SONG OF SOLOMON

A LOVER'S MANUAL

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

by David Ray Lewis

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Song of Solomon

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Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through
Scripture . . .

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word" to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says, yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Editor's Note: Song of Solomon is a different type of book than previously included in the Men's Bible Study series. Therefore, the study is a bit different. You will note that there are no clock icons or Afterwords in this study. You may study Song of Solomon at your own pace, but personal experience with loving relationships will be of more value than any illustration the author could have provided in the Afterword.

Song of Solomon

Introduction

The Sublime Song

And now for something entirely different! Even if you have been doing Bible studies for years, if you have not looked at Solomon's "sublime song" you are in for a big surprise. It is unlike any other book in the Bible.

First, it is one of only two books in the Bible that does not mention God (the other is the book of Esther). Nor is there any reference to Jesus or the Holy Spirit. In the categories used today, it might be classified as a secular book. It stays firmly focused on human experience.

Second, it is unmistakably erotic. Its subject is human lovemaking, and, even in the oblique translations most often available, there is little doubt as to what is going on. The New Revised Version has the woman sing, "My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him" (5:4). Several new translations are even more specific. And the songs of the man are equally as clear as those of the woman. He sings, "You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches" (7:7–8).

Third, it is timeless poetry. It is ahistorical, without a setting in time and space. It is love poetry of a kind heard from romantic hearts in all ages, and there is little to tie it to any given moment in biblical history. While its title attributes it to Israel's great King Solomon—and he is mentioned at several points (3:7–11; 8:11–12)—the references are mostly to his prowess as a lover and a writer of songs and wise sayings. When historical details do emerge, they tend to describe times and cultures very much like those that were condemned by Israel's historic prophets!

Secular, erotic, and timelessly poetic; what on earth is it doing in the Bible? That question has been asked from earliest times. It was a major discussion topic among the rabbis at the Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90 when the Jewish canon was settled and the opinion of Rabbi Akiva won out: "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy."[1]

The book passed from Jewish to Christian Scripture after similar debate. However, to read it in its direct, bawdy sense was impossible for both rabbis and disciples, and scholars and preachers quickly learned to allegorize it, to turn its characters into representatives of something else. It became a poem about God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church. In addition, the Jewish tradition of reserving it for reading only in one's old age, when it might not excite, also became a custom among Christians—except, of course, for priests, monks, and nuns who read and commented on it extensively as a description of their holy love for God. Whenever any commentator suggested that it be read literally—as love poetry—as did Theodore of Mopsuestia in the fourth century, such views were quickly outlawed, as were his at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553.

No other Bible book of this size has received as much comment over the centuries as has this brief collection of songs. In our own day, the largest volume in the famous Anchor Bible series is by Marvin Pope and is about the Song of Songs (743 pages!). Yet after all the comments, there is no unanimity as to what it really means, nor is there agreement about how it should be organized. The entire book is only eight chapters—117 verses—and it has been variously divided into nineteen to forty-three "songs," some as short as one verse. There is not even agreement among the scholars as to whether it is a collection of songs or a single poem! We assume here that it is a collection of thirty songs with the common theme of erotic love, that they were collected over many centuries, and at some point they were dedicated to the great lover, Solomon. They bear remarkable resemblance to ancient Ugaritic and Egyptian love songs, but have a beautiful linguistic style that the poet Chana Bloch aptly describes as both "voluptuous and reticent."[2] Most similar poetry from every age is gross by comparison.

A word about the title that is given in verse one of the first chapter. It is a superlative of the word for "song." Most commentaries call it "the song of songs," in a fashion similar to the superlatives "king of kings" or "holy of holies." Marvin Pope refers to it as "the sublime song," and Martin Luther called it "the high song." Hopefully, as you study it, you will come to understand why it has received such praise and you may even find your own superlatives to describe it.

1. Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs* (New York: Random House, Inc, 1995), p. 28.

2. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, p. 14.

