

The Royal Love Song



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Song of Solomon, Gen. 2:7, 1 Cor. 7:3–5, John 17:3, 1 John 1:9, Rom. 1:24–27, Gal. 5:24.*

Memory Text: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame” (*Song of Solomon 8:6, NKJV*).

Among the seasons of life, one of the big ones is marriage. Again, not everyone marries, but for those who do, marriage brings special challenges, and special blessings, as well. Among those blessings is the wonderful gift of sexuality. What a powerful expression of love this gift, in the right time and the right place, can be.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible is not against sex. It's against the misuse of this wonderful gift from the Creator to human beings.

In fact, the Song of Solomon, one of the smallest and perhaps one of the least-read books of the Bible, describes the relationship between a young Shulamite bride and her beloved, who is believed to be King Solomon himself. The book unfolds the mysteries of human intimacy and the delights of conjugal love in marriage. Although the Song of Solomon has frequently been treated allegorically as a symbol of the relationship of God and God's people or of Christ and the church, it is first of all a poem on the love found in the very real human relationship of a man and woman.

This week we will look at marriage as portrayed in this Old Testament book.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 11.

Indivisible Life

Based on the following passages, how would you characterize the Bible's view of the human body? *Gen. 2:7; Ps. 63:1; 84:2; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20; 1 Thess. 5:23.*

Some religions believe in dualism, a philosophy that views the human body as a problem for the life of the spirit. That is, the body is deemed bad while the “spirit” is deemed good. In Scripture, however, the human body, including its sexual characteristics, is integral to the whole being. Life is “body” and “spirit” (see *Gen. 2:7*). The psalmist gives the whole of himself in worship to God (*Ps. 63:1, 84:2*). The total person is to be sanctified, set apart for the holy purpose God intended.

A positive view of the human body, in the context of sexual relations, is reflected in the Song of Solomon. How do these texts reveal this attitude? *Song of Sol. 1:2, 13; 2:6; 5:10–16; 7:1–9.*

Throughout this sacred text the human body is admired. The physical aspects of married love are not an embarrassment. A full range of emotions is openly presented.

Powerful sexual taboos typically exist in many cultures. Married couples thus often find it difficult to communicate in healthy ways regarding their intimate life. Similarly, children are often deprived of the opportunity to learn about sexuality in the setting of a Christian home where godly values can be integrated with accurate information. The Bible's openness with sexuality calls His people to a greater level of comfort with this topic so that this vital aspect of life is treated with the respect and dignity due so great a gift from the Creator.

How can we protect ourselves against cultural and moral forces that either make sexuality into nothing but degrading animal-like passion or turn it into something shameful that must never be talked about? How does the Bible show us that both extremes are wrong?

The Loves of the Love Song

Describe various aspects of love presented in the Song of Solomon.

Song of Sol. 1:2, 13; 2:10–13, 16; 3:11; 4:1–7; 5:16; 6:6; 7:1–9; 8:6, 7.

The Song of Solomon shows how friends spend time together, communicate openly, and care about each other. In the Song of Solomon, two good friends become married partners. The wife declares, “This is my friend” (*Song of Sol.* 5:16, *NKJV*). The word *friend* expresses companionship and friendship without the overtones of sexual partnership. Happy is the husband or wife whose spouse is a dear friend.

Throughout the poem, intimate compliments and loving gestures convey the strong attraction, the physical and emotional delight, that the male and female find in each other. The natural intimacies of romantic love are a gift of the Creator, to help partners bond closely to each other in marriage. As partners are open to the work of divine love in their hearts, their human love is “refined and purified, elevated and ennobled.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 99.

These verses also convey the loftiest of thoughts about love. True love, though, is not natural to the human heart; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit (*Rom.* 5:5). Such love bonds husband and wife in a lasting union. It is the committed love so desperately needed in the parent-child relationship to build a sense of trust in the young. It is the self-giving love that binds believers together in the body of Christ. The Song of Solomon calls us to make this love an active force in our relationships with our spouses.

