I sought him, but found him not" several times in the two 'seeking-and-finding' scenes. What does she add to this refrain in 5:6?

7. Compare 3:3-4 with 5:7. What are the similarities and differences in the woman's interactions with the watchmen in these two scenes?

8. Where are the woman and her beloved located at the end of 3:1-4? Where is each of them at the end of 5:2-7? How do you *feel* at the end of each passage?

9. At this point in the Song, do you think the lovers might have a happy ending? What would you guess is going to happen to them?

10. Look up these passages and see how they resonate with the 'seeking-and-finding' theme that we've seen in the Song:

    - Prov 1:28; Hos 5:6; Amos 8:12

    - Deut 4:29; Jer 29:10-14

When the Song speaks about 'seeking and finding', it isn't speaking directly about God, but it does tell the story of the woman and her beloved using language that is familiar to the Israelites from their Scriptures. The longing and distress of the lovers calls up just a shadow of the loss that is felt by the Israelites, seemingly abandoned by the God they have rejected and calling out for him to take them back.

11. Read Matthew 7:7. What do these words show us about the fulfillment of the 'seeking-and-finding' theme found in the Song?

## To finish

How have your own experiences of loss and heartbreak impacted your relationship with God?

## Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for the honesty of the poetry in the Song, even when it's troubling.
- Ask God to reveal more of himself to us as we seek him in his word, especially in the obscure parts of the Song. Ask him to fill our hearts when we feel the longing of loneliness and broken relationships.

# 4. Together in the garden

## SONG OF SOLOMON 4:1-5:1 AND 5:9-6:3

### Getting started

What are some of the reasons that Christians can feel uncomfortable talking about sex and romance in a mixed group?

## Light from the Word

Read Song 4:1-5:1.

1. In 4:1-5, notice how the beloved describes the woman starting with her eyes and hair. Where does his gaze stop (for now)?

Look closely at the metaphor of the "garden" in 4:12. Then read the woman's invitation in 4:16 and the man's response in 5:1. There should be no doubt that their relationship has been consummated!

2. "'Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.' 'I came to my garden, my sister, my bride ...'" (4:16-5:1). What does this exchange model about communication and consent in the lovers' relationship?

3. "Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!" (5:1) What does this model about the relationship between the couple and their community? How does it shape our attitude to reading today's passages from the Song?

Read Song 5:9-6:3.

4. Compare the woman's description of the man in 5:10-16 to his description of her in 4:9-16. List the senses that are engaged in each description, such as sight and touch. What does this convey about their relationship?

5. Both 5:9 and 6:1 contain the words spoken by the "daughters of Jerusalem". What do these verses convey about the daughters' involvement in the central relationship?

6. Our passage invites a celebration of romantic love. What are some of the reasons we might become disillusioned with romance?

7. In your own experience of church culture, what has been helpful and unhelpful in this regard?

8. Whether you identify most with the woman, her beloved or the onlooking daughters, what has been modelled in these passages of the Song that you might seek to imitate in your own life?

In the culture in which the Song was produced, it was rightly recognized that romantic couplings impacted and were impacted by the whole community. The Song's presence in the Bible provides an opportunity for communities of believers—including those who are single—to have safe, positive conversations together about love and sex. This also fosters an atmosphere in which we can hold brothers and sisters accountable and have difficult, loving confrontations when sexual sin is apparent.

## To finish

Read Ephesians 5:8-14.

If you don't already do this, could you benefit from meeting regularly with one or two other Christians to share deeply about your lives? What benefits do you think this could bring? If somebody in the group is already doing this, they could share their experience.

##  Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for sexual, platonic and familial love, and for the enjoyment of physical and emotional intimacy with other humans.
- Ask God to let us taste the satisfaction and joy we witness in the Song, through close relationship with him and each other. Ask him to help us be vulnerable and expressive with one another so that our relationships grow deeper.

# 5. The gravity of love

## SONG OF SOLOMON 6:4-8:4

### Getting started

Think of the person you love the most. What would be the cost of losing that person? What would you be prepared to do to prevent it?

## Light from the Word

Read Song 6:4-13.

1. Look back at 4:1-5 and compare these verses with 6:4-10. What details are added? What effect does this have?

2. What does 6:8-9 reveal about how the beloved views the woman? (See also how he refers to her in 1:8 and 2:2.)

3. How does the beloved's view of the woman compare to the way Solomon 'loves' women? (If you need a reminder, peek at 1 Kings 11:1-3.)

Read Song 7.

4. Look back over 4:1-5 and 6:5-7, and compare these passages to 7:1-5. In order, list the parts of the woman's body that the man's gaze travels over in these passages:

| 4:1-5, 6:5-7 | 7:1-5 |
|---|---|
| 'eyes' (4:1; 6:5) | 'feet' (7:1) |

   Compare the two columns. What does this convey about their relationship?

When Adam and Eve committed the first sin in the garden of Eden, God cursed them each individually. To Eve he said:

> "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
> in pain you shall bring forth children.
> Your *desire* shall be contrary to your husband,
> but he shall rule over you." (Gen 3:16)

5. The word translated "desire" in Song 7:10 is the same word used in Genesis 3:16. What's the effect of using the word from Eve's curse in Song 7:10?

Song 7:10 develops a motif from 2:16 and 6:3 (have a quick look to refresh your memory). Now read the following verses: Jer 24:7, 31:33, 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 37:23, 27; Zech 8:8.

6. With the declarations of these prophets thundering in their ears, how is the force of the statement "I am my beloved and my beloved is mine" strengthened for the original Israelite hearers of the Song?

Read Song 8:1-4.

The woman's wish for her lover to be "like a brother" is odd to modern ears. In Ancient Near Eastern love poetry, it was common for lovers to refer to each other as 'brother' and 'sister' to express intimacy.

7. What's the predicament the lovers are facing in verses 1-2? In light of how far their relationship has progressed, is this situation surprising?

It's clear the lovers in the Song are meant to be together; as the audience of the Song, we're positioned to be rooting for them. It seems that unknown external pressures are threatening to keep them apart.

8. During the exile and afterwards, the Israelites experienced social (and, in some circumstances, legal) pressure to integrate with the cultural groups around them and give up their exclusive devotion to the God of Israel. What are some specific ways the lovers' plight in the Song might have resonated with an Israelite audience in light of these cultural pressures?

9. In light of all we have read so far, why do you think the woman keeps warning the daughters of Jerusalem "not to stir up or awaken love until it pleases"?

## To finish

Romans 12:1 appeals to us to present our bodies as a "living sacrifice" to God, resisting conformation to this world.

Whether you are married or single, how do you need to heed the warning of the Song in your circumstances? What have you been challenged or encouraged to sacrifice for the sake of your relationship with God? What will it look like for you to present your body as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God"?

## Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for his determination to keep us in relationship with him, even going to the lengths of giving himself up on a cross for us.
- Ask God to help us imitate Jesus in the way we relate to others in our intimate relationships.

# 6. Set me as a seal upon your heart

## SONG OF SOLOMON 8:5-14

### Getting started

Is there anything that could cause you to stop loving God? Is there anything that could cause God to take away his love from you?

## Light from the Word

Read Song 8:5-7.

1. In verse 6, the woman tells her beloved to "set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm". What are some ways a modern couple might express a similar sentiment?

2. According to verses 6-7, what is love like?

*Love* is paralleled with *jealousy* in 8:6. Jealousy of other people is not a desirable quality for humans (e.g. Job 5:2; Prov 14:30; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 3:3), but the Bible affirms jealousy in some circumstances.

Read Exod 34:14; Deut 6:14-15; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14; 2 Cor 11:2-3.

3. Reflecting on the verses above, when is jealousy right? What's the relationship between righteous jealousy and love?

4. What is confronting about God's jealousy? Where can we find comfort?

Read Song 8:8-14.

The woman's brothers first appeared in 1:6. As her male guardians their role was to protect her, but they exposed her to the elements and to sexual vulnerability. Now, in 8:8-9, they discuss her prospects—or rather *their* prospects. Virginity upon marriage was important to men in the Ancient Near East for two reasons. First, a woman's virginity was the responsibility of her male guardian and so its loss reflected poorly upon his honour. Second, virginity upon marriage guaranteed that a husband did not inadvertently support another man's child (since it ensured a woman wasn't already pregnant when she married). A woman's virginity was necessary for her male guardian to collect a good bride-price in exchange for her.

5. In verses 8-9, the brothers say that their sister "has no breasts" and speculate about whether she is "a wall" (pure) or "a door" (promiscuous). What does her response in verse 10 reveal about the brothers' knowledge of their sister?

6. Since the woman and her beloved have engaged in a sexual relationship, being "a wall" cannot simply mean that she has remained a virgin. What does the Song present as a picture of sexual purity?

7. Look at verses 11-12. Solomon's "vineyard", run by keepers in exchange for money, is a metaphor for his harem. How does this contrast with how the woman shares her own "vineyard" (her body)?

