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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 12: SONG OF SONGS – 2

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK:

The Song of Songs is often said to be one of only two books in the Old Testament that do not mention God (the other being Esther), but God is mentioned in some translations of verse 8:6 when referring to the love between the couple being like “flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.” Yet there is no question that the Song contains no other references to God, his Law, or Covenant, and the only overt connection it has to the other biblical wisdom books such as Proverbs is its ascription to Solomon. So why is this book included in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament? The answer lies in its interpretation.

INTERPRETATION

Natural or Literal Interpretation

This view sees the Song as a clear celebration of marital love – in particular, romantic and sexual love. Although the New Testament does not use the Greek word for this kind of physical love (eros), the Old Testament uses the Hebrew equivalent (*'ahabah*), and it is found repeatedly in the Song. The Hebrew word does not always refer to romantic or sexual love, but it can – and clearly does in the Song. In its use of this word the Song is explicit, but not illicit. It paints verbal pictures but they are never pornographic. This is certainly not unbiblical. We can see the same approach and the same kind of imagery in the book of Proverbs: “may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love” (Proverbs 5:18-19).

It is odd then that from an early date Jewish interpreters avoided the literal interpretation of the Song, and the authoritative Talmud placed a prohibition on treating the poem as a secular song (Sanhedrin, 101a). But this was probably to avoid the use of the Song in profane circumstances. A literal approach to the Song was taken by a number of early Christians, but this interpretation was condemned at the second council of Constantinople in AD 553 – perhaps for similar reasons and because allegorical views of the Song had by then taken hold. As a result, a literal understanding of the Song as primarily a love song based on the romantic and sexual relationship between two lovers has historically been the least popular view. Another reason for this is the danger that once the sexuality of the Song is acknowledged, some begin to see sexual innuendos and references in every part of the composition – sometimes to a ridiculous extent. Nevertheless, one of the most basic principles of biblical interpretation is that it is preferable to take the plain, normal meaning of any passage unless there is clear reason to view it in some other way. As a result, the literal view of the Song has seen increasing acceptance in the Church in the modern period.

Allegorical or Typological Interpretation

From at least as early as the first century AD, the Jewish rabbis taught that the Song should be viewed as an allegory – as a poem or story that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning. From this perspective the poem celebrates the spiritual love between Yahweh and his people from the exodus to the messianic kingdom. This was not a great leap of interpretation, as it is clear that the Israelite prophets frequently used the symbolism of marriage to represent the relationship between God and his people (for example, Isaiah 50:1; 54:5-6; Jeremiah 3:1-25; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Hosea 1:1-11; 3:1-5). In fact, the frequent Old Testament command to love God (for example, Deuteronomy 6:5; 7:7-9, 13; 10:12, 15; 30:16, 20) could be viewed as representing a kind of marital dedication, faithfulness, and love just as much as it is the love for a parent. Of course, there is no romantic or sexual aspect to the love of God, so the analogy breaks down in this regard. Furthermore, when we look at the book of Psalms – which more than any other Old Testament book shows the love of an individual for God (for example, Psalm 18:1; 31:23; 42:1; 63:1; 97:10; 145:20) – there are no instances where we can find the concept of marital love being used of the psalmist's spiritual relationship to God.

Considering the background of Jewish interpretation of the Song, it is not surprising that many early Christian teachers followed the allegorical interpretation of the composition by simply substituting the Church for the people of Israel. This was all the more understandable because the apostle Paul clearly uses the concept of marriage to represent the union of Christ and the Church (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:22-33), as does the apostle John (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2, 9). Nevertheless, the spiritual marital analogies used by Paul and John – like those of the Old Testament prophets before them – are a far cry from the physically-focused descriptions of the Song, and it must be realized that there is no hint whatsoever anywhere within the Song itself that it is intended to be understood as an allegory.

Mediating or Balancing Interpretation

As we have seen, there are problems with both the purely literal view and the allegorical view of the Song. If the poem is merely a description of physical love, we might question why it is present in the Bible. The Jewish teachers saw the potential problems of such a view of the book long ago, and history has shown that a purely literal approach can lead to a downgrading view of the work. On the other hand, there is no evidence in the poem that the work should be viewed allegorically, and this view has often been subject to approaches that are clearly extreme and unfounded.

But a balancing view of the Song is possible that avoids the potential problems of the purely literal and allegorical approaches. The key to such an approach lies simply in treating the Song as we would any other biblical document – by looking at each verse and passage individually to determine whether what is said appears to be intended literally or in some other way. For example, when we read the young woman's statement in 1:6: "Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun," there is no reason to see these words as having anything but a purely literal meaning. On the other hand, we see many flashes in the Song of truths that go beyond the physical – as when we read the declaration:

If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned.
(Song of Songs 8:7)

This reminds us, of course, of the apostle Paul's words:

If I give all I possess ... but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:3)

Although they make somewhat different points, it is possible to see a spiritual principle in what the Song tells us in this instance, just as it is in what Paul says. Viewed this way, the Song may well be primarily a poem that celebrates the love between a man and a woman – itself a worthy part of life to be considered in the Bible’s wisdom literature – but it may also provide examples of looking into love at a level that may be deeper than physical love alone and that certainly can be said to apply to spiritual love. Throughout the centuries many readers have certainly found spiritual significance in the Song, and while there may not always be agreement on exactly what the message of the book is, there is little doubt that the Song can speak to its readers in a number of ways. The Song can also be as practical as it is poetic – as we see in the lessons that it can teach.