Kisses Sweeter Than Wine

When the Weavers, a famous folk-singing group, sang "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" in 1950, it was such a hit that it helped to move folk music from scholarly byways into the mainstream of American music. It included five verses about the flowering and development of human love—and a haunting refrain from the opening verses of the Song of Songs!

> Let him kiss me with the kisses
> of his mouth,
> For your love is better than wine . . .
> (1:2)

We enter here a world where lovemaking is the greatest of pleasures, and kisses make us drunk. Othmar Keel found an interesting parallel in an Egyptian love song from about 1300 B.C.:

> I kiss her,
> her lips open,
> and I am drunk
> without a beer.[3]

Clearly this is a man singing in the Egyptian song while it is a woman in the Song of Songs, but the same shared sense of satisfaction about kissing and lovemaking is evident. This two-voiced duet between man and woman in love is characteristic of the Song of Songs, where songs and sometimes parts of songs alternate equally. Both partners are caught up in the ecstasy of love and both sing it into reality, a two-part harmony! Or, as the Weavers put it,

> I begged and a-pleaded like a natural man, and then,
> Oh Lord, she gave me her hand.[4]

While descriptive, these songs are not pornographic, with the body merely used to arouse; nor are they platonic, with love espoused apart from physical expression. They are a perfect wedding of intent and expression, of body and soul as one. It is interesting to note that in the Weaver's song, God's name is invoked, almost unconsciously, as the experience of human love lifts the couple beyond themselves. Such has been the experience of lovers in every age; God may not be mentioned at such moments but is always assumed to be present—and smiling!

Sex is no sin in the Hebrew world, the Genesis story begins with the man and woman "cleaving" (KJV) or "clinging" (NRSV) to each other till they "become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The words are both mythically and anatomically correct. While a permanent relationship is probably assumed, marriage is never mentioned. Ecclesiastes, another book of Wisdom ascribed to Solomon, declares:

> Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain [fleeting] life that are given you under the sun . . . (Eccl. 9:9).

Jesus affirmed this same permanent union of lovers (Matt. 19:5–6), and Paul considered it the norm (1 Cor. 7:10–11), yet Song of Songs is never about marriage; it is about love.

Most of the book is in the form of direct speech, like a drama, and the male and female voices are clearly distinct, with the man referring to the woman as "my love" and the woman referring to the man as "my beloved." This is clearly seen in 2:2–3:

> As a lily among brambles,
> so is my love among maidens.
> As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
> so is my beloved among young men.

This study looks closely at these gender differences, but sees them in the context of mutual lovemaking; each session has something to say about "my lover . . . his/her intentions, body, desire, and embrace." The whole study is called a "manual for lovers" to set it clearly in tension with the contemporary focus on sex manuals—which it is not. It is that rarest of books today, clear guidance about being fully in love with another person. In that unique sense, it belongs in the Bible—the story/song supreme about God's love and our learning to respond in kind:

> "Oh Lord, she gave me her hand."

The Lover Archetype

It is really remarkable how the Song of Songs seems to reflect the age in which it is being read. In the Middle Ages, it was read primarily by monks and nuns and seen as a model for their chaste but passionate love for Christ. Later, the English poet

3. Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 41.

4. Words by Lee Hays with Ronnie Gilbert, Fred Hellerman, and Pete Seeger, 1950 (New York: Folkways Music Publishers, Inc.) on "Pete," a CD booklet from Living Music Studio, Litchfield, CT, 1996), p. 7.

John Milton picked up an idea from Origen, and saw the book as a drama set between two voices and with an added chorus. Eighteenth-century scholars continued this literary viewpoint with a popular three-voice theory in which the "king" is trying to win a young shepherdess to his harem and she rejects him for her rustic lover. The nineteenth century was fascinated with new discoveries in anthropology and culture and developed various cultic and sacred marriage theories to account for the songs. In our own times, psychological and sociological interpretations abound.