How does this kind of intimacy reflect, in its own way, the kind of intimacy we can have with God? What are some parallels one can draw (for example, spending time, giving completely of ourselves, etc.)? What other parallels are there?

A Loving Knowledge

Many have seen a “return to Eden” theme in the Song of Solomon. Though the couple described is not the first man and woman, the poem calls to mind the earliest garden. God’s plan that they be “one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24, 25*) is portrayed throughout in delicate metaphors and symbols.

How does the Song of Solomon present a commitment to mutuality in the intimate life of the married couple? *Song of Sol. 4:7–5:1*. How is Paul’s instruction of 1 Corinthians 7:3–5 similar?

Solomon invites her, “Come with me” (*Song of Sol. 4:8*). His bride responds. Later she invites him, “Let my beloved come into his garden” (*Song of Sol. 4:16*). He responds (*Song of Sol. 5:1*). Scripture here teaches there is to be no force or manipulation in this intimate setting. Into this relationship both partners freely and lovingly enter. “My garden” is “his garden.”

“Solomon” and “Shulamith” share names that are derivatives of the Hebrew *shalom*, “peace” or “wholeness.” Their admiration is mutual (*Song of Sol. 4:1–5, 5:10–16*). The balance in their relationship is evidenced even in the poetic style of paired lines and verses. The covenant expression “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (*Song of Sol. 2:16*) echoes the language of Eden, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (*Gen. 2:23*).

How does the description of the marital union as “knowing” enrich our understanding of our relationship with God? *Gen. 4:1, 25; 1 Sam. 1:19; Luke 1:34; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:3*.

The Bible uses *know* for the intimate union of husband and wife. In this loving “knowledge,” the most hidden inner depths of their beings are offered to the other. Not only two bodies but also two hearts are joined in “one flesh.” *Know* also describes the relationship between individuals and God. For the discerning Christian the unique and tender knowledge of marriage, with its companionship, commitment, and unbounded delight, provides a profound insight into the most sublime and holy mystery ever, the union of Christ and the church.

Love at the Right Time

Read Song of Solomon 4:8–5:1.

Song of Solomon 4:16 and 5:1 form the very center of this book and describe, as it were, its climax as the marriage between Solomon and the Shulamite is consummated.

To what is Solomon referring in the following passages? *Song of Sol.* 4:12, 16; 5:1; 8:8–10.

In the Song of Solomon, we find some of Scripture’s most compelling evidence for God’s plan that people remain sexually chaste until marriage. One of the most powerful is a reference to the Shulamite’s childhood, when her brothers wondered whether she would be a “wall” or a “door” (*Song of Sol.* 8:8, 9). In other words, will she remain chaste until marriage (a wall) or be promiscuous (a door). As an adult woman, she affirms that she has maintained her chastity and comes pure to her husband: “I am a wall” (*Song of Sol.* 8:10). In fact, he confirms that she is still a virgin up to their wedding night by saying that she is “a garden inclosed . . . a spring shut up, a fountain sealed” (*Song of Sol.* 4:12). From her own experience, she can counsel her friends to take the steps of love and marriage very carefully. Three times in the Song of Solomon the Shulamite addresses a group of women referred to as the “daughters of Jerusalem” to counsel them not to arouse the intense passion of love until the appropriate time (*Song of Sol.* 2:7, 3:5, 8:4); that is, until they find themselves safely within the intimate covenant of marriage, as she.

For the second time in the poem the beloved invites his bride to come away with him (*Song of Sol.* 2:10, 4:8). Before the wedding she could not accept his invitation, but now it is she who invites him to her garden (*Song of Sol.* 4:16), and he gladly accepts (*Song of Sol.* 5:1). He is not just attracted to her beauty; she has stolen his heart (*Song of Sol.* 4:9), he is intoxicated with her love (*Song of Sol.* 4:10), and he is exuberant that she is his and nobody else’s now and forever: “My bride, my very own, you are a garden, a fountain closed off to all others” (*Song of Sol.* 4:12, CEV). In his union to this perfect woman he finds himself as reaching the Promised Land: “Your lips are a honeycomb; milk and honey flow from your tongue” (*Song of Sol.* 4:11, CEV).