8. Read the final sentence of 8:7 again. How does this reflect on the woman's brothers and on Solomon?

9. Throughout the Song, the woman warns the daughters of Jerusalem to "not stir up or awaken love until it pleases".

   - Looking back over the Song, what type of love is seen as good? What type of 'love' is not good?

   - For Israelites reflecting on the legacy of Solomon, what type of 'love' should they avoid? What should they pursue instead?

- For Christians today, how do we love in a way that pleases God? What should we take care to avoid stirring up when it comes to love?

## To finish

Have somebody read Song 8:6-7 aloud again. Have somebody else read Isaiah 43:1-4 aloud in response. Reflect individually for a few moments.

How will understanding God's love and jealousy change the way you relate to him?

## Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for the protection of his love, enacted in Jesus' sin-covering sacrifice, and for the way our hearts are changed by Jesus Christ so that we can have love and life in him.
- Ask God to daily renew our devotion to him so that we conduct our relationships in ways that are pleasing to him. Pray that nothing would turn our hearts away from God.

### Feedback on this resource

We really appreciate getting feedback about our resources—not just suggestions for how to improve them, but also positive feedback and ways they can be used. We especially love to hear that the resources may have helped someone in their Christian growth.

You can send feedback to us via the 'Feedback' menu in our online store, or write to us at info@matthiasmedia.com.au.

APPENDIX 1

# Solomon and the Song of Solomon

One of the most basic interpretive questions we encounter when we come to the Song is: *What is Solomon doing in the Song?*

There is no overriding consensus on Solomon's role in the Song. Interpreters usually take one of three main positions, which are:

1. Solomon is one of two main characters in the Song. That is, Solomon is the beloved.
2. Solomon is one of three main characters in the Song. That is, the woman and her beloved are the main characters and Solomon is an antagonist.
3. Solomon isn't in the Song and doesn't have very much to do with it. The references to his name are meant to invoke 'Solomonic' ideas, but don't refer to him specifically.

One reason that interpreters have difficulty agreeing on the role of Solomon in the Song is that the reading of Solomon in the Song tends to be informed by one's reading of Solomon overall. That is, if you think Solomon is a good guy in the Bible, you'll be expecting him to be a good guy in the Song—so you might assume that Solomon is the beloved. If you think Solomon is a bad guy in the Bible, you'll be looking out for him to be a bad guy in the Song—so you might assume he's *not* the beloved.

So, is Solomon a good guy or a bad guy?

The answer is *both*. Solomon is one of the most complex characters in the Old Testament. On the one hand, he's remembered for several positive achievements. He's the first son of David to take the throne, he builds the first temple in Jerusalem, he receives special wisdom from God to govern his people, and he reigns over a period of dazzling prosperity and peace for Israel. The composition of large portions of the book of Proverbs is attributed to him, constituting further evidence of his wisdom.

On the other hand, Solomon is remembered negatively for his marriages to many women. First, he marries Pharoah's daughter. The Hebrew of 1 Kings 3:1 literally says, "he made himself a son-in-law to Pharaoh", emphasizing that the union was not a romantic one but a political alliance between the leaders of Israel and Egypt. This is the same Egypt from which God had rescued his people—the same Egypt which he strictly warned them to never return to again! Following this, Solomon accumulates 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of them foreigners who worship foreign gods. They persuade Solomon into worshipping their gods and he even erects public worship sites for them, thus officializing idolatry in Israel (1 Kgs 11:1-8).

This is one version of Solomon's biography. His history is covered again later in the Hebrew Bible, from 1 Chronicles 22 to 2 Chronicles 9. Unlike the Kings account of Solomon, which highlights his issues with women and idolatry, the Chronicles account focuses on his good points and doesn't mention his foreign wives at all. Does this mean that either account is untrue? Absolutely not! Different aspects of Solomon's complex character are emphasized in the two different accounts, but both accounts integrate into a coherent picture of an individual who had good and bad characteristics, as all humans do.

When we come to the Song, we need to decide which side of Solomon's complicated persona is most relevant to interpretation of

the Song. Some interpreters emphasize that Solomon is a son of David, a type of Christ, and so read this into his character in the Song and assume that he must be the beloved. Other interpreters remember Solomon's problematic relationships with women and apply this to their reading of the Song. Which is correct?

It makes sense to look to the text of the Song itself for clues about Solomon's role in it. The main topic of the Song is *love*. The Hebrew word for 'love' appears 25 times in the Song (counting the noun *ahava* and the verb *ahev*). The Samuel-Kings account of Solomon's life also contains several key references to love: When Solomon is born, God *loves* him (2 Sam 12:24); when Solomon takes the throne, he *loves* God (1 Kgs 3:3). But later in life, Solomon *loves* many foreign women (1 Kgs 11:1) and his heart turns away from God as he clings to his wives and their gods in *love* (1 Kgs 11:3). (All these references employ the same root word for *love* that is used in the Song.) On the other hand, the word 'love' does not appear in the Chronicles account of Solomon's life; it is simply not concerned with this topic. This suggests that the Samuel-Kings account, rather than the Chronicles account, provides the background for the interpretation of the Song, which is all about love.

The book of Nehemiah recounts events that took place approximately 500 years after Solomon's death, when the Jewish people returned from exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. The recent returnees from exile soon start to consort with foreign women, producing children who only speak foreign languages (Neh 13:24), meaning they can't understand the language of the Jewish religion or participate fully in the life of the Jewish community. Within a single generation, the identity of God's people will begin to be eroded by integration with those who don't worship the God of Israel. Nehemiah warns the Israelites by Solomon's example: "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him

king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin" (Neh 13:26). Nehemiah's words perfectly sum up the complexity of Solomon's character. He was a great king, better than all the kings of the nations, and God loved him—yet his love for foreign women caused him to sin. This is the enduring legacy of Solomon's reputation in love, and it is this aspect of Solomon's character that informs the interpretation of Solomon's role in the Song in these studies.

Evidence from within the Song itself supports this interpretation. 'Solomon' appears explicitly by name in 3:6-11 and 8:11-12. Scholars who believe that he and the beloved are one and the same take it that Solomon is the man who appears throughout, but there is compelling evidence that the 'Solomon' mentioned in chapters 3 and 8 and the beloved who appears in the rest of the poem are two different men.

Firstly, the presentation of Solomon in the two passages above is sharply contrasted with the presentation of the beloved throughout. To understand how this works, see the leader notes on study 2 for a side-by-side comparison of the beloved in 2:8-17 and Solomon in 3:6-11.

Secondly, the presentation of Solomon is created through allusions to his depiction in 1 Kings 3-11, a text which is highly critical of Solomon when it comes to matters of romantic love. By taking up the language of 1 Kings 3-11, the Song continues the critique of Solomon from the Samuel-Kings account. (Again, the leader notes on study 2 provide more detail on this.)

Thirdly, in 8:11-12 the woman explicitly rejects Solomon. This interaction is the clincher when it comes to seeing that Solomon is not the beloved, and it's the most difficult for those who take a different view to explain away. 8:11 states that "Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon". Baal-hamon is widely recognized as a literary invention, named to deride Solomon: it literally means 'owner/husband of a multitude'. The "vineyard" is a metaphor for the woman's sexuality in the Song, so while Solomon would historically have owned many literal

vineyards, in the context of the Song his "vineyard" is an unmistakable metaphor for his stable of women. The way Solomon stewards his vineyards at arm's length, through keepers, is analogous to the lack of true intimacy in his many marriages. This contrasts with the intimacy of the woman and her beloved throughout the poem.

Historically, Solomon's large harem would have been a public display of his wealth and political standing. The Song's use of the metaphor of profitable vineyards for Solomon's women drives home the point that he treats his wives and concubines as chattels. This continues a theme from 8:8-9, where the woman's brothers discuss their prospects for getting their sister married. The attitudes of the brother and Solomon in these verses highlight the reality that women in the Ancient Near East were traded as possessions between men. The Song presents the mutually desired relationship between the woman and her beloved as an alternative to the male-centric model of marriage which serves the powerful at the expense of the weak.

Through the voice of the woman, the Song rejects this Solomonic model for 'love' in 8:12. She tells Solomon to keep his silver, making it clear that her 'vineyard' is not a commodity. The woman asserts her right to steward her own body, to share it with her beloved, and to keep it from being given over to other men (like her brothers and Solomon) who would use it to serve their own purposes.

So then, 8:11-12 confirms that Solomon, in the view of the Song, is the antithesis of an ideal romantic partner. The way he conducts himself in love is despicable, and stands in contrast with the ideal behaviour embodied by the beloved.

APPENDIX 2

# The daughters of Jerusalem

Discussions of the Song of Solomon typically focus on the relationship between the two main characters—the woman and her beloved. An overlooked third character is the group called the "daughters of Jerusalem".

