

redeeming love

Song of Songs

Week 1 - Love & Intimacy (Pg 4)

What the Song of Songs is all about.

Week 2 - Love & Desire (Pg 6)

This isn't your average book. In this study we'll look at how love & desire fit together.

Week 3 - Love & Sexuality (Pg 8)

It's a complex issue.

But Song of Songs has something to say.

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Is there any point in waiting? Is there any point in holding off in what you want? Song of Songs thinks so.

Song of Songs





Song of Songs is a unique book. And for many it's an incredibly unusual book to be found in the Bible. Partly because it seems to say so much about sex & sexuality, but also because it seems to be so explicit & overt about it. Isn't the Bible supposed to be discreet when it comes to sex? It seems the Old Testament writers didn't seem to think so.

In this series we're going to be looking at the beauty, the frustration and the framework of love from the Creator's manual. Contrary to popular view, and as seen in the Song of Songs, the Bible celebrates love, desire and sexuality. But as with all things created, the Creator provides a framework in which his creation will best enjoy it.

This is a challenging book. And depending on where you're coming from, you're going to find this book either hilarious, awkward, painful, embarrassing, challenging, a wake-up call...or a combination of any and all of those. Because of this, we need to approach it with sensitivity to others, but also with the knowledge that while we might not feel everything in Song of Songs is directly applicable to us, we're part of a community where it's helpful to understand others' situations so as to care for them.

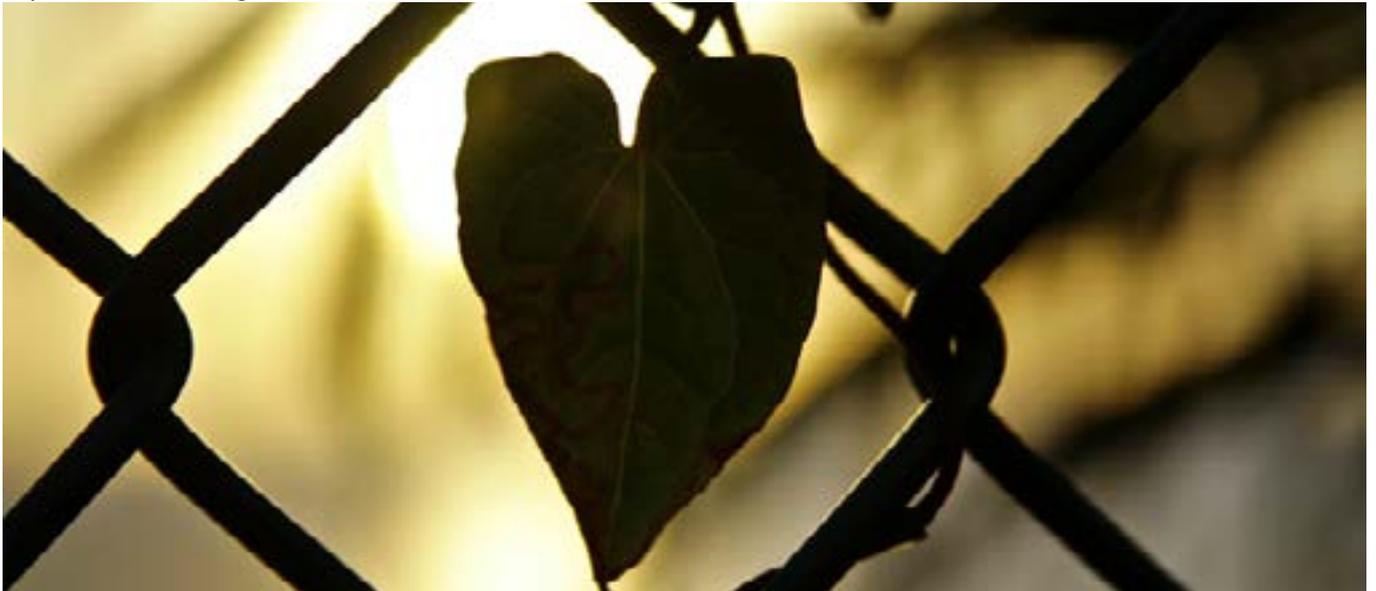
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LOVE AND INTIMACY

There's lots of speculation about who wrote Song of Songs, when they wrote it, and whether it's meant to be taken literally. Much of the early church thought it was literal. As time went on though, many Church fathers thought that it was a little ripe to be literal (that's not the kind of things the Bible talks about!) so it became allegorical. That is, it was a description of God's love for Israel or the Church. But during the Reformation period, there was a resurgence back towards reading it how it most plainly and naturally reads, a description of the love & sexual desire between a man and a woman. This is how we're going to approach the Song of Songs. But this doesn't mean it's got nothing to say about the God who is love. As we'll see, there are a number of references in Song of Songs that point in this direction.