What good news is there for individuals who regret their wrong choices in the expression of their sexuality? 1 John 1:9; compare Ps. 103:12, Isa. 55:7, John 8:11.

Safeguarding the Creator’s Gift

God had a special purpose in creating humankind as male and female (*Gen. 1:26–28*). While each bears His image, the joining of gender opposites in the “one flesh” of marriage reflects the unity within the Godhead in a special way. The union of male and female also provides for procreation of a new life, an original human expression of the divine image.

What attitude does Scripture take toward sexual practices not in keeping with the Creator’s plan? *Lev. 20:7–21, Rom. 1:24–27, 1 Cor. 6:9–20.*

Scripture disapproves of all that alters or destroys God’s image in humankind. By placing certain sexual practices off limits, God guides His people toward the right purposes of sexuality. When human experience is confronted by God’s precepts, the soul is convicted of sin.

What guidance is given Christian believers for relating to their sexuality and that of others in a fallen world? *Rom. 8:1–14; 1 Cor. 6:15–20; 2 Cor. 10:5; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:3–10; 1 Thess. 5:23, 24.*

Believers wait for release from the corruption of sin at Christ’s return. They wait in faith, considering themselves dead to sin through Christ’s death on the cross and alive in Him through His resurrection. Through unceasing prayer, watchfulness, and the power of the Spirit, they treat their sinful nature as crucified and seek to obey Christ in their thoughts. They acknowledge God’s ownership of their bodies and sexuality and use them according to His divine plan.

God forgives those who repent of sin (*1 John 1:9*). The gospel enables individuals who formerly engaged in promiscuity and sinful sexual activity to be part of the fellowship of believers. Because of the extent to which sin has altered sexuality in humanity, some may not be able to know full restoration in this aspect of human experience. Some, for example, might choose a life of celibacy rather than get involved in any sexual relationships that are forbidden by God’s Word.

How should we as a church relate to, for instance, homosexuals? How should their own attitude about their sexual orientation influence our response?

Further Thought: “Marriage has received Christ’s blessing, and it is to be regarded as a sacred institution. True religion is not to counterwork the Lord’s plans. God ordained that man and woman should be united in holy wedlock, to raise up families that, crowned with honor, would be symbols of the family in heaven. And at the beginning of His public ministry Christ gave His decided sanction to the institution that had been sanctioned in Eden. Thus He declared to all that He will not refuse His presence on marriage occasions, and that marriage, when joined with purity and holiness, truth and righteousness, is one of the greatest blessings ever given to the human family.”—Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God*, pp. 180, 181.

As the Song of Solomon showed, sexual love can be a wonderful thing in marriage. But a lasting relationship cannot be based simply on the outward beauty and physical delights. Our bodies age and decay, and no amount of diet, exercise, or plastic surgery will keep us looking forever young. Solomon and the Shulamite’s marriage is a lifelong, committed relationship. Three times they affirm that they belong to each other (*Song of Sol.* 2:16, 6:3, 7:10). The first time it’s a recognition of mutual ownership (*compare with Eph.* 5:21, 33). The second time she reverses the order in affirmation of her submission (*see Eph.* 5:22, 23). The third time it expresses his desire for her (*see also Eph.* 5:24–32). Love like this cannot be drowned (*Song of Sol.* 8:7); it’s like a seal that cannot be broken (*Song of Sol.* 8:6).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does Solomon’s description of his wife as perfect (*Song of Sol.* 4:1–5, 6:8, and 7:1–9) compare to Adam’s expression when he first saw Eve? (*Gen.* 2:23, *CEV*). How should husbands then relate to their own wives? (*Eph.* 5:28, 29).
- 2 Some have seen in the book of Song of Solomon an allegory of the relationship that exists between God and His people or between Jesus and His church. While one must be careful not to overallegorize, what features of the relationship between these two people can be compared to our relationship with God? *Also compare to Isa.* 54:4, 5; *Jer.* 3:14; *2 Cor.* 11:2.
- 3 Read Proverbs 31:26, Song of Solomon 5:16, and Proverbs 25:11. How important are our words in tearing down or building up our spouse and weakening or strengthening our marriage? Use the following texts as further illustration: *James* 1:26, 3:5–11.