In their popular book *King Warrior Magician Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette develop ideas from Jungian psychology to help men, in particular, reach a new kind of maturity. In the section under "Lover" they write,

> Jungians often use the name of the Greek god Eros to talk about the Lover energy. They also use the Latin term *libido.* By these terms they mean not just sexual appetites but a general appetite for life.[5]

They go on to describe a human energy pattern built on passion, vividness, and life affirmation that satisfies the human longings for sex, food, well-being, reproduction, creativity, and finally—meaning. The Song of Songs fits easily into this description, and its lovers perfectly illustrate such human hungers, yet Moore and Gillette go on to argue that this search is also important for men right now. A hunger to make life full and lively is contemporary, even as it picks up echoes of an ancient search as well. One fascinating theory ties the Song of Songs to ancient Tamil poetry from India and a similar sublime collection of love stories, the One Thousand and One Nights. The Lover archetype is that within us which wants it all—right now, passionately, and despite the risks!

Over against this passionate search is a society afraid of risks and confused by sexuality. In 1991, the 203rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received a lengthy Report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality including an alternative "Minority Report." After long discussion and debate, it refused to adopt either report and called on the churches to begin studying human sexuality in depth. A part of the original report was "A Central Affirmation: A Gracious God, Delighting in Our Sexuality." Presbyterians are still struggling with this simple affirmation. "A Manual for Lovers" is a part of this ongoing study, and your search for a full and passionate life is a part of it also.

Central to this study is a conviction perhaps best stated by biblical scholar Walter Wink: "There is no biblical sex ethic. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period."[6] The Song of Songs is perhaps the sublime song because it stays firmly in touch with this love ethic and offers to us, and perhaps particularly to men, access to our "Lover archetype," our deep hunger for all that is life-affirming and sensual, and it does so without shame or guilt. It has sometimes been described as a Jewish midrash or mediation on the story of Adam and Eve in the garden—but without the snake!

May this be for you a Bible study with a difference. May you find new energy of a deep and healing sort here. And as you struggle through contemporary issues of sexuality, marriage, work, and family, may these simple songs put you in touch with a healthy, wholesome, cosmic, and sacred harmony that has been waiting for you for centuries!

Some Useful Resources

Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995).

A. S. Herbert, "The Song of Solomon," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, edited by Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Hong Kong: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1962), pp. 468–74.

Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

George A. F. Knight, *Esther/Song of Songs/Lamentations* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1955).

Theophile J. Meek, "The Song of Songs," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 91–148.

Marvin H. Pope, "Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary," in *The Anchor Bible,* vol. 7C (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1977).

William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

Presbyterian Resources

God's Gift of Sexuality: A Study for Young People in the Reformed Tradition—Parent's Guide (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1989).

Helping Your Child Learn About God's Plan for Growing Up—Parent's Guide (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1996).

Presbyterians and Human Sexuality 1991 (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991).

5. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King Warrior Magician Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 120.

6. As quoted by Walter Wink, in James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 61.

session one

My Lover's INTENTIONS Song of Sol. 2:2–7

At the heart of lovemaking is intention. Victorian fathers were known to inquire of their daughter's male friends whether or not their intentions were honorable. Every parent facing their child's first date has something of this question in mind as well; a new source of will or intent has formally come into the play life of their child and they wonder about the outcome. Every newly forming couple also wonders about their partner's intent and the future of this relationship. What are his or her intentions?

In truth, the question of intent is not an easy one to answer. Potential lovers are motivated by a wide range of intentions, some known to them and many beyond their conscious minds. Psychologists make it clear that some kind of unconscious matching process occurs between the potential lovers and images or archetypes implanted in their psyches by parents, family, and culture. In whatever ways it can, society ritualizes or tries to control the process, but all are aware that it is ultimately beyond their control. The search for mate, partner, companion is too deep, too basic to human existence to be completely proscribed—even in very formal societies. Attempts to do so lead to tragedies of the "Romeo and Juliet" sort.

As you read the Song of Songs you can understand why interpreters continue to find a drama in it, an ancient story of seeking, almost losing, and finding. The figures in the songs are so preoccupied by their own and their lover's intentions. Words like "desire" and "longing" hardly contain the wild, exuberant rush of feelings that such new lovers experience. Verse 2 of chapter 5 has been variously translated as "I am faint with love," "I am sick with love," and "I am in the fever of love," but all try to capture this overwhelming experience of becoming the object of another person's love intentions.