Song of Songs is poetic, it's part of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament, so going through this book is not like going through Romans. And as the title suggests, it sees itself as the greatest song on the greatest topic - the Song of all songs. Therefore, what we'll do is pick up on some of the main themes in the book and try to focus on the sections that develop those. But as you read the whole book, you'll see that the themes we look at, and more, are interwoven throughout the whole book.

Before we look at the first section of Song of Songs, let's turn to the question of who wrote it. It's identified at the start as "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's". So accepting that the person who wrote it was Solomon (or someone wanting to be identified as Solomon so that we'd interpret it in light of that), let's consider what implications that might have.



Read 1 Kings 11:1-8.

What do we know about Solomon, his relationships with women and love?

The Song of Songs presents an alternative picture to love, sex & relationships. Discuss what Solomon, with his 700 wives & 300 concubines, could bring to a discussion in 21st Century Brisbane?

So when we come to Song of Songs, it's a piece of Wisdom literature, written by a man who made a lot of mistakes, but providing us with a framework for how things should ideally work. What we'll see throughout this series is both examples of what it should look like, but come face to face with the reality that we all know, that love can be both beautiful when it's all going well...but painful when it's not. Song of Songs wants to draw us to the former, without forgetting the latter. It wants to redeem the idea and expression of love.

So, let's get started in Song of Songs. This study we're going to be looking at the overarching theme in the book, that of love.

Read Song of Songs 1:1-2:7.

1. KNOWING IT

1 - From this section, what could you say about love according to the Song of Songs?

2 - What do these verses add to the picture: 4:10, 5:1, 6:3, 8:6-7?

3 - What's the contrast between how the woman sees herself, and how the man sees her? (1:5-6; 1:9-10; 2:1-2)

Romantic love can be consuming. It changes what we see as important, as well as how we see the one we're in love with. But Song of Songs also reminds us how an ongoing relationship should look for years to come, not just how it should look in the first 6 months.

3. DOING IT

Love & Intimacy aren't things that are confined to romantic relationships, they're just often most clearly seen there. What we want to consider as we think about relationships, love & intimacy, is how we have fidelity without exclusivity.

1 - What's realistic, and what's unrealistic, about this first picture from Song of Songs?

2 - What are the struggles you have with other people, as they express their relationships?

3 - Within Christian community, how do we encourage people towards fidelity in their relationships, while avoiding exclusivity?

4 - How can love & intimacy be found outside of romantic relationships? What's our responsibility to others?

Everyone longs for a connection with others, someone to value them, see them as special, understand their shortcomings, but accept them anyway. Romantic relationships are often seen (and can be) the pinnacle of this - but it's naive and destructive to think they can or will fulfil all of our needs.

One of the amazing spins the New Testament puts on marriage relationships is that it's actually just a pointer to something greater. A greater connection, a greater intimacy. It's in that passage you'll have heard read at weddings a lot - Ephesians 5:22-33.

4 - Cast your eyes over that section of Ephesians. What kind of connection is a marriage relationship pointing to? How does this help us reconsider what we have or what we lack now?

2. APPLYING IT

1 - How does Song of Songs portray how those in love speak to & about one another?

2 - How is this encouraged & supported by those looking on?

One of the pictures built in Song of Songs is a picture of intimacy. It's not merely sexual (there's actually no evidence in this book that they actually have sex) - it's about how they speak to one another, how they see one another, how they understand the others flaws, and how they embrace them anyway. On this front, loving intimacy is more than desire, it's more than sex, and it's more than gratification. It's about connection & acceptance.

3 - Would you say the idea of intimacy is evident in this first chapter? Is intimacy important to you?

4. SHARING IT

1 - What are some ways in which Christian communities should approach & speak about relationships differently when it comes to love & intimacy that's distinct?

2 - In a fallen world, what does the Gospel say about love, intimacy & connection for Christians?



LOVE AND DESIRE

Desire is both natural and healthy. But when there's no direction or boundaries to it (self-expression) it becomes self-indulgent & destructive.