A Strange Light

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Ruth Jereh sang heartily as she walked home from the bar in her hometown, Mazabuka, in southern Zambia.

It was Friday evening, and she had spent the entire day drinking beer.

Suddenly a blinding light appeared in front of her. The light hung in space, and Jereh stared at it, not knowing from where it had come. Her song stuck in her throat, and she instantly became sober. Then the light vanished.

Trembling, Jereh made her way home. She didn't say anything to her husband or 14 children that night, but she broke her silence in the morning.

"Honey," she told her husband. "Yesterday, on my way back home, I saw a big light that scared me."

"Stop drinking beer," her husband replied. "This could be God talking to you."

Later that day, a Dorcas worker visited Jereh's home and invited her to an Adventist church meeting. With the previous night's experience fresh in her mind, Jereh went with her husband.

Jereh had been raised in an Adventist home but left the church after marrying her husband, who belonged to another denomination. He played the saxophone in bars, and for years she sold homemade food as he played. Afterward, they would drink for hours.

It got to the point that Jereh would drink from morning until evening and forget her young children.

Drinking was part of Jereh's life, and she struggled to quit after seeing the bright light. For two weeks, she woke up at night, frightened and weeping. "God, the life that I am living has caused me to neglect my children," she said. "Help me to stop drinking beer."

Then one day she lost all desire for alcohol.

Townpeople were stunned to see her sober. They knew how she had been before, and they asked which roots she had taken under the witch doctor's direction to give up drinking.

"How did you stop drinking beer?" asked one. "Give us the root that helped you to stop," said another.

Jereh replied to everyone, "The medicine that I used was prayer."

Jereh also has used the power of prayer to win over her family for Christ. She was baptized, and, through her influence, 10 family members also have been baptized, including her husband.

"I always thank God in my prayers for allowing my family and me to start worshipping," said Jereh, 62.

"Worshipping God is very important in life."



Part I: Overview

When God looked at everything He had made, including our physical bodies, He deemed it “very good” (*Gen. 1:31*). This approval alone could serve as an imprimatur on sexual activity if there were no other biblical texts on the subject. But that is not the case. We can conclude explicitly and implicitly from dozens of scriptures on the subject that human sexuality is intended by God. Yet, it is carefully regulated (*Gen. 1:28, 4:1, 9:1, Exod. 20:14, Lev. 18:1–30, Prov. 6:32, 1 Cor. 6:9, Gal. 5:19, Heb. 13:4*).

Seventh-day Adventists believe that bodies matter. What happens to the body is going to affect who a person is or becomes. Our belief in this causal relationship stems from our conviction that humans are a wholistic unity of both physical and nonphysical dimensions. A maxim often heard when discussing biblical anthropology is “A human doesn’t have a soul; a human *is* a soul” (*see Gen. 2:7*). That means that bodily actions, such as eating, exercising, physical contact, and sex, are *soulish* activities and are not to be thought of as events isolated from affecting the whole person. Because God has created our bodies and has a serious stake in our well-being, it should be no surprise that He has something to say about our sexual lives. He knows just how important a subject it is. If any think that God is squeamish about the topic and has austere or puritanical restrictions on sexuality, then we commend to you the Song of Solomon.

Some of the beautiful themes nestled in the Song of Solomon are that love has many faces. The Shulamite can present her lover to Jerusalem’s daughters by declaring, “This is my friend” (*Song of Sol. 5:16*). Seeing intimacy in other contexts besides the physical deepens our understanding of the love on display. “Knowing,” a veiled expression for sexual union (*Gen. 4:1*), is not just a random euphemism. Rather, it is a profound description of the depth of personal familiarity and vulnerability that gives sexuality its God-intended meaning.

