

Love Actually

ROMANCE, SEX & JESUS IN
THE SONG OF SONGS



Love Actually

The not-so-humbly titled “Song of Songs” takes a look at love through the eyes of an ordinary Israelite girl. The song traces the thrills and spills of her love life, complete with steamy dreams and anxious absences, well-meaning friends and scoffing onlookers. And while her love may start out with naive love poems, the song culminates in the glory of fulfilled wedding vows.

You might know this book as the “Song of Solomon”, as the Hebrew subtitle reads ‘of Solomon’. But that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s written *by* him - this guide suggests that it means it’s written *about* him. Though our leading lady clearly recognises the playboy Solomon’s wealth and power, her wedding speech has some choice words about whose love life is superior: hers or his. The sad fact is, Solomon had more women than he could keep track of. But her covenant keeping man has eyes only for one.

¹ King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter – Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. ² They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. ³ He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.

1 Kings 11:1-3

What’s love got to do with it?

But why have love poetry in the Bible at all, let alone a whole book dedicated to it? To start with, simply because of love’s sheer power. When two people become infatuated with each other they become like strong magnets: the closer they get the stronger the pull between them, until it becomes nearly impossible to prevent the two from uniting and becoming one. This is just as true whether that union will lead to relational bliss or a relational train-wreck.

How these unions turn out matters because every marriage - God’s good gift of passion-in-covenant - is meant to be a picture of God’s relationship with his people. How we use it is vitally important. Sex is never ‘just sex’ as God sees it, because it’s for representing the union of Christ and his church. It’s both why God made human passion to be so powerful, and why he cares about how we use it.

So how should I read the song then?

A common approach to the Song of Songs is to read every little detail of the text as teaching us about some aspect of Israel's relationship with God, and Christ's relationship to the church (an allegorical approach). This can lead to all kinds of unhelpful speculation and crazy interpretations. Another false-trail would be to over-eroticise its poetry, finding specific bedroom activities in every metaphor (a non-genre-sensitive approach).

The approach taken in these studies however is what's called a 'biblical-theological' approach. This means that we read the passage on its merits first (in context, recognising its genre, etc), but once we've understood the main point we look for how it finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Step 1: Recognises that Song of Songs is made up of four poems, each separated by a common refrain: "Do not awaken or arouse love until it so desires." This is the warning about love's magnet-like power: for good and for ill.

Step 2: Recognises that the storyline of love doesn't climax with human marriage (which won't last forever) but in Jesus' marriage to the church.

While Step 1 gives us wisdom about real woman-man relationships in this fallen world, Step 2 takes us beyond this fallen world. It takes us to the ultimate relationship between Christ and the church. That's the relationship to which all good woman-man relationships ultimately point. That's the relationship where all that's wrong in our current relationships is finally made right.

Our hope and prayer is that this guide will help you 'get into' the Song of Songs. We pray that through it the Spirit will give you the wisdom not to stoke passion outside of covenant. And we pray that it stirs in you a fiery passion for Jesus as you realise just how passionate and faithful he is towards us, his covenant bride.

Pastoral comment for reading Song of Songs

If you're single (and equally if you're married) it's important to realise that connection and romance are not the same thing. Healthy, life-giving connection is also found outside of romantic and sexual relationships. We should neither prize marriage over singleness or vice versa. If married (or unmarried) people expect their spouse to fulfill all their needs for human relationship it's a recipe for unhappiness all round.

Jesus never married but he enjoyed a perfectly fulfilled emotional life. We should be careful not to imply that the situation of a single, divorced or widowed person is somehow lesser than a married person's. Each has its problems and its glories, and all people are loved and valued within the family of God.

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STUDY 1 || *GENESIS 2&3*

LOVE STORY

How many songs are there in the world? In 2011 there were 97,000,000 songs in the gracernote database (that includes all of iTunes, Amazon MP3, Google, YouTube, Topspin, last.fm, Rhapsody, Facebook, and many, many more). Of those songs it is estimated that over 70% are about love!

What is your favourite love song?



Ephesians 5:31-32

³¹ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' ³² This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.

LOVE, SEX AND JESUS

6. Does it surprise you that all this intimate (and even erotic) poetry has something to teach us about our relationship with Jesus? (cf. **Ephesians 5:31-32**)

A SONG FOR US

The Song of Songs is relevant and encouraging no matter where you find yourself in life and love.

- For those not following Jesus, it shows that the Christian sexual ethic (which is often criticised) is actually one of enjoyment that is based in the gospel, not moralism.
- For followers of Jesus, it encourages us to keep sex within monogamous, faithful and passionate marriages because of God's intimate, exclusive and faithful relationship to his people.
- If you're married, it's a reminder that there is more to (eternal) life than sex. Don't idolise sex, but enjoy romance, love and physical intimacy.
- If you're single (whether young or older) then don't idolise marriage and sex, but enjoy what they point to, namely intimacy with Christ.
- Sex is a sign that points to a great and final consummation between Christ and all his people whether you have been single or married in this world.