The sections of Song of Songs that we're going to be looking at in these studies are dreams by the bride, longing for her lover-to-be. While in the fourth study we'll explore more the idea of timing & patience (i.e. the lover-to-be question), in this study we're going to be seeing the desire expressed in romantic relationships, and talking about how that's healthy, and where it's not.

How is desire portrayed in our culture?

What connection does desire have to commitment, sex & relationships?



■ We're going to have a look at two parts of Song of Songs. The beauty of the Song of Songs is that while it talks so positively about the great aspects of romantic love & sexuality, it doesn't gloss over the challenges. That's what we'll see as we look at these two "dreams" in this study.

Read Song of Songs 3:1-5 & 5:2-9.

1. KNOWING IT

1 - From the first poem (3:1-5), how is desire portrayed? (You can also look at places such as 1:9-11, 2:8-10, 2:16, 4:1-7, 4:16, 5:9, 6:3, 6:9 to build a bigger picture.)

2 - There's a similar dream or episode in 5:2-9. What's happening there? (Also see the allusion in 2:15.)

3 - What kind of picture is Song of Songs building when it comes to desire?

3. DOING IT

1 - Is there a difference between desire & lust?

2 - What's the connection between desire & contentment? (1 Cor 7, Phil 4:11-13?)

When talking about money, Jesus once said "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:34) That is, what you value will be seen in what you talk about, what you long for, what consumes those quiet moments of reflection you have. It could be a relationship, it could be sex, it could be money, it could be power. But whatever you think will bring you contentment, that's what will shape your life.

In Philippians, Paul the Apostle tells us what he longs for, what he desires. It's not that he didn't struggle with other longings, or have other struggles, it's that he had built a perspective on life and let it shape all others.

3 - From Philippians 4:18b-26 where is Paul's treasure, and how do you see his heart?

4 - How does this desire speak into our struggle now with idolising relationships, our struggle with sex (& addiction), and our search for contentment.

2. APPLYING IT

1 - From these poems, what are the parameters for desire & love? (If you had to try and read the mind of the poet, would you say that's important to them?)

2 - What are the things that get in the way of desire & love being expressed well?

3 - As the second poem shows us, desire often misses the mark or goes unfulfilled. According to the Bible, what's the cause of this? Does this ring true for you?

4. SHARING IT

1 - How do we build a community that values desire in its right context, steers away from lust, but encourages people towards contentment? Are we doing that?

2 - How do we provide contexts & relationships in which we can have hard conversations about these sensitive issues?