Wholism Versus Dualism

How one views the relationship of our material dimension (our bodies) to our immaterial dimension (our mental, emotional, spiritual states) has a tremendous influence on how we live. One of the most influential theological breaks our church made with existing Christian tradition was to view the human as a whole rather than as a duality. Though we believe that a person is multifaceted (physical, spiritual, mental, emotional), we

believe all those dimensions are woven into a complex whole in which each dimension affects the other. Repercussions of this view are immediately apparent on a number of theological topics. One may be tempted to think that the Adventist Church holds unique positions on any number of independent subjects, such as Creation, resurrection, death, hell, sanctification, and health. But these positions are based on the biblical relationship of the human psyche with human physicality. It is our view of the wholeness of humans that informs, and sets us apart from, the dualism of fellow Christians.

Let's take an extreme example from Gnosticism that was acutely dualistic and believed anything physical was inherently evil. Sexuality took two different paths (at least) among Gnostics. First, given that the body, according to Gnosticism, is inherently evil, sexuality was to be strictly avoided in all circumstances. Other Gnostics concluded that because the spirit cannot be affected by the body (dualism), what is done in the body is irrelevant. Thus, one can indulge in all the unrestricted sex one wants. So, ascetic or hedonistic sexuality are the extreme results of strong dualism. Though there may not be many card-carrying Gnostics around today, dualism and its consequences can still be detected in Christian experience.

How?

Anytime a Christian thinks that what he or she does in his or her body is not as important as what is done in the "soul," he or she is in danger of flirting with Gnostic/dualistic philosophies and their consequences. A dualistic Christian may be well aware of Bible prohibitions against inappropriate sexual behavior. But because this individual has done spiritual things, such as submitting his or her "soul" to God, praying and worshipping, and loving God in his or her heart, then sex with his or her unmarried partner doesn't rank in importance with all the "spiritual" commitments this person has made to God. The "spiritual" has trumped the "physical" in their religious anthropology. This thinking leaves the Christian susceptible to committing sins of the body.

Another problem with this view, besides its variance with biblical wholism, is that it directly violates our experience. Sexuality is meant to be as much an act of the heart and spirit as it is of the body and, ideally, is to be an expression of a very nonphysical entity we call *love*. Again, those in recovery from abusing their bodies in any number of ways (food, sex, drugs, etc.) are often led to realize the core of their issues as nonphysical (e.g., one's self-image, dysfunctional relationships, emotional issues). In conclusion, our spiritual/relational life with one another, with God, and with ourselves is dramatically affected by what we do in our bodies. The physical affects the spiritual and vice versa. This conclusion can be leveraged to support biblical principles of sexuality, premarital physical involvement, substance abuse, and health/wellness issues.

Part II: Commentary

A Song for Today

The speed and degree to which Western culture is redefining all things sexual (gender, marriage, appropriate/inappropriate sexual expression, etc.) is dizzying. Fortunately, the echoes of a Judeo-Christian worldview have held in check secular societies' determined liberation from all religiously informed moral norms. To invoke an almost three-thousand-year-old Hebrew love poem for guidance today on intimacy and sexuality most certainly would be considered laughable in mixed company. However, the Song of Solomon contains themes that, if heeded, would reorient sex and relationships along God's ideal—an ideal that always restores fulfillment and joy.

Two themes will be briefly noted here: (1) intimate exclusivity and (2) timely love. It is apparent that the loving drama in the poem is between Solomon and his beloved. Though both bride and bridegroom have their respective companions that make frequent appearances (*e.g.*, *Song of Sol.* 1:4, 5, 11; 2:7; 3:7, 8; 3:11), the intimacy between Solomon and the Shulamite is exclusive (*Song of Sol.* 2:16). Now imagine a world in which this single principle was taken seriously: a lifelong monogamous intimate relationship with one's best friend (*Song of Sol.* 5:16). (Note: All are aware that Solomon was polygamous. But all also are aware that Solomon has become the epitome of violating his own wise counsel. Solomon's experience is a case in which we must do as he says, not as he did.)