Strictly speaking, sex is not the primary intent here, although it is well nigh impossible to exclude it from the experience. The sex manuals move to sex too quickly. Alex Comfort's famous manual, "The Joy of Sex" begins with an article on "Beds: Still the most important piece of domestic sexual equipment. . . . "[1] The Weavers were closer to the starting point and the real topic with their man begging and pleading and their woman offering her hand.

We have here two people trying to find a means of communication on a topic about which they know everything and nothing. All the generalities of the race have been compiled in song, study, and manual, yet the individual has not the slightest idea about the response of the one other individual most critical to the communication—the potential lover. It is a question of determining intentions.

As you begin to read the Song of Songs you immediately find this to be the topic. Rich, suggestive signals of love flash back and forth, and soon the lovers break into halting dialogue.

> Ah, you are beautiful, my love . . .
> Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved.
> (1:15–16)

It is the famous "He said . . . And I said . . . " of pubescent telephone conversations.

We have mentioned this dialogue already, in the Introduction, where the two characters are introduced as "my love" and "my beloved," and they compare each other to flowers and trees (2:2–3). The woman sings, "With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste" (2:3b). Commentators have continually argued about whether sexual intercourse is being described here, as it may well be, but anyone who has simply sat on a park bench and shared an orange with a newfound love could sing this song. It celebrates the establishment of communication, of common intent.

For men in particular this encounter is a powerful moment. Having spent their childhood and youth trying to break free and establish their own independent status, it is destabilizing to suddenly encounter the Other as attractive. This author recalls to this day the first time he was kissed by a girl and rushed home to enter into his little used diary a huge "X" which he could look at over and over in awe. Doubtless women are also surprised by this moment, but their cultural conditioning usually helps them see it coming. Most men have been conditioned from childhood to

1. Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), p. 50.

"stand on their own two feet" and "go it alone."

Verse 2:4 is the focus sentence of this song. It has had an incredible variety of interpretations. The Hebrew term for *intention* comes from the word for "banner" or "military ensign" on which the military unit pictured its purpose, mission, or intention. When a church goes through a mission study prior to seeking a new pastor, it usually posts such a "banner" in its Church Information Form (CIF) to see if it can strike up a love relationship with the Personal Information Form (PIF) of the "right" candidate for their position!

In this case, the male partner "brought" the woman to a special place and in some fashion declared his intentions towards her. Men and women rarely banqueted together in such ancient cultures—unless the purpose was erotic—so the location itself might have declared the intent. Another possibility is that the special place (literally "wine hall") could be a bower in a vineyard or even a secret meeting place already used for lovemaking. Whatever the setting and message, the response was, as we have noted, "love sickness." The woman cries out for strength, for raisins and apples (recall that her beloved was just described as an apple tree in 2:3). Cultic interpreters note that these are the ingredients used in the famous raisin cakes offered to the goddess of love, the "queen of heaven," whose worship was condemned by the prophet in Jer. 44. No condemnation here—the man's intentions are accepted!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Ask someone to read Song of Sol. 2:2–7 aloud and slowly—as poetry or song. Suggest to the group that when this reading is over each person will be asked to comment on one word or phrase that stands out for him.
  Note: Talking about love and sex is not easy for many men; accept what is said as an easy way to start the process.
- The famous Masters and Johnson study of Human Sexual Response begins with an outline of the Male Sexual Response Cycle. Ask the group to guess what items come first. As a group, build a list of suggestions: sharing an orange on a park bench, winning a kiss? Allow for humor, but push to find the earliest possible clue that something is under way. Masters and Johnson merely list Excitement as the first phase and talk about "somatogenic (body-originated) and psychogenic (mind-originated) stimulation."[2] Surely you can do better than that!
- Men have traditionally been pictured as the initiators of lovemaking, have even been told they are "in charge." Yet the Song of Songs clearly begins with a woman's voice singing, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! . . . " (1:2). From your group list and your personal experiences, who generally initiates the love relationship and how is this done?
- A well-known Gospel song begins, "I'm my beloved's and He is mine, His banner over me is love." The words are from the Song of Songs, but the topic is the Christian's relationship with Christ. Discuss as a group whether this is an appropriate use of the text and why you think as you do.