They play an important role in the Song as the woman's conversation partner (1:4, 5, 11; 2:7; 3:5, 11; 5:1, 8-9; 5:16-6:2; 6:13; 8:4). More than that, it is widely recognized by scholars that the daughters of Jerusalem stand in for the readers of the Song. As we read the woman's repeated instruction to the daughters (2:7, 3:5, 8:4), we are supposed to receive it as instruction to ourselves.

So, who are the daughters of Jerusalem? Traditional views on this can be grouped around three main ideas:

1. *Women who live in Jerusalem.* In this view the "daughters of Jerusalem" are characterized as sophisticated women from the capital city, while the main character is a country girl. This is extrapolated from the way the woman implores the daughters of Jerusalem "do not gaze at me because I am dark", and goes on to explain that her skin is darkened from working in the fields (1:5-6). From this it is assumed that she is of a different class than the fair-skinned city girls who haven't had to work outside.

The characterization of the daughters is usually embellished specu-

latively from here: they are assumed to be beautiful, sophisticated and disdainful towards the woman, when in fact there is no evidence for this anywhere in the Song. What's more, this view ignores the significance of Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel. The focus is on the fact that the daughters are from *a city*, but the characterization is not specific to them being from *Jerusalem*.

2. *Solomon's harem*. Some commentators understand these women of Jerusalem to be ladies of Solomon's royal court—that is, his wives and concubines. Usually, the commentators who hold this view see the Song as being about a love triangle in which the woman and her beloved want to be together, but Solomon wants to win the woman for himself. Some believe that the daughters are a sad symbol of the woman's fate if she marries Solomon, and even that they are rooting for the woman to escape and be with her beloved. Others see the daughters as co-conspirators with Solomon who want to entice her to join them in his harem.

One thing going for the idea that the daughters of Jerusalem are Solomon's harem is that it takes seriously the fact that they are *of Jerusalem*. It's suggested that it's natural to identify the king's wives with the capital city. On the other hand, the most distinctive feature of Solomon's wives is that they were *foreign* (1 Kgs 11:1), which had crucial implications for the narrative in 1 Kings. It would be odd to identify these women as "daughters of Jerusalem", since it's very significant to Solomon's story arc that they are *not* from Jerusalem.

3. *Unmarried women*. A third popular idea is that the daughters of Jerusalem are virgin friends of the woman. They haven't yet experienced the type of love that she has with her beloved, so they look on and ask questions, and she instructs them about it. This accounts well for the dynamic in the Song wherein the woman is positioned as knowledgeable in matters of love, imparting her wisdom to the daughters. There have also been legitimate parallels drawn between the dynamic of 'father' and 'son' in Proverbs (a book of wisdom addressed

to men) and the dynamic between the woman and 'daughters' in the Song (which has been suggested to be a counterpart book of wisdom for women).

Each of these views has something going for it. However, none of them satisfyingly accounts for the fact that the daughters' only identifying quality is that they are *of Jerusalem*. Since they are named for Jerusalem, and the Song reveals nothing else about them, this is the key detail that shapes their identity. It has largely been ignored by commentators throughout the history of the Song's interpretation.

The Song of Solomon is not the only book in the Bible to use the phrase "daughters of ..." with a place name. In fact, this is a very common way to name groups of women or even mixed-gender groups, especially in poetry. David sings of "the daughters of the Philistines" and "daughters of Israel" to represent Philistines and Israelites generally (2 Sam 1:20, 24); Isaiah uses "the daughters of Zion" (Isa 3:16-17, 4:4), and Psalms use "the daughters of Judah" (Ps 48:11, 97:8) to represent God's people. The prophets speak of the daughters of Moab (Isa 16:2), Rabbah (Jer 49:3), the Philistines (Ezek 16:27, 57), Syria (Ezek 16:57) and just 'nations' (Ezek 32:16, 18) to designate various enemies of Israel.

The daughters of Jerusalem are also referred to as "daughters of Zion" in Song 3:11. This identical terminology appears in Isaiah 3:16-17 and 4:4 to personify Israel. Reading the Song of Solomon alongside these other poetic texts makes it seem natural to take it that the "daughters of Jerusalem" are a poetic representation of the people of Jerusalem generally. Jerusalem (Zion), being the most significant location in Israel, functions as a shorthand for the whole nation of Israel. So, it seems likely that "daughters of Jerusalem" is another way of saying "people of Israel". In the world of the Song they are characterized as young women, but they stand in for all God's people—not just young women—in the same way that "my son" in Proverbs stands in for all God's people, not just young men.

APPENDIX 3

# Marriage and the Song of Solomon

Among lay Christian readers, it's generally assumed that the Song of Solomon is about 'marriage'. This assumption is grounded (legitimately) in a basic Christian sexual ethic. The logic goes: the Song of Solomon is about sex, the Bible only affirms sex within marriage, therefore the Song is about marriage.

However, evidence from the Song itself suggests that the couple is *not* married. Shocking, right? How can a book of the Bible celebrate a sexual relationship that takes place outside of marriage?

This concept needs to be handled carefully with contemporary Christian readers. The Song of Solomon is *absolutely not* a licence for Christians to engage in sexual relationships outside marriage. The Bible offers a fully-rounded sexual ethic that makes it very clear that sex is reserved for marriage—which in our context means a legally formalized, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman. And the Song of Solomon definitely affirms that the ideal sexual relationship constitutes a monogamous, lifelong, exclusive commitment. The Song's choice to situate its central relationship outside the normal construct of 'marriage' is a deliberate one, to make a particular kind of point, and it's influenced by cultural and literary considerations that might be invisible to the modern reader.

First of all, what suggests that the couple in the Song isn't married?

There are several points of evidence:

1. The woman remains under the guardianship of her brothers (1:6; 8:8-9).
2. The woman's brothers discuss what they will do for her "on the day when she is spoken for". That is, they're talking about her *future* (as yet unsettled) marriage (8:8).
3. The couple don't appear to have a shared home to make love in: instead, they imagine a "couch" of green in a "house" of trees (1:16-17) and speak of making love in the countryside (7:11-12). Twice she speaks of her desire to bring him to her "mother's home" (3:4; 8:2), where she apparently lives.
4. Further evidence that they don't live together is that the beloved peeps through the woman's window to invite her to go away with him (2:9) and knocks on her door after she is in bed (5:2). She goes out into the streets at night to look for him (3:1-4, 5:6-7).
5. The woman and her beloved aren't able to show affection in public (8:1-2).

None of the above makes sense if the couple is married or formally betrothed. They simply don't behave like a married couple.

The only explicit allusion to marriage is in a single passage, 4:8-5:1, in which the beloved refers to the woman as "bride"—not 'wife'—six times. While most English versions translate the term "*my* bride", that doesn't reflect the wording in Hebrew. The beloved actually only says "bride". Throughout the Song, the beloved calls the woman by multiple terms of endearment that are *always* paired with "my" to emphasize the way they belong to each other: he calls her "my love", "my beautiful one", "my dove", "my sister", and "my perfect one"—but not "my bride". The exclusion of 'my' seems deliberate in comparison to the way the beloved usually styles his endearments. It has been suggested that when he calls her "bride", the term is poignant; she may be *a* bride, but not

necessarily *his* bride. This supports the view that Solomon and the woman's brothers are a threat to the woman's autonomy, and that her husband will be chosen for her against her will.

Even if readers find it difficult to accept the unmarried status of the couple, it must be admitted that the Song is not interested in any of the things that are usually associated with marriage in the Old Testament. It makes no reference to the patriarchal family structure, property concerns or the bearing of children. The Song isn't interested in the external trappings of legal marriage; it's interested in the inner life of the two people involved. This suggests that the relationship is deliberately set outside the structure of marriage so that the nature of love can be explored independently of the baggage that usually goes along with a marriage in the Ancient Near East.

There's also a likely literary reason for the couple being unmarried. The Song shares many literary characteristics with love poetry from neighbouring Egypt. While restricting sex to marriage was valued in Egyptian culture as in Israelite culture, it is typical in Egyptian poetry for lovers to be unmarried. There isn't a decisive consensus on the reason for this, but Egyptian poetry—very like the Song—often has a dreamlike quality of being set a little apart from mundane reality. The normal social rules and rituals of marriage are ignored as the lovers enjoy each other in a world of semi-fantasy. It's likely that the Song's lack of interest in marriage is imitated from Egyptian poetry. Since this is known to be a stylistic convention for this type of poetry, it's understood that the Song does not literally affirm sex outside of marriage and that the Hebrew Bible's position on extra-marital sex remains firm.

The Song does have a strong sexual ethic, but its emphasis is not on what happens before marriage. That is, contrary to common Christian teaching, the message of the Song is not primarily about waiting until marriage to have sex! The Song is not very interested in whether the lovers were virgins before they met, but in how they behave once they

are together. The qualities that are affirmed in the ideal relationship are not to do with delaying its beginning, but with enjoying it wholeheartedly, perpetuating its commitment, and preserving its exclusivity. Indications that the couple are not able to be together fully and openly (e.g. 3:1-4, 5:2-8, 8:1) are portrayed as unwelcome obstacles to the relationship as it should be. The virtue the Song extols the most is not chastity, but fidelity: undying, exclusive commitment to one's lover *after* the relationship has begun.