As the lesson notes, the Shulamite is a "wall" and a "garden enclosed" (*Song of Sol.* 4:12, 8:10). She rightly esteems her heart and virginity as valuable enough to be given only to a committed lifelong companion. She rejects the temptation to be a revolving "door" for a multitude of worthless suitors (*Song of Sol.* 8:9). The blessings this perspective entails and the heartaches it avoids are too legion to enumerate. However, space will allow at least one lesser-known insight into following this principle.

While traditional/biblical values on sexual abstinence until marriage are often mocked as being an idealistic and antiquated killjoy, it turns out the opposite may be the case. There is evidence that having numerous sexual partners before committing to a single partner for life (in marriage) can undermine the prospects of a "high-quality marriage."—See Galena K. Rhoades and Scott M. Stanley, "Before 'I Do': What Do Premarital Experiences Have to Do With Marital Quality Among Today's Young Adults?" (Charlottesville, Va.: The National Marriage Project), p. 5. Let that sink in for a moment. God should *never* be seen

as restricting human pleasure, only as regulating it in order to *maximize* it in the proper time. Here our second theme, timely love, comes into play: the leitmotif of the Shulamite, charging the daughters of Jerusalem to “not stir up or awaken love until it pleases” (*Song of Sol.* 2:7, 3:5, 8:4, *ESV*). Sexuality not only was meant to be expressed with a single mate for life (“his eyes are as the eyes of doves” [*Song of Sol.* 5:12]; doves are known to mate for life), but was intended to be preserved till a threshold of personal and relational maturity was reached.

A current worldwide phenomenon that violates both of these Song of Solomon principles is the explosion of early exposure to graphic sex through the Internet and other media. Again, the consequences of this exposure, no doubt, will be studied for decades to come. But some preliminary observations reinforce that God’s ways preserve the potential for lifelong sexual intimacy within marriage, whereas alternatives are often damaging. For instance, a *Time* article reported on a population of young men attempting to avoid pornography permanently. Why? Not for religious reasons or any high moral convictions. Rather, they had “marinated” their minds in sexually explicit material so extensively they were not able to perform normal sexual functions in the real world. As one recovering dad sensitively expressed: “I would tell my son, I’ll be straight up with you, all superstimulating things, like Internet porn, junk food, and drugs, can be fun and pleasurable, temporarily . . . however, they also have the potential to desensitize you to normal, natural things and ultimately rob you of the one thing you thought they would give you, the ability to experience pleasure.”—Belinda Luscombe, “Porn and the Threat to Virility,” *Time*, March 2016: Web accessed: Aug. 2, 2017.

Whereas some poor souls are literally destroying their capacity for sexual pleasure through illicit sexual activity, God is trying to use whatever means He can, including the Song of Solomon, to preserve and maximize the emotional, relational, spiritual, and, yes, physical satisfaction that marriage can bring. Praise His name.

Part III: Life Application

Though necessary, it still can be difficult to broach topics of sexuality in a group setting, such as Sabbath School. Use your discretion in presenting the following activities and hold back using sexually explicit language so as not to offend. Remember, there are most likely church members struggling in this area right now.

- 1. Earlier it was stated that the physical affects the spiritual and vice versa. Nowhere is this more glaringly obvious than in sexual activity.**

Ask the class to elaborate on why that is or to come up with other examples of body/spirit interactions.

2. Enjoying “the pleasures of sin for a season” is an allure for all, including the Christian (*Heb. 11:25*). Traditionally, self-denial is seen as the answer to such an allure. But in light of the above reflections, seeking superior pleasure over inferior pleasure can be appealed to as motivation. See if the class can elaborate on this strategy for a number of issues.

3. Notice the attention to detail the characters in the Song of Solomon use to describe one another. What character attribute do they possess that fosters such adoration? How is this attribute a clue for a happy marriage?