Come Away!

If intent is the beginning of love, privacy is its incubator. As the new communication begins, long periods of practice are necessary to keep it alive. A secret language of special words, songs, and caresses is being learned. In many cases the conversation breaks down and has to be restarted or lost for good, depending on the continuing intent of both partners. It is entirely possible that sexual intercourse will become a part of this conversation before long, but it need not. Wonderful love stories have flourished without it. The beautiful book by Helen Hanff, *84, Charing Cross Road* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970), is an exchange of letters across the Atlantic between two book lovers who never meet. They use correspondence as a means of "coming away" to be with each other.

The imagination runs wild in this newly discovered and shared world. One's head is full of fantasy, of imagined scenarios, of projected outcomes. Look at 2:6 as an example from the Song. It accurately describes a "position" pictured in many ancient terra cotta and stone carvings, the man with his left hand under the woman's head and his right hand on her abdomen; the woman with one hand around his waist and the other offering her breast to him. While seldom pictured in the pages of explicit sex manuals, it is nevertheless a position of preparation often used in dancing and courting. It can be taken sitting in a car, dressed or undressed, and it can move toward further intimacy or be a satisfactory coupling in itself. The woman in the song longs for it, pictures it in her future. It is the extension of her present level of commitment.

If the first step of a relationship is to communicate, the second step is toward separation: first from others to develop the skills of intimate communication and then, eventually, separation from each other to test the strength of the bond. If

2. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1966), p. 5.

the imaginations of both partners continue to project such images as those in the Song of Songs, then a reunion is inevitable. A kind of commitment to be a pair, to stand over against others, has been established.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- In the 1950s Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* helped launch the women's movement. It is sometimes forgotten that in those same years Hugh Hefner launched *Playboy* magazine to redirect male lives toward pleasure and a "Playboy Philosophy." Discuss how successful these two efforts have been and what each has meant for establishing love relationships between the genders. Have they changed the process pictured in Song of Songs? Explain your answer.
- It is obvious that new lovers need time and space to practice their relationship. But how about couples in more enduring relationships? How much privacy do they need and how can they get it, especially with children, jobs, and in-laws in the picture? How about couples putting together "blended" families? Or couples in retirement facilities? Share ways you have found time to be alone with your partner.
- There is much talk of sexual harassment in the workplace today and about child sexual abuse in day care and nurseries. Where are the boundaries in your world between an acceptable touch and embrace and something more, which might start down this road we have been discussing? How do you police your own behaviors with women and children as well as those of your other male acquaintances? What do you teach your sons in this regard? What do they (and your daughters) teach you?
- As you go through the process of building a relationship, what are you looking for in your partner? How do you test to see if it is there? What issues complicate this search today?
- Church camps and youth programs have often been the places apart where young people can meet and test relationships. Does this continue in your church today? Ask a high school counselor to share with your group the reality of teen romances in your community. What is the church's role in this important activity?

Jerusalem Girls

Marvin Pope coined this translation for the Hebrew words usually translated as "daughters of Jerusalem." It is felicitous because it better echoes what is intended—a kind of teen gang or slumber party crowd. This "chorus" of female friends awaits every whisper from the woman partner as to how the relationship is going. Once communication has been established and confirmed, the need to *tell* becomes overwhelming! From privacy to shared secrecy, the relationship expands. Who is trustworthy, who will understand?

The Song of Songs mentions these Jerusalem Girls often and repeats the little refrain of advice to them—about awakening love—three times (2:7, 3:5, 8:4). It is clearly a bit of newly acquired knowledge that "the girls" ought to hear. And what is this newfound knowledge? It is something every man knows already; when lovemaking reaches a certain point, it is hard to stop! The maiden in the song is telling her sisters that they need to be in control as lovemaking escalates. When they want to go further it is up to them to give the signal, to "wake up" love—and its physical attributes in the male (cf. 8:5). The Jerusalem Girls are sworn by oath to keep this secret; rather than a typical oath taken before God, this oath is taken before gazelles and wild does, the symbols of the goddess of love, Astarte! (2:7).