The Song is not anti-marriage. Even among scholars who believe the couple is unmarried, there is a consensus that the Bible teaches that marriage is the appropriate context for sexual activity. The Song is *not* a wholesale approval of sex outside of marriage nor a licence for young couples to enter recklessly into unsuitable pairings and expect the world to fall in line because of their 'love'. Rather, the Song is being deliberately counter-cultural as it contrasts the couple's unconventional union with the societally approved 'marriages' of Solomon. The rebuke is that just putting a marriage on paper doesn't make it pleasing to God. Solomon is criticized for exploiting his power to gather a large harem; the woman's brothers are criticized for treating her virginity as a commodity they can trade. The Song radically suggests that the woman's desire for her beloved and his desire for her should be considerations when it comes to her fate. It shows that God is truly delighted when a marriage reflects the qualities in the Song—mutually desired, emotionally intimate, exclusively devoted—and not just when it follows the socially accepted conventions of the time. In a sexually permissive contemporary society these ideas aren't subversive, but in the context in which the Song was produced they were a challenge to the way God's people lived out their relationships as an expression of their devotion to God.

# For the leader

## What are Pathway Bible Guides?

The Pathway Bible Guides aim to provide simple, straightforward Bible study material for:

- Christians who are new to studying the Bible (perhaps because they've been recently converted or because they have joined a Bible study group for the first time)
- Christians who find other studies[1] too much of a stretch.

Accordingly, we've designed the studies to be short, straightforward and easy to use, with a simple vocabulary. At the same time, we've tried to do justice to the passages being studied, and to model good Bible-reading principles. We've tried to be simple without being simplistic; no-nonsense without being no-content.

The questions and answers assume a small group context, but it should be easy to adapt them to suit different situations, such as individual study and one-to-one.

## Your role as leader

Because many in your group may not be used to reading and discussing a Bible passage in a group context, a greater level of responsibility will fall to you as the leader of the discussions. There are the usual responsibilities of preparation, prayer and managing group dynamics. In addition, there will be an extra dimension of forming and encouraging good Bible reading habits in people who may not have much of an idea of what those habits look like.

Questions have been kept deliberately brief and simple. For this reason, you may have to fill in some of the gaps that may have been addressed in, say, an Interactive Bible Study. Such 'filling in' may take the form of asking follow-up

1 Such as the Interactive Bible Study (IBS) series also available from Matthias Media.

questions, or using your best judgement to work out when you might need to supply background information. That sort of information, and some suggestions about other questions you could ask, may be found in the following leader notes. In addition, a *New Bible Dictionary* is always a useful aid to preparation, and simple commentaries such as those in the *Tyndale* or *Bible Speaks Today* series are often helpful. Consult these resources after you have done your own preparation.

On the question of background information, these studies are written from the assumption that God's word stands alone. God works through his Holy Spirit and the leaders he has gifted—such as you—to make his meaning clear. Assuming this to be true, the best interpreter and provider of background information for Scripture will not be academic historical research, but Scripture itself. Extra historical information may be useful for the purpose of illustration, but it is unnecessary for understanding and applying what God says to us.

## The format of the studies

The discussion questions on each passage follow a simple pattern. There is a question at the beginning of each discussion that is intended to get people talking around the issues raised by the passage, and to give you some idea of how people are thinking. If the group turns out to be confident, motivated and comfortable with each other and the task at hand, you may even decide to skip this question. Alternatively, if the group members are shy or quiet, you may decide to think of related types of questions that you could add in to the study, so as to maintain momentum in a non-threatening way.

After the first question, the remaining questions work through the passage sequentially, alternating between observation, interpretation and application in a way that will become obvious when you do your own preparation. The final question of each discussion, just before the opportunity for prayer, could be used in some groups to encourage (say) one person each week to give a short talk (it could be 1 minute or 5 minutes, depending on the topic and the people). The thinking here is that there's no better way to encourage understanding of a passage than to get people to the point where they can explain it to others. Use your judgement in making the best use of this final exercise each week, depending on the people in your group.

In an average group, it should be possible to work through the study in approximately 45 minutes. But it's important that you work out what your group is capable of, given the time available, and make adjustments accordingly. Work out in

advance which questions or sub-points can be omitted if time is short. And have a few supplementary questions or discussion starters up your sleeve if your group is dealing with the material quickly and hungering for more. Each group is different. It's your job as leader to use the printed material as 'Bible *Guides*', and not as a set of questions that you must rigidly stick to regardless of your circumstances.

## Preparation: 60/40/20

Ideally, group members should spend half an hour reading over the passage and pencilling in some answers *before* they come to the group. Not every group member will do this, of course, but encourage them with the idea that the more they prepare for the study, the more they will get out of the discussion.

In terms of your own preparation as leader, we recommend you put aside approximately *two hours*, either all at once or in two one-hour blocks, and that you divide up the time as follows:

- 60 minutes reading the passage and answering the questions yourself as best you can (without looking at the leader notes or Bible commentaries)
- 40 minutes consulting the leader notes (plus other resources, like commentaries). Add to your own answers, and jot down supplementary questions or other information that you want to have available as you lead the discussion. Make sure you write everything you need on the study pages—the last thing you want to do is to keep turning to the 'answers' in the back during the group discussion
- 20 minutes praying about the study and for your group members.

This 60/40/20 pattern will help you to focus on the Bible and what it's saying, rather than simply regurgitating to the group what is in the leader notes. Remember, these notes are just that—notes to offer some help and guidance. They are not the Bible! As a pattern of preparation, 60/40/20 also helps you to keep praying for yourself and your group, that God would give spiritual growth as his word is sown in your hearts (see Luke 8:4-15; 1 Cor 3:5-7).

If, for some reason, you have less or more time to spend in preparation, simply apply the 60/40/20 proportions accordingly.

LEADER NOTES

# 1. Lovers and others

## SONG OF SOLOMON 1:1-2:7

▶ **Remember: 60/40/20**

## Getting started

This question is designed to get people thinking about what they've heard or assumed about the content of the Song. Some group members won't have read the Song at all, so they can be encouraged to make guesses or listen to others. Some in the group may be familiar with the Song and have confident opinions. Invite everybody to hold their ideas lightly at this stage. As the group brainstorms, prompt them to notice if any of their ideas contradict one another.

## Studying the passage

The poetic nature of the Song means that two different readers might get two different impressions from a given passage. Some aspects of the Song that are confusing at this early stage will become clearer as the poem goes on and more is revealed.

This is why this first study asks open-ended questions about the readers' impressions, and why it asks readers to keep an open mind.

The first question asks readers to list any characters they can identify from verses 1-17. The headings in modern Bibles are not original to the Hebrew text—they represent the Bible translators' best guesses as to who is speaking, and they vary in different Bible versions. Sometimes they confuse rather than clarify! Ignoring the headings, the group can look out for *pronouns* within the text (e.g. "him", "you") and *names* or *descriptors* (e.g. "the king", "daughters of Jerusalem", "my mother's sons", "your companions").

There are various views among Christian interpreters as to the identities of the main characters in the Song. The two major issues are:

a. whether "my beloved" and "the king" refer to the same person, and
b. whether King Solomon is a character in the Song.

Many of us have heard teaching one way or another, which may not be helpful. Readers should be encouraged to hold their preconceptions lightly and see what impressions they get from the text *only* as they come to it afresh.

Verses 12-17 set up a contrast between the king's situation and that of the lovers. The king is "on his couch" while the beloved "lies between [the woman's] breasts", and together the lovers are in a woodland setting imagined as a green couch, cedar beams and pine rafters.

The Hebrew word translated "couch" in verse 12 is an example of poetic ambiguity—it could refer to a 'round thing', 'something that surrounds', or just something that's 'around'. (The word used for the lovers' "couch" in verse 16 is a different word that straightforwardly means 'couch'.) The best guess of many translators is that the word in verse 12 *might* refer to a round table, cushion or divan, hence the ESV translation "on his couch". Some translators prefer "at his table". The ambiguity of the word choice is likely deliberate and could be taken to mean something like "while the king was where kings usually are (i.e. at his table or couch)" or more dismissively, "while the king was ... around". Either way, a comparison of 1:12 to 1:13 and 1:15-16 is an early hint that the beloved is differentiated from the king. While the king is in his usual environment, the lovers are together in a "house" (or 'palace'—the Hebrew word in verse 17 can mean both) of their own imagination.

Verse 6 introduces the mother's sons (i.e. the woman's brothers), who will appear again in 8:8-9. The woman's mother is mentioned five times in the Song (1:6, 3:4, 6:9, 8:1, 8:2), but there is no mention of a father. His whereabouts are not stated but it might be assumed he has died, since her brothers take the role of her male guardians.