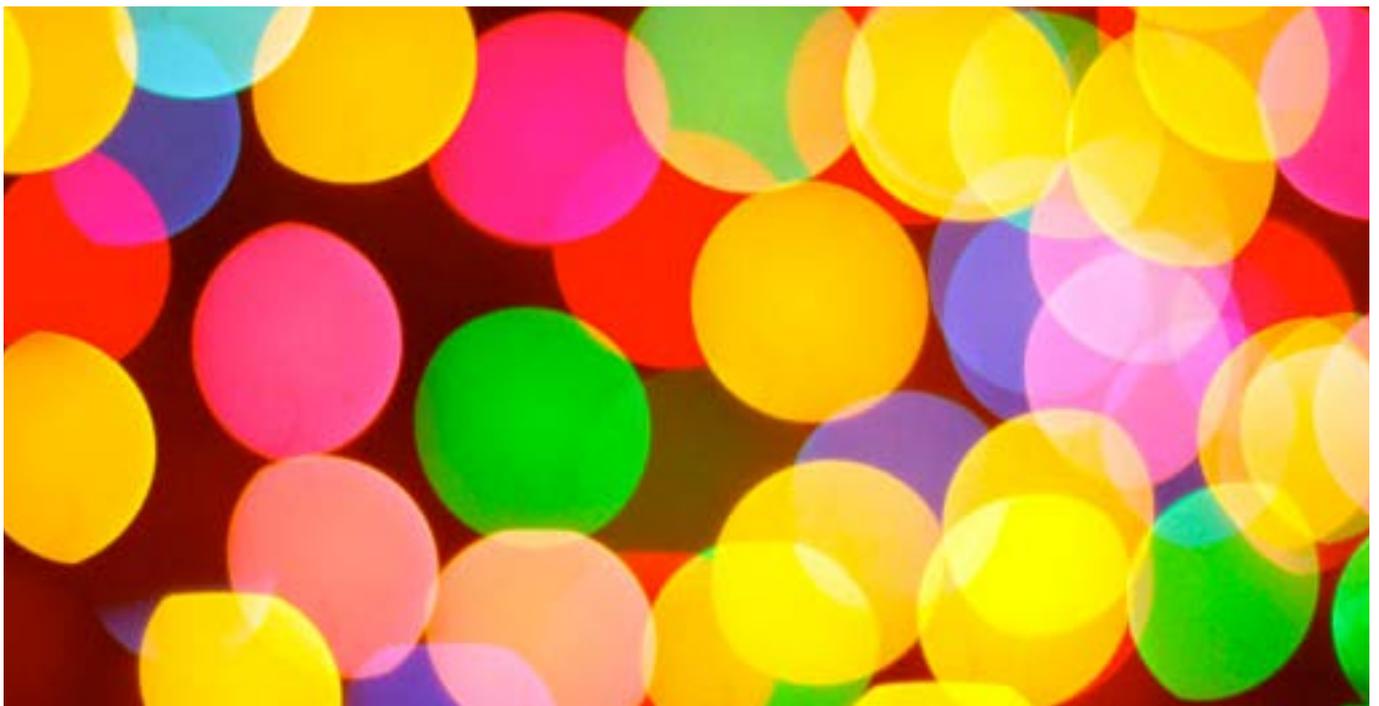
LOVE AND SEXUALITY

Song of Songs shows the expression of love in the context of sexuality. Sexuality is that desire to express intimate union with someone else, to feel whole & complete.

In the last study we looked at love & desire. The desire to be desired, and the desire that wells within us for another. In our culture, when love & desire are spoken about, sexuality is often the inevitable end-point. Sexuality can cover how we feel, our behaviour, our identity and for many, perception of gender. So for the discussion tonight, it's worth taking a moment to say that this is a difficult topic, and many within our church community are struggling deeply with it. Let's make sure our discussion is open, generous, nuanced, sensitive, caring & understanding.

Do you think Christians have dealt, or do deal, with the question of sexuality well? Why or why not?

What do you think of the statement: "to be true to ourselves, our sexuality must be expressed not suppressed."



Song of Songs is a book that clearly celebrates sex & sexuality. It's unapologetic about people's attractions to each other, and equally unapologetic about the expression of that attraction! Even though we could choose nearly any section of Song of Songs to have this discussion, we're going to read Song of Songs 6:4-8:4 together. Go for it.



1. KNOWING IT

1 - From what you just read, and what we've seen in Song of Songs so far, what does Sexuality look like?

2 - What's the connection between sexuality & union (connection) in Song of Songs?

3 - Working within what the Song of Songs says, could sexuality exist outside of this connection? What does that say about it?

4 - How does Song of Songs talk about the relationship between love & sexuality?

3. DOING IT

1 - The model in the Song of Songs is great if you're heterosexual, and you're happily married. Not so great for everyone else in the world. Discuss.

2 - We live in a broken world, but we're being renewed in Christ. Ephesians 1:3-14 is an amazing passage that describes God's people and what being "in Christ" means. Have a read of this passage and discuss what this looks like, and what implications it has for how we see ourselves, and how we understand our own sexuality - the good, the broken & the being renewed.

3 - There are many in our community that struggle with their sexuality. How can we care for them so they don't feel stigmatised, marginalised but rather supported, loved & reminded who they now are in Christ? (This is a really important question. Spend some time on it.)

Without doubt, this is one of the biggest challenges facing people today. Both the struggle for individuals, but also how communities respond. We need to be a church community that's clear what God is calling us to, while at the same time being committed to being open about our struggles and walking with one another through them. If you're struggling with the things we've touched on tonight, chat to another Christian you know and respect about it, chat to your Growth Group leader, or come and speak to Derek or Mitch. You can also find some really helpful information on these websites.

libertyinc.org.au - for Christians working through issues of same sex attraction & gender identity issues.

sexaddictionhelp.com.au - for anyone struggling from sexual addiction.

2. APPLYING IT

Some commentators say (although not all agree) that Song of Songs was a book that wasn't allowed to be read by anyone in Israel under the age of 30. They just weren't mature enough. (So if you're under 30, consider yourself lucky.)

1 - Is sexual expression something to be embarrassed about according to the Song of Songs? How does lack of embarrassment, and appropriateness compliment each other?

2 - Other parts of the bible are quite clear about what sex is for, and the context it's meant to be expressed. Quickly look at 1 Corinthians 7:1-4. What context does it say sex is intended for? (1 Corinthians 6:12-20 also talks about this, but we'll look at that next week.)

3 - Song of Songs is set in a post Genesis 3 world, where things are broken, including us. How does the reality of sin inform our struggle with sexuality?