As love progresses there are things you cannot tell your parents. The "Jerusalem Girls" and the "Brothers" (1:6; 8:8) become coconspirators with the couple. The circle of love expands, and continues to expand, until family, friends, and community (and state?) are ready to hear—and a permanent and public commitment can be made.

The third step in lovemaking is telling others, holding hands in public, confiding to friends, and bringing your partner home to meet family. It is a shift of status—from a solo to a duet—and a change in relation with all others is involved; you want to be seen as part of a pair. The bit of advice whispered to the Jerusalem Girls is but one of many learnings that need to be discussed and checked out in confidence with those who are trustworthy. Is it true that "men" are this way, that "women" behave thus and so? That which was shared in intimacy now needs to be tested in community.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Many couples today "live together" before they decide to get married. Discuss your feelings about this trend. Be honest about your own premarital experiences. Should society (the church, the schools) accept this trend and give counsel about

safe sex and the Sexual Response Cycle (i.e., take the place of the Jerusalem Girls and the Brothers)?

- How do you honestly feel about women who are provocative, who awaken "love" before they are ready? Whose task is it to say "no" in a relationship? Explain your answer.
- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) provides resources for sex education of children and youth (see "Some Useful Resources" in the Introduction). Obtain copies and review their contents. Do they seem appropriate and helpful to you? Could they, should they, be used in your church? Why or why not?
- With whom could/should your children share their insights, curiosities, and learnings about lovemaking and sexuality? What have you done to make this a possibility for them? Do you discuss these matters as a family?
- If your group is comfortable with role playing, set up a role play in which your son or daughter tells you (as parent) about his or her intention to marry. Even this simulation can sometimes release surprising emotional responses. What are they and why do they happen? How might this experience be a conflict of intentions?
- Ancient common law saw marriage as the relationship established by a couple when they decided to live together It was preferable that this relationship be blessed by the church and registered by the state, but this was not necessary. What is the proper role of church and state in the marriage relationship? Is "living together" seen as common law marriage today?
- Date rape is an extremely serious issue in our society. Since the advice given in the Song seems to suggest that it is women who control the course of lovemaking, men need to discuss their responsibilities. Studies of acquaintance rape say that "entitlement" is the primary reason males give for raping women, and that rapists almost never call what they do "rape."[3] Are men ever "entitled" to sex? Discuss this question together and then, if possible, invite some feminist women to discuss this question *without any male participation in the discussion* (since entitlement is a claim to power, male participation in such a discussion could be seen as a power play). Why do you think the woman in the Song gave her advice to her "sisters"?
- With whom do you confide and check out questions about love and sex?

3. Rus Ervin Funk, *Stopping Rape: A Challenge for Men* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993), p. 60.

session two

My Lover's Body (Female)

Song of Sol. 4:1–7; 6:4–10; 7:1–5

Men love to look at women. Descriptive portrayals of the female body (mostly by men) fill literature, music, and art. Women are fully aware of these glances; some love it and some are put off by what seems like endless scrutiny.

Looking at women is right on the edge of social propriety and stepping beyond that line into soft- and hard-core pornography fuels a huge and lucrative business. In 1984 it was determined that over $750 million dollars was generated by eight hundred different pornographic magazines. The President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970) found that 90 percent of this business was aimed at "predominantly white, middle-class, middle-aged married males."[1] The public debate about the impact of this pornography has both activated and divided contemporary feminists and also society-at-large. In the face of all this, Michael Kimmel has observed: "Men's response to this debate has been a deafening silence."[2] In this session we will try to break into this silence and look at men looking—and at what they see.