The metaphor of the woman's "vineyard" is a significant one in the Song. In the Old Testament, a vineyard is sometimes a metaphor for God's people, Israel (Isaiah 5:1-7 is a good example of this). Fruitful vineyards are associated with abundance and blessing, and a dried-up vineyard is a picture of scarcity and judgement. In the Song, a vineyard is a lush place where the love of the couple "blossoms" (1:14, 2:15, 7:12) and is used explicitly as a metaphor for the woman's

body (1:6, 8:12) and for the women in Solomon's harem (8:11). When the woman declares in 1:6 that she hasn't kept her own vineyard, it conveys that her physical boundaries have been compromised in some way—alluding to her physical vulnerability as a woman, and possibly indicating that she has engaged in sexual activity.

The impression of the woman's vulnerability is reinforced by the hints about her interactions with other men. She expresses discomfort at going to look for her beloved among the other shepherds. Some scholars take the reference to 'veiling' in verse 7 as referring to a garb typical of prostitutes, which would mean the woman is expressing that going in search of her lover makes her look like a promiscuous woman. Another view is simply that she goes to meet him in secrecy. In verse 8, her beloved implies that when she passes a group of men she reduces them to lusty stallions perturbed by the presence of a mare in heat.

Throughout the Song, the relationship between the couple is painted in contrast to the way they relate with others. The woman's brothers are angry with her and set her to work in the sun (1:6), while her beloved is like a tree providing shade (2:3). Her interactions with the daughters of Jerusalem, her brothers and other men all have shades of negativity, while her beloved is "better than wine", "a sachet of myrrh", "a cluster of henna blossoms", "truly delightful" (1:2, 12, 14, 16). He calls her the "most beautiful among women" (1:8) and sees her as "a lily among brambles" next to other women (2:2). Likewise, she sees him as an "apple tree among the trees of the forest", that is, other young men (2:3).

The woman's warning to the daughters of Jerusalem is abrupt (2:7). The word "adjure" in Hebrew literally means "I make you swear"; it's used for putting somebody on oath and can be used in legally binding contexts. The phrase "gazelles and does of the field" rhymes with the Hebrew for *the hosts and God Almighty*. It's widely accepted that this phrase is a device called a 'circumlocution'—saying something that sounds like God's name to avoid saying God's name. English phrases like "Gosh darn!" or "Jiminy Crickets!" work the same way. In effect, the woman asks the daughters to swear in the name of God. This is not just advice; it's a serious warning!

The love she shares with her beloved seems good, so it's not yet clear why she warns others against stirring up love. Based on the Song so far, it's possible that the allusions to the woman's negative interactions with other men are a clue. This is one of the things that will become clearer as the poem goes on.

## To finish

The opening section of the Song is difficult to read, as it's not yet clear who's who, and readers are still disoriented. This is a deliberate effect of the poetry! This closing question allows people to notice and name where they are still feeling confused. This first study is designed to stimulate open-ended conversations and foster questions which won't necessarily be answered yet.

LEADER NOTES

# 2. Two kinds of lover

## SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-17 AND 3:6-11

▶ **Remember: 60/40/20**

## Getting started

If the average person were asked, "Is love good or bad?" they would probably answer "good". The opening question is designed to break down that assumption. In the Bible there are numerous examples of romantic 'love' leading to bad consequences. Most relevant to the Song is the example of Solomon in 1 Kings 11:1-13. Other examples include Shechem and Dinah (Genesis 34), Amnon and Tamar (2 Samuel 13), Samson and Delilah (Judges 16), and the temptation of the forbidden woman in Proverbs 1-9 (e.g. 7:18-21). According to the Bible, whether love is good or bad depends on how and what a person loves. This is self-evident when we think about our own lives: many of us have experienced or witnessed misguided crushes, unhelpful obsessions, poorly matched relationships or even, sadly, abusive 'love'. This study will compare two contrasting depictions of 'love'.

## Studying the passage

Song 2:8-17 and 3:6-11 contain two parallel scenes describing the approach of two figures. In the first, the woman's beloved approaches from the mountains and speaks to her, inviting her to come away with him. In the second, King Solomon approaches from the wilderness, and his carriage and entourage are described in detail. The close proximity of two scenes describing the approach of a man from far away invites their comparison. Reading these scenes side-by-side reveals some key differences in the characterization of the figure called "my beloved" in 2:8-17 and the figure called "Solomon" in 3:6-11. The group are invited to come up with a few

words to describe each lover. Their choices will likely be different to the key words below, but the background information below offers some guidance for the leader.

*Difference 1: Intimacy vs remoteness.* The beloved runs towards his lover on foot, under his own steam, and she hears him coming (2:8) and describes his physicality (2:9). Verses 10-15 are taken up with his voice. He peeps through the lattice at his lover and speaks to her, inviting her to come away with him and asking her to reveal her face and voice to him, "for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (2:14). By contrast, Solomon is never seen, nor does he speak to the woman. He is distanced from her by a crowd of sixty armed attendants, and only his carriage is described. It would have been usual for royal conveyances such as these to have curtains screening the monarch from public view. It is his office as the king, rather than his actual person, that is on view in these verses.

*Difference 2: Mutuality vs coercion.* The beloved invites his lover to come with him; he never coerces or commands. She is safe inside her home and apparently has the freedom to choose to go with him (or not), as he begs her to choose the former. Evidently she does, as in 2:16 he "grazes among the lilies" (a euphemism for enjoying her body). Meanwhile, Solomon arrives for his "wedding" with an armed entourage more appropriate for conquest than courting. Multiple scholars have noted the inappropriateness of this armed guard for the occasion of a wedding.

*Difference 3: Polygamy vs exclusivity.* Song 2:16a is a classic summary of the couple's exclusive pairing that re-appears (inverted) in 6:3a. It builds on the impression of exclusive desire gleaned from 2:2-3 (study 1). By contrast, Solomon is known to be a prolific polygamist (1 Kgs 11:1-3). His depiction in Song 3:6-11 ties in to this characterization. As noted in the study, the word translated "litter" in 3:7 is the ordinary Hebrew word for 'bed'—it literally says "behold, it is the bed of Solomon!" This vehicle is "inlaid with *the love of* the daughters of Jerusalem", a not-so-subtle reference to the many women who have occupied Solomon's bed. If this is his wedding day, the reader is reminded that it's certainly not his *only* wedding day.

The picture of Solomon in 3:6-11 is also created with reference to other biblical texts that paint him in a negative light. First, the list of building materials in verses 9-10 dovetails with the description of the palace Solomon built himself (and the "House of the Forest of Lebanon", built to house his treasures) in 1 Kings 5-7. These building activities were self-indulgent projects that saw Solomon's house take six years longer and end up much larger than the house he built for Yahweh (1 Kgs 6:37-38, compare 7:1; 6:2, compare 7:2-8).

Second, the description of the carriage in Song 3:10 is reminiscent of the pavilion of a foreign king, specifically that of King Ahasuerus in Esther 1:6. This isn't flattering; when the Israelites demand a king "like all the nations", they implicitly reject God as their king (1 Sam 8:5-7). And when God does appoint a king, this king is supposed to be distinctive in the way he submits to God. Solomon broke all the commands in Deuteronomy 17:14-17, which were supposed to guard Israel's kings from falling into the likeness of foreign kings.

Third, Solomon "made *himself* a carriage" (3:9), resonating with wording from Ecclesiastes 2:4-8. The Solomon-like king in this passage recounts how he built, planted and made things *for himself* (the phrase "for myself" appears six times) before dismissing the value of this Solomon-like self-indulgence.

Finally, the mention of Solomon's mother in 3:11 should strike an uneasy note. Solomon's mother was Bathsheba, who was a victim of non-consensual sex with King David (it wasn't possible for a subject to withhold consent from a king) while she was married to another man (2 Sam 11:1-12:25). Naming her here makes the reader alert for a possible 'like father, like son' pattern.

All these digs at King Solomon are contrasted with the personal devotion of the lovers and the simplicity of their shared bed (1:16-17).

The contrast between the beloved and Solomon in these passages is striking. Even more striking is the contrast between the decadence of Solomon and the humility of Jesus, who came to his kingdom riding on a donkey. Solomon's greatness as a king is not actually diminished by his failings; he's a complex man who did good things and bad. But drawing out his flaws here helps us to begin to lift our eyes to the longed-for King who eventually came centuries after Solomon: King Jesus.

## To finish

Readers might like to reflect again on the opening question: Is love ever a *bad* thing? Depending on the needs of the group, they might be prompted to reflect on their own misuse of love, or times when they have been misused. This discussion will require gentleness and tact on the part of the leader. As we reflect on misuse of power in relationships, we turn our eyes to King Jesus, the leader who approached his people face-to-face on a lowly donkey. He was not self-glorifying, selfish or coercive, but humble, relational and invitational. Pray in thankfulness for the safety of his love.