LESSONS FROM THE SONG OF SONGS

1. Love requires time to build

The old Supremes’ song of 1966 that tells us “you can’t hurry love” has some biblical truth in it. It is interesting that of all the expressions and phrases that are found in the Song of Songs, only one is repeated – 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4 all say the same thing – reflecting an ongoing or stressed theme. The three verses all say: “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” This is interesting because although the Song does show the feeling of urgency that can accompany love in the moment (1:4; etc.), the overall theme that is acknowledged is nevertheless that love cannot or should not be hurried. There is certainly a physical lesson in this in terms of building human relationships – and above all, marital relationships. Love that lasts is built slowly.

2. Love is a cycle that ebbs and flows

The Song is not just one sensuous scene after another. As was pointed out in the first unit on this book, the Song telescopes time to some degree as the scenes shift from one setting to another. This means that we can see the ebb and flow of emotional intensity that is normal in relationships. The same woman who says “Take me away with you—let us hurry!” (1:4) also says, when she is tired, “I have taken off my robe – must I put it on again?” (5:3). This may seem like a frivolous example, but there is truth in it. We also saw that the couple is repeatedly shown seeking and finding each other, then seeking each other again. In other words, rather than an unrealistic “they lived happily ever after,” the Song shows us two people in love who constantly move closer to each other then, over time, have to move closer again. This shows the reality of all human relationships – of every type of love – and that while challenges may come and go, devotion may be repaired and restored and begun again.

3. Love needs to be nurtured

Love is not a perpetual motion machine. The cycle of human love – whether it is love of others or of God himself – needs to be nurtured or “fueled” to continue the cycle. This is basic reinforcement psychology, but it is found in every successful relationship. One of the most noticeable aspects of the Song is the way in which the lovers continually use endearments in speaking to each other, and the way they frequently compliment each other. And the compliments are not faint praise. If you compare the Song with other books of the Bible, you will find there are far more exclamation points in the Song. Although ancient Hebrew actually had no exclamation marks, modern translators add them throughout the Song as they are so obviously part of what is being said! Many of the Song’s compliments may seem overly poetic to us, but it is the compliment, not its wording, that feeds love. Compliments should be the norm in any love relationship – whether it is complimenting a spouse or praising God.

4. Love avoids what tears down relationships

No matter what we do right in our relationships with others, the good can often be undone by allowing or not avoiding things that tear the relationship down. Oddly, we often accept this in the spiritual realm (Isaiah 59:2) more easily than we do in the physical, but human relationships must avoid that which tears them down above all else. The Song appears to make reference to this fact in the words of the lover who exclaims “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom” (2:15). The “little foxes” were young or small animals able to get through small openings in the vineyard hedges, and the context of these words indicates that what is being talked about is anything that detracts from the lovers’ relationship. Such things may be small – or begin that way – but they are destructive, nonetheless. These words apply just as much to our relationship with God as they do to physical marriage.

5. Love can be a powerful force for good and evil

While we tend to think of love as a completely positive aspect of life, physical love can, of course, be improperly controlled and can then be destructive. Ironically, we see this clearly in the life of Solomon – the purported author of the Song: “King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women ... They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, ‘You must not intermarry with them.’ Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love... and his wives led him astray” (1 Kings 11:1-3). Solomon’s failure to guide and control his love caused him both to choose wives who led him astray and to then “hold fast” to them. The Song points to this danger in love and also to a related problem of undisciplined love when it says: “love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave” (8:6). Even as a poem of praise for love, the Song admits the power and intensity of love can be destructive if not controlled.

6. Properly guided love is a physical type of our relationship with God

Many of the images found in the Song evoke by association biblical descriptions of settings involving human relationship with God. For example, some of the plant metaphors used in the poem are allusions to a “Garden of Eden” type setting: “The soft grass is our bed. The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are fragrant firs” (1:16-17 BSB). These verbal images suggest not only an idyllic background, but also an Edenic condition with its unspoiled relationship with God and his blessings. In the same way, other metaphors suggest the perfection and blessings of the promised land – as when the lover states that “milk and honey are under your tongue” (4:11). No Israelite hearing the expression “milk and honey” would fail to recognize the symbolic connection with God’s promised blessing of a land and a life flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8).

Time and again the Song uses images such as these that are based in biblical vocabulary and that remind us of the many instances in which God's relationship with his people is typified as one of love, and specifically as a marital union. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that verses in the Song such as "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love" (2:4 ESV) have so easily been viewed as having an allegorical dimension – even by those who view much of the poem from a literal perspective. Ultimately, whether directly or indirectly, the Song reminds us that our relationship with God is a love affair. The Song's story of the love between a man and a woman points us to both the importance of love in human relationships and to God's covenantal relationship of love with us.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Looking Below the Surface

Analyze your own view of the Song of Songs. To what degree do you feel the Song should be viewed literally or allegorically?

Everyday Applications

Regarding the Song's words about "the little foxes that ruin the vineyards" (2:15), what potential "foxes" can you think of in your life that could hurt your relationship with others?

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