In the Song of Songs the woman spies her beloved "gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice" (2:9). She is not surprised that he is watching her, but awaits the sound of his voice; looking should lead to speaking, she thinks. In a related passage (2:14), Chana Bloch's poetic translation is far more apt and accurate than the usual translations; the man has been playing hide and seek with his love and finally cries out, "Let me see you, all of you!"[3] (versus "Let me see your face," NRSV). Again, this passage moves directly from looking to speaking:

> . . . let me see your face,
> let me hear your voice.
> (2:14)

The argument against pornography is based on this distinction; in pornography the voices of both women and men are silenced. It is not so much that pornography is morally wrong as that it short-circuits the full sensory palette of lovemaking—moving directly from seeing to private pleasure and missing all the shared sensual delights about which the Song of Songs is so explicit. Looking is just a first course in the banquet of lovemaking.

On reading the Song of Songs, one notices at once that there are three lengthy and visual descriptions of the woman's body (4:1–7; 6:4–10; 7:1–5). They follow a form common to Arabic poetry called a *wasf* or Descriptive Song.[4] In 1922 S. H. Stephan produced an anthology of "Modern Palestinian Parallels to the Song of Songs," which gave many strikingly similar *wasf*-type poems including these two:

> I'll cry out: "Great is God,"
> For her whose breasts are pomegranates and larger.
>
> I never admired anything like her form
> with a slender hip;
> She, who is chary of her charms, is slender
> as a bough.[5]

Slender hips and large breasts; does it sound familiar?

Doubtless biblical men also looked at women; however, what is so striking about the descriptions in the Song of Songs is their restraint. The typical *wasf* form describes the female body either from the top down or, less commonly, from the bottom up (see next section). Cultic interpreters like to picture these as songs to be sung at weddings in order to excite and incite the groom. But in the Song the majority of each description is "from the shoulders up"—hair, teeth, lips, cheeks, neck, eyes, and nose. Each of these is an important part of a woman's body needing to be considered with care when it comes to lovemaking, says the Song. Yet none, save hair, are even mentioned in the standard sex manuals or sex education materials of the church (which do, however, mention skin hunger and that most powerful of sex organs—the human brain).

1. Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *Men Confront Pornography* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1990), p. 1.

2. Ibid., p. 2.

3. Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, p. 122.

4. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1977), p. 67.

5. Ibid., pp. 64–65.

Hair is a powerful erotic stimulant, partly because it has visual texture and form and partly because it everywhere attaches to the skin, which is our largest sex organ. Television ads show endless waves of female hair, bouncing, shimmering, flowing, and draping. In the Song the woman's hair is similarly pictured as a flock of goats bouncing down a hillside (4:1)! Playing with and washing the hair, and hair or head massages are powerful and erotic "turn-ons" for many people.

Eyes have always been seen as windows on the inner soul or psyche. Looking into the eyes close up and full faced is a most trusting and emotion-inducing experience. The intentions mentioned in Session 1 are most clearly broadcast by the eyes. We check each other's eyes constantly. The man cries out, "Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me!" (6:5). The Song calls the woman's eyes "pools"—a very common metaphor for reflection and depth.

Teeth, lips, and cheeks are important to the lover's description because they are often the first area of close-up physical contact, in kissing. The lips are "crimson" (4:3), the mouth delicious (4:11). White, orderly, and balanced teeth were highlighted and prized in ancient days; perhaps because they were less common than today's carefully aligned and brushed versions. The cheeks seem always to have been hidden behind a veil, suggestive and tempting—like a slice of pomegranate!