LEADER NOTES

# 3. Seeking and (not) finding

## SONG OF SOLOMON 3:1-5 AND 5:2-8

▶ Remember: 60/40/20

## Getting started

The opening question is designed to help people engage their feelings with the predicament of the lovers and relate to the sense of tension, longing and loss. The passages in this study are the darkest in the Song, but the darkness is typically glossed over by commentators and preachers. One of the main goals of this study is to help the readers feel the emotional depths of this part of the Song. If group members are comfortable to do so, they could share an experience from their own life or one they've witnessed. If sharing real-life examples is difficult, you could start by asking for examples from popular culture (and maybe have one or two examples prepared). If appropriate, you could help the group by being the first to be vulnerable in sharing a personal story.

## Studying the passage

One of the poetic techniques employed by the Song is its cyclical nature; it doesn't seem strictly chronological, but cycles through some repeated themes and scenes. That's why this series of studies doesn't take the Song from beginning to end, but instead studies some thematically similar scenes side-by-side. In the last study, we compared a depiction of the beloved with a depiction of Solomon; in this study, we will look at two scenes in which the woman searches for her beloved.

Chapter 3 introduces a new setting: the city. Up until now the lover's interac-

tions have taken place in nature settings abundant with imagery of fruit and flowers, but now the woman seeks her lover "in the streets and in the squares" (3:2). The city at night is a hostile place for a lone young woman. However, in the first scene (3:1-5) the tension dissipates quickly as the woman soon finds her beloved and brings him to a place of safety, her family home.

The heading added above 4:1 in the ESV is "Solomon admires his bride's beauty", but this is misleading. Firstly, the speaker here is the woman's beloved, and we've established this is unlikely to be Solomon. Secondly, the Hebrew word translated "my bride" in 4:8 actually just says "bride". It's the *only* term of endearment in the Song that doesn't have 'my' attached, which suggests a deliberate omission. It implies that while the woman is dressed as a bride, she's probably not the bride of the man who is speaking to her—that is, she's *not* the beloved's bride (since he calls her "bride", not "my bride"). One interpretation is that Solomon is taking the woman to marry into his harem, but the beloved is her true love.

We will explore chapter 4 more deeply in the next study. For now, the focus is on the tone of 4:8 and how it contrasts with the verses immediately preceding as well as the lovers' interaction in 2:1-17 (study 2). The reference to "dens of lions" and "mountains of leopards" speaks unambiguously of danger. It's uncertain what this refers to specifically, so allow the group to offer their own interpretations based on the text. So far in the Song, parties with a threatening presence have included the woman's brothers (1:6), other young men (1:7, 9) and Solomon (3:7-8). In 5:7 the watchmen will also perpetrate violence against the woman.

The woman's tone in 5:3 is flirtatious. The way she says "how" is an embellished form of a Hebrew word (seen only here) conveying emphasis and a little silliness—"I've taken off my clothes; *ho-ow* could I *possibly* put them on again?" She's playing a friendly game with him. It might seem that the beloved slips through the woman's fingers because she delays opening the door, but this is not to imply that it's her fault for being a tease. The problem is that she didn't understand his urgency. The woman is having fun, believing that it's safe to be silly with her beloved. When she rises and he's gone, the tone abruptly shifts from playful and flirtatious to the shock of loss and brutality.

As the group compares 3:1-5 and 5:2-8, they should notice the intensification from the first scene to the second. The writer ramps up the tension as the second scene unfolds in an unexpectedly brutal way compared to the first. Upon reading 5:2-8, readers might be lured into a sense of safety, assuming it will finish in a similar way to the previous scene with the lovers in each other's arms. This sharpens

the feeling of dismay and unease when it doesn't work out that way.

The theme of 'seeking and (not) finding' is woven through the Old Testament. The people of Israel are warned that one day God will answer their rebellion with silence; they'll look for him and won't be able to find him (Prov 1:28; Hos 5:6; Amos 8:12). But they're also promised that eventually, after a time of punishment, God will gather them back to himself. They will seek him *and* find him (Deut 4:29; Jer 29:10-14).

The idea that God would ignore those who seek him might be new to some in the group and might challenge their expectations of God's responsiveness to people who want to know him. The fact that there were times in history when God refused to heed the cries of his people deepens our appreciation for the predicament of the Israelites and for the depth of their sin that caused God to turn his face away for a time.

God would eventually come to Israel in Jesus Christ, and he would speak these well-known words: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find" (Matt 7:7; Luke 11:9). As Jesus taught his hearers to pray, he deliberately used the words of 'seeking and finding' from the Jewish Scriptures, confirming that he was the fulfilment of God's promise to bring his people back to himself. The time had come when those who sought him would find him and be restored to him forever.

However, when Israel was in exile God promised them:

> "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jer 29:13-14)

Christians today hear the foreshadowing not only of Israel's immediate hope of restoration to their land, but of our own great metaphysical hope of being gathered to God in eternity. The difficult history of the Israelites helps us to appreciate our fortune in knowing God through Jesus Christ.

The story of the lovers is unresolved at this point in the Song. Allow the group to sit in the tension and experience the 'valleys' of these passages. Remember, poetry works deliberately on the readers' feelings. It's important to *feel* what these passages evoke.

## To finish

The final question allows participants to reflect on the experience of loneliness and relational brokenness in their own lives. Encourage honesty in answer to this question—some people might need the space to admit that these experiences threaten their faith or make them feel alienated from God, rather than inclined to draw closer. Ultimately, God will heal our hearts of the brokenness we feel as we discuss the pain of romantic separation and as we consider what it is to be lost from God. Let this truth be reflected in the time of prayer.

LEADER NOTES

# 4. Together in the garden

## SONG OF SOLOMON 4:1-5:1 AND 5:9-6:3

▶ Remember: 60/40/20

## Getting started

The opening question is designed to help people acknowledge the potential awkwardness of discussing sex in a mixed group and start talking openly together. The study will also work to break down the misconception that being single excludes people from participating in a conversation about love and sex. The Song of Solomon is offered in the Bible for everybody to enjoy, regardless of marital status. This study will point people to consider how romantic love operates in the context of a community.

## Studying the passage

These passages are some of the most sensual in the Song. They strike a noticeably different emotional tone than the passages from the previous study. Although 4:1-5:1 and 5:9-6:3 sit either side of darker scenes (and the group might feel this tension), in these passages the lovers enjoy freedom in each other's presence. Other voices celebrate and encourage them in 5:1.

The lovers' relationship is unambiguously consummated in this part of the Song. While graphic details are not described, the woman's invitation to the man to "come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits" is unmistakeable. In 5:1 he confirms that he has accepted her invitation. Some readers might be distracted by the question of whether the lovers are married; help them resist this distrac-

tion. While they do not appear to be formally wed, the relationship in the Song is analogous to a marriage due to its consummation, its exclusivity, and the lovers' undying commitment (the latter will be discussed in study 6).

The exchange in 4:16-5:1 contributes to the picture of mutuality in the lovers' relationship. 'Affirmative consent' is a loaded term in the cultural climate of the 21st century, but that is what's modelled in these verses. The invitation to sexual activity is extended by the woman and enthusiastically accepted by the man. This contrasts with the type of 'love' embodied by Solomon (as discussed in study 2), in which there is no two-way communication between the king and his conquests.

Familiar biblical imagery is employed to convey the heightened passion of the lovers. In 4:9-5:1 the man describes his woman with references to wine, oil, fruits, spices, flowing water, milk and honey—all elements associated with blessing and luxury. Throughout the Bible, these images appear in positive descriptions of the promised land and of God's promises fulfilled. It's as though the woman not only delights her lover's senses but is a metaphorical source of healing and life. She also uses flora-and-fauna imagery to describe him in 5:10-13, then expands the images to include precious metals, jewels and timber in 5:14-16. Her beloved is as precious to her as these material luxuries. Compare and contrast this to the image of the solitary king and the carriage he made for *himself* of precious elements in 3:9-10!

While today's study presents a highly positive picture of romantic love, this won't sit comfortably with all group members.

Firstly, it's right to challenge the idolatry of romance. Many cultures hold up romantic coupling as the source of highest happiness, making single people feel inadequate and excluded. This is *not* biblical and should be critiqued.

Secondly, people may legitimately feel disillusioned about romance for many reasons: bad dating experiences, loneliness, dissatisfying marriages, witnessing friends' divorces, or going through divorce themselves. Maybe they've simply realized that the idealization of romance in popular culture is a lie. This can all be validated and acknowledged.

Thirdly, single people are often excluded from conversations about sex and romance and may not know how to comfortably engage. It should be acknowledged that coupled people are often guilty of snubbing others (knowingly or unintentionally), especially their single friends.