4. SHARING IT

1 - How do we talk to those who aren't Christians positively about sexuality?

2 - How can we talk to people who define themselves by their sexuality?

3 - Sexuality is an area where many fundamentally (& vehemently) disagree with Christians. How do we keep the Gospel at the centre of our conversations, without compromising what the Bible says about Sex & Sexuality?

LOVE AND PATIENCE

One thing we've mentioned in passing while doing the Song of Songs, is an idea that's repeated throughout (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), is that of not letting love, passion and desire rule you, but having the wisdom and willpower to wait for the right time to let them loose. We're going to explore what's behind this in Song of Songs and talk about it's relevance for us today.

How does our society (in general) look at the expression of love, desire & sexuality? Are there boundaries?

Christians are often viewed as living in the dark ages because of their views on sex only in marriage. What is seen as regressive & out of date about these views? What do you think?

Read Song of Song 8:1-14



1. KNOWING IT

1 - From this section, what does Song of Songs put kinds of boundaries does Song of Songs put around sexual relationships (8:4, 8-9, 12)? What reasoning does it give?

2 - In many ways 8:6-7 are the central message of the Song of Songs. What framework does it give for sexual fulfilment & love?

3 - When Song of Songs talks about love & sexual expression, what's the connection? How do boundaries help or hinder that?



3. DOING IT

1 - The references from the NT we've looked at seem like pretty stark boundaries. They're certainly counter-cultural. But put against the backdrop of the Song of Songs, it should be argued that the boundaries are there not to inhibit enjoyment of sex, but to provide a framework in which to enjoy ideally. Discuss what you think of that.

2 - What makes it hard to live with the boundaries the Bible puts forward on sex? How can we help each other towards this end?

3 - Have a read of Ephesians 5:1-3. Before we bring it back to what we're talking about here, it's worth noting that Paul puts greed on the same level as sexual immorality...but anyway...what's the reason Paul gives for avoiding sexual immorality?

4 - Nearly everyone struggles with this. And each of us think we're the only ones, and that we're alone in our struggles. How can we be more open with each other, and remind ourselves of God's grace even in our struggles and failure in this area?

2. APPLYING IT

When reading Song of Songs it's easy to read our own cultural situation back into it. That is, that it says nothing about the context of sexual expression, nor does it put any boundaries on whom we are to express it with. But this is less about what Song of Songs says, and more about what we think it should say.

1 - What (from Song of Songs) makes it hard to believe this when reading it?

Here are two things to consider.

First, we're products of the sexual revolution in the 60's, ancient Israel (surprisingly) weren't. So sex, and its expression, were defined by different norms than it is for our culture today. Doug O'Donnell points out in his commentary, "In that place and time, there were only two kinds of love: truly free love between a man and a woman in marriage, and sexual slavery, which is found in adultery and fornication (sex outside of marriage)." That is, the only kind of sex that would have been celebrated within Israel was sex within marriage.

Second, in chapters 4 & 5 which are probably the most saucy chapters, the person it's describing is that of the "bride" (4:8,9,10,11,12; 5:1). The context Song of Songs puts all sexual activity within the context of marriage... as much as we might (anachronistically) like to read it otherwise.

2 - Does knowing this change the way you read Song of Songs? How or how not?

Covering a few thousand years of history, the bible is incredibly consistent on this point. There are plenty of instances in Old Testament where people had multiple wives (think Abraham, David, Solomon) but it never, ever goes well for them because it's against God's ideal.

3- When Jesus came, he clarified the situation even further. What boundaries does Jesus affirm in Matthew 19:1-6?

4 - And what about Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12-17?

It seems pretty stark, and it's certainly counter-cultural, but when you put the boundaries here on the backdrop of Song of Songs, it can't be argued that the boundaries are there to inhibit enjoyment of sex, but to provide a framework from which to enjoy it.

4. SHARING IT

1 - We live in a highly sexualised culture. How does our (Christians) approach to sex say something significant about what we value, who we follow, and how we use our bodies? Do you think that's an important aspect of being a Christian witness?

2 - We don't want to impose Christian values on those who aren't Christians. So how do we speak about the boundaries we believe are important, without being imposing?



Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm.

For love is as strong as death;
ardent love is as unrelenting as Sheol.

Love's flames are fiery flames—
the fiercest of all.

Mighty waters cannot extinguish love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.

If a man were to give all his wealth for love,
it would be utterly scorned.

Song of Songs 8:6-7