Fourthly, churches and Christian subcultures can sometimes be guilty of perpetuating deeply unhelpful and non-biblical narratives around sex and love.

These might include the idolization of marriage and the nuclear family, expectations around gender roles that are drawn from culture rather than biblical models, the taboo of discussing sexuality among single people, the demonization of sexual sin over other sins, and the unspoken assumption that all Christian people are attracted to people of the opposite sex. Group members will probably be able to think of more such narratives! Sadly, some people in your group might have grown bitter and disillusioned about love due to the teaching they have heard.

The Song offers a counter-perspective to all the above, speaking happily and honestly about deep human connection. While these passages focus on romance, community and family are also included in the conversation and highlighted throughout the Song.

A biblical understanding puts romance in its place: it's not the highest source of human satisfaction, but within that understanding the Song freely celebrates sexual relationships. The whole community is included in this celebration—the onlooking daughters of Jerusalem are curious, involved and encouraging. The presence of this content in the Bible invites all Christians to engage with these topics and talk openly with one another, sharing their experiences, joys and disappointments in community.

## To finish

While these passages do not speak explicitly about God, they prompt consideration of how we live in relationship with others under God. This part of the Song offers a jumping-off point for frank conversations about sex and romance. When we treat these topics as taboo, issues like relationship difficulties and sexual sin can fester in secret. Christians can help one another grow in godliness by fostering appropriate intimate friendships in which open conversations regularly take place, and secret struggles are brought from darkness into light.

LEADER NOTES

# 5. The gravity of love

## SONG OF SOLOMON 6:4-8:4

▶ Remember: 60/40/20

## Getting started

The opening question is designed to help people tap into the intensity of emotion in this part of the Song. It will be revealed that the lovers are, by this point, deeply committed to one another. Although it seems their relationship is not socially approved and their marriage has not been formalized, for the woman to now be given into marriage with another person would be a travesty. The gravity of the lovers' relationship needs to be understood now, because that travesty will become a concrete possibility in study 6.

## Studying the passage

Chapters 6 and 7 contain some of the most obtuse lines in the Song, subject to much unresolved scholarly debate. Encourage the group to let the poetry wash over them and focus on the parts they do understand, rather than getting bogged down in debates about the parts they don't.

We pick up in 6:4 where the last study left off, with the lovers together in the garden. The man praises the woman's beauty, repeating some phrases that are familiar from 4:1-5 and adding some new lines. Some of the new language is extreme—she is "awesome as an army with banners" (6:4, 10), and he begs her to turn her eyes away from him because they "overwhelm" him (6:5). She "looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun" (6:10); the magnitude and power of the imagery conveys that he's completely dazzled by the woman. The intensity of her effect on him is heightened by comparison to the

previous iteration of this poem in 4:1-5.

In 6:8-9 he compares her to other women: she stands out among queens, concubines and virgins. It echoes the way she sees him as "distinguished among ten thousand" (5:10). In a crowd of other men and women, they only have eyes for each other. The mention of "queens and concubines" prompts an unfavourable comparison with Solomon, who "loved" many women (1 Kgs 11:1) and whose number of princesses and concubines far exceeds the number mentioned here. The couple in the Song shows that true love is characterized by exclusivity, something which did not exist in Solomon's relationships with women.

Listing the body parts named in 4:1-5, 6:5-7 and 7:1-5 should make it obvious that the couple's relationship is progressing. While in the earlier passages his gaze never travelled beyond her breasts, now he begins at her feet and describes his way to the crown of her head. From this, and from the woman's top-to-toe description of the man in 5:10-16, it's apparent that they are familiar with every inch of each other's bodies. The expansion of the man's gaze is another way this passage intensifies the interactions from previous passages.

The word *desire* in 7:10 is significant. It appears in only two other places in the Bible (Gen 3:16 and 4:7); since it's not a common word, its use here is likely a deliberate allusion to Genesis. In Genesis 3:16, God curses Eve by saying, "your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you". In Song 7:10, the woman declares that "I am my beloved's, and *his* desire is for *me*", undoing the order of the words in Genesis. This conveys that the relationship in the Song embodies a reversal of the curse, a return to the way male-female relationships were designed to be. This is a strong affirmation of the rightness of their union.

The first part of chapter 8 strikes a negative tone compared to the verses preceding it. Indeed, 8:1 is very odd to modern ears. In Ancient Near Eastern poetry, it was not uncommon for lovers to refer to each other as 'brother' and 'sister'; familial intimacy was considered an appropriate analogy for romantic intimacy. When the woman longs that her beloved were "like a brother" who "nursed at my mother's breasts", she's using an extremely intimate image to express the degree of closeness she longs to share with her beloved. As it stands, something prevents her from expressing her affection to him in public. It's a clue that societal forces are against the couple, though it isn't revealed exactly what's going on.

The force of 8:4 is often lost in English translations. Where this adjuration occurred in 2:7 and 3:5, the woman said, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, *that you not* stir up or awaken love until it

pleases". In 8:4 the expression is phrased slightly differently, using a Hebrew word (called an 'interrogative particle') that forms a question. The effect is "*how could you* stir up or awaken love?" The woman also skips the usual preamble—"by the gazelles or the does of the field"—and cuts straight to the point. Overall, it's a terser and more strongly worded rebuke than the other two similar refrains. The urgency of her warning reflects the gravity of the couple's situation. The tension in the Song is winding up towards a climax.

## To finish

As the intensity builds in this part of the Song, readers are being primed for the final teaching about love to be revealed in study 6. They are called to start considering what's at stake in matters of love. In any relationship status or circumstances, Christians should not take love lightly. As God has sacrificed for the sake of relationship with us, so we should be prepared to sacrifice our desires in order to honour him, so that we may engage in love (or keep each other accountable) in ways that are delightful to him.

LEADER NOTES

# 6. Set me as a seal upon your heart

## SONG OF SOLOMON 8:5-14

▶ Remember: 60/40/20

## Getting started

The opening question is designed to prompt deep reflection on the nature of God's love for us. The group might offer a variety of answers. Are they confident that Jesus' sacrifice assures God's love for them? Are they worried they could sin badly enough or treat God with little enough regard that he would abandon them? By the end of this study, they should be pointed to the truth: God's love makes him rightly jealous for our wholehearted devotion, and we deserve his wrath for breaking faith. But while the Israelites were uncertain about their future with God, we know that Jesus has suffered God's wrath on our behalf and united us to himself by his Spirit so that we can persevere in faithful, loving relationship with God.

## Studying the passage

In 8:6-7, the woman is addressing her beloved. A seal was a common item in the Ancient Near East—an individualized stamp that could be worn as a ring or on a pendant around the neck. A seal was an extremely personal object. It could be used as a 'signature' on letters or other important documents, or shown as proof of identity. When the woman tells her beloved to set her as a seal upon himself, she's metaphorically asking to stamp him with her own mark, to be worn on his body and treated as a highly guarded personal item. She's asking for both public and private devotion. In modern society couples wear wedding rings to publicly

display their mutual belonging, or even get tattoos to honour the permanence of their love.

The three lines that follow are some of the most intense and emotive lines in the entire Bible. The claim that *love is strong as death* and *jealousy is fierce as the grave (Sheol)* showcases the pure strength of love. This is probably not a literal reference to death itself; in Hebrew the word 'death' can be used as a superlative (this happens in English too, in expressions like 'dead serious' or 'bored to death'). Here it expresses that love is 'extremely strong' and jealousy is 'extremely fierce'.

Up until this point in the Song, all references to 'love' have been assumed to refer to the romance between the two main characters. Now, the description of love is peppered with words that remind the reader of God.

The first key word is *jealousy*. "Love" and "jealousy" are placed in poetic parallel with one another, suggesting an analogy between the two terms (a common technique in Hebrew poetry). Love and jealousy are presented as two sides of the same coin. In the Bible, jealousy is usually framed as an undesirable quality for humans. There are only two exceptions: first, marital jealousy is seen as an appropriate response to infidelity; second, God's jealousy is an appropriate response to his people's lack of faith. (It's also appropriate for people to be jealous on God's behalf when others turn away.)

It's important to recognize that righteous 'jealousy' is not a petty emotion, nor an excuse to punish another person because you think you've been wronged. The 'jealousy' alluded to in the Song is not that of a husband sulking because his wife stayed out late with her friends or inflicting violence on her because another man smiled at her. Righteous jealousy is the justified assertion of wrongdoing where the commitments of a covenant relationship have been violated due to a third party. The cheated-on wife has a right to ask for fidelity; the cheated-on God has a right to expect devotion or pour out his wrath.

The second key image is *fire*. The Hebrew word that is translated "the very flame of the LORD" in 8:6 could literally mean 'flame of God', or it could mean something like 'a God-awful flame'—a flame so intense that it invokes comparison with the white-hot power of God. Either way, the phrasing puts God in mind as we read it.

From there, 8:7 goes on to elaborate that this "flame" of love cannot be quenched by many waters or floods. In the Old Testament, 'many waters' is a common metaphor for hostile powers that threaten God's people. The Song simultaneously depicts 'love/jealousy' as something dangerous that can consume the

unfaithful, and something powerful that can protect those who are loved. All of this confirms that Song 8:6-7 doesn't just refer to the romantic human love we've seen so far, but that it deliberately invokes God's love. When God's love is properly understood it can be fear-inducing, because a component of covenantal love is righteous jealousy. God will punish those who are unfaithful to the covenant. As Christians, we know that we aren't righteous enough to live out our commitment to God perfectly, but Jesus has provided a bridge to God so that we can be eternally assured of his love.

Song 8:7 finishes the description of love by asserting that anyone who tried to buy love would be despised. This reinforces the immeasurable value of love, which can't be bought for any price. It also emphasizes the folly of anybody who misunderstands this. Since the Song is "Solomon's", he is the person that comes to mind when we think of great wealth. All the wealth of Solomon's house would be the largest amount of material wealth imaginable in the Israelite consciousness, yet even that amount of money can't match the priceless quality of love.

Verses 8-9 shift tone abruptly, crashing back down from the heady heights of divine love and jealousy to the everyday reality of the woman's situation. These lines are spoken by her brothers, who are discussing her sexual purity and their plans for her. "A wall" is something that keeps people out, and "a door" is something that swings open to let people in—obvious metaphors for abstinence and promiscuity. Her brothers plan to ornament her with silver if she's the former, and literally to 'besiege' her if she is the latter. Their objectification of her should not be mistaken for loving protection.

The woman retorts in 8:10 that, contrary to their perception, her breasts have already grown (she is already sexually mature) and that she has been "a wall" (sexually pure). Since she has had sexual relations with her beloved, purity in this case does not equal virginity. Instead, it means entering into the type of mutual, devoted, lifelong, committed relationship depicted in the Song. This is contrary to her brother's plans for her, which might plausibly be to sell her into an arrangement that will benefit their own interests.

The theme of monetary arrangements that suit men is continued in verses 11-12. The location of Solomon's vineyard, *Baal-hamon*, is likely fictional, since it translates as 'husband of a multitude'. In these lines the woman critiques Solomon's impersonal approach to love. His "vineyard" (harem) is run by paid keepers. In verse 12, the woman asserts that her vineyard is her own to give and tells Solomon to keep his money. This exchange harks back to 8:7, which derided any man who

would attempt to offer wealth for love. Solomon is revealed to be the kind of fool described in that verse.

So far, then, we have read two little scenes in response to the fiery description of love in 8:6-7: the brothers planning to parcel up their sister, and Solomon's "vineyard" enterprise and the woman's rejection of it. In both couplets the men are clueless about the true nature and value of love.

The Song is rounded out with a third and final exchange. The woman's beloved asks to hear her voice—in pointed contrast to the attitudes of the brothers and Solomon. Her final word to him is enigmatic. The word translated "make haste" in the ESV is even stronger in Hebrew: she tells him to 'flee'! It's not clear why, but the Song ends with her telling him to run away. For the original readers of this poem, likely Jews in exile or recently returned, the cliffhanger ending of the Song of Solomon might have reflected the emotional landscape of their relationship with God. Would their love be thwarted by enemy nations determined to assimilate with Israel? Would God return to them, or had he abandoned them forever?

The resounding message of the Song is "[do] not stir up or awaken love until it pleases". The closing question of the study is designed to prompt reflection on the application of this message for the original Israelite hearers of the Song before applying it to ourselves. The Song teaches its audience to pursue mutually desired, intimate, committed relationships that honour both the man and woman and do not treat the woman as an object. They should avoid Solomon's example of accumulating women to display wealth and power. They should also resist the temptation to follow Solomon's lead in marrying non-Israelite people who will influence them to worship other gods.

The Israelites need this teaching because they historically imitated Solomon's sin. They perpetually integrated themselves with foreign nations by marrying foreign women and worshipping their gods, diluting their devotion to the one true God. Setting themselves apart from non-Jewish people was a requirement for them to properly express their faith.

Christians no longer need to resist social integration in the same way, but the desires of our heart still threaten to distract us from wholeheartedly following God. Sexual and romantic attraction have powerful sway over our actions; sometimes we can joyfully give ourselves over to these feelings, and sometimes we are called to resist. The Song warns that what we do with our hearts and bodies impacts our relationship with God, so we should guard ourselves carefully so as not to invoke his jealousy. We should seek to enjoy our God as we flourish in

Christ-honouring friendships and committed sexual relationships that draw our hearts closer to God, not away from him.

##  To finish

Song 8:6-7 emphasises the need for devotion because of the fear-inducing aspect of God's love. Our God is a jealous God (Exod 20:5, 34:14). When his people turn away and worship other things, he rightly pours out the fire of judgement (e.g. Isa 66:24; Jer 4:4). Isaiah 43:2 shows the tender side of this love. (The points of resonance between Isaiah 43:2 and Song 8:6-7 are striking: in Hebrew, the words 'waters', 'floods/rivers', 'drown/overwhelm', 'fire' and 'flame' are the same in both verses.) Those who are devoted to God will find that his love shields them from judgement. He goes to great lengths to redeem his rebellious people and bring them into glory with him. We see this clearly displayed on the cross of Christ, where God's own beloved Son took the pain of his wrath and offered us protection from the judgement we should bear.

matthiasmedia

Matthias Media is an evangelical publishing ministry that seeks to persuade all Christians of the truth of God's purposes in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible, and equip them with high-quality resources, so that by the work of the Holy Spirit they will:

- abandon their lives to the honour and service of Christ in daily holiness and decision-making
- pray constantly in Christ's name for the fruitfulness and growth of his gospel
- speak the Bible's life-changing word whenever and however they can—in the home, in the world and in the fellowship of his people.

Our wide range of resources includes Bible studies, books, training courses, tracts and children's material. To find out more, and to access samples and free downloads, visit our website:

**www.matthiasmedia.com**

## How to buy our resources

1. Direct from us over the internet:
   - in the US: www.matthiasmedia.com
   - in Australia: www.matthiasmedia.com.au
2. Direct from us by phone: please visit our website for current phone contact information.
3. Through a range of outlets in various parts of the world. Visit **www.matthiasmedia.com/contact** for details about recommended retailers in your part of the world.
4. Trade enquiries can be addressed to:
   - in the US and Canada: sales@matthiasmedia.com
   - in Australia and the rest of the world: sales@matthiasmedia.com.au

Register at our website for our **free** regular email update to receive information about the latest new resources, **exclusive special offers**, and free articles to help you grow in your Christian life and ministry.

# Pathway Bible Guides from Matthias Media

Our Pathway Bible Guides are a valuable resource to help you keep feeding from God's word. As of November 2022, the series contains the following titles:

**Beginning with God [Genesis 1-12]**
Author: Gordon Cheng,
8 studies

**Getting to Know God [Exodus 1-20]**
Author: Bryson Smith,
8 studies

**One Life Under God [Deuteronomy]**
Author: Paul Barker,
8 studies

**There Was No King in Israel [Judges]**
Author: Des Smith,
8 studies

**The Art of Living [Proverbs]**
Author: Bryson Smith,
8 studies

**Under the Sun [Ecclesiastes]**
Author: Des Smith,
7 studies

**A Seal Upon Your Heart [Song of Solomon]**
Author: Kamina Wüst,
6 studies

**Seeing Things God's Way [Daniel]**
Author: Bryson Smith,
8 studies

**Return to the Lord [Hosea]**
Author: James Stone,
9 studies

**Fear and Freedom [Matthew 8-12]**
Author: Peter Collier,
8 studies

**The Unexpected Kingdom [Matthew 13-17]**
Author: Peter Collier,
8 studies

**Following Jesus [Luke 9-12]**
Author: Gordon Cheng,
7 studies

**Peace with God [Romans]**
Author: Gordon Cheng,
9 studies

**Church Matters [1 Corinthians 1-7]**
Author: Bryson Smith,
8 studies

**He Is Our Peace [Ephesians]**
Author: David Jackman,
10 studies

**Fullness in Christ [Colossians]**
Author: James Stone,
8 studies

**Standing Firm [1 Thessalonians]**
Author: Simon Roberts,
8 studies

**Living Stones [1 Peter]**
Author: Matthew Jensen,
8 studies

**That You May Know [1 John]**
Author: Matthew Jensen,
8 studies

**Jesus Through Old Testament Eyes**
Author: Matthew Jensen,
8 studies

**For Our Sins [The Cross]**
Author: Matthew Jensen,
8 studies

**Alive with Christ [The Resurrection]**
Author: Matthew Jensen,
8 studies

## For more information or to order contact:

**Matthias Media**
Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com.au
www.matthiasmedia.com.au

**Matthias Media (USA)**
Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com
www.matthiasmedia.com