The nose and neck play an important role that often today comes under the category of pride or self-esteem. Both are pictured as "towers" and suggest an imposing and even fearsome Presence "terrible as an army with banners" (6:4). As one enters the kissing range one begins to engage the partner's full Self, and it can indeed be an awesome experience. The relatively distant senses of sight and sound go out of focus, as it were, and the more intimate sensations of taste and smell come into play. It is possible men choose pornography in order to avoid this powerful sensual confrontation!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- A leading feminist writer, Andrea Dworkin, states, "The point about pornography is that it changes men."[6] Discuss as a group what she might mean. Another feminist, Susan Griffin, feels pornography changes women also, turning them into "the pornographic ideal of the female."[7] Do you agree? Explain your response.
- If looking needs to be followed by speaking, then men need to learn what to say. Think of a woman you love, not necessarily a sexual partner, and try to describe a favorite part of her face or head with an analogy (a comparison) similar to those used in the Song of Songs. Read your efforts to each other (without criticism!). Could you honestly use such language with this woman? What is the point of this exercise?
- An important best-seller of the nineties is *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher. In particular, fathers with young daughters will want to read this entire book. Pipher sees our culture as toxic for young women in a variety of ways, especially in the ways it attacks their self-esteem or self-pride through their bodies. About sexuality she writes, "Girls receive two kinds of sex education in their schools: one in the classroom and the other in the halls."[8] Discuss what you think young girls hear in the halls and what impact it might have on their Selves.
- Give each man a pencil and a blank slip of paper. Ask him to list the three parts of a woman's body he looks at first, in priority order. Hand in the slips and record results on a chart for all to see. Discuss what men actually see as they look at women (i.e., probably nothing is new about what they see; what do they keep looking for?) Why might men look at "parts" rather than the whole person?
- Modern sex education has put great emphasis on correct terms and descriptions for body parts and activities. As a group, see how many of the following terms from the Masters and Johnson glossary you can describe.[9] In most cases colloquial ways of saying these things have overtones that demean women. Discuss the role of correct and colloquial language in sex education—and in sex. Read the descriptions only after the group has shared ideas. Should the church emphasize language in its teachings about sex?

Dyspareunia (Coitus that is difficult or painful for a woman)
Fornix (Upper portion of the vagina)
Intromission (Insertion of the penis into the vagina)
Myotonia (Increased muscular tension; a secondary physiologic response to sexual stimulation)
Perineum (Area between the thighs extending from posterior wall of the vagina to the anus in the female and from the scrotum to the anus in the male)

6. As quoted in Kimmel, *Men Confront Pornography*, p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 17.

8. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p. 206.

9. See Glossary, in Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* , pp. 337–346.

The Body in Motion

The male lover in the Song is forever leaping, bounding, and prancing (2:8)—a dervish of motion. The woman is less so, letting herself be noticed, approached, and even drawn or dragged about (1:4; 2:4). However, in the third descriptive song about her, this changes. She begins to dance!

The literary critic, Robert Alter, has done a wonderful job isolating this "Dance of the Shulammite" (6:13—7:5) for comment and interpretation. It is a *wasf* in reverse, describing a woman from toe to head, and it is set in a public gathering place where all can watch her dance. Chana Bloch's translation is best:[10]

> dance again,
> that we may watch you dancing!
> (6:13)

Alter writes:

> In the spectacle of the dance . . . there is a nice tension between the kinetic image of the graceful steps—the Bloch translation is quite precise here, for this is not the normal Hebrew word for "feet" but a term that suggests the rhythmic or pounding movement of footsteps—and the sculpturesque image of the thighs as beautifully crafted curves of gold.[11]

The poem actually seems to take the position of a reclining onlooker and follows the sight lines upward from feet to thighs to navel and belly, then upward to breasts, neck, and head crowned by "flowing locks [which] are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses" (7:5).

It is a body alive and "flowing" with the onlooker's eyes constantly moving to take it in. At a recent family wedding, a belly-dancer friend of the couple undulated on the grass and held the encircling crowd just as breathless as did once the Shulammite! The moving body can be electric in a way no picture can express; it can enchant the eyes.

An important part of Alter's study is his careful outline of the use of the five senses in the Song of Songs. Although the poems are everywhere physical and ultimately focused on touch, they are indirect about touch; instead they use first the senses of taste and smell, as we have seen, and then sight and sound second . All four are paired pointers, a kind of sensual palette, indicating the ultimate sensation of touching but not mentioning it directly.[12]

The whole Song in the NRSV begins with taste and smell:

> For your love is better than wine,
> your anointing oils are fragrant. . . .
> (1:3)

And the woman describes the man's actual embrace as an aroma, "My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts" (1:13). The "Dance of the Shulammite" is more public and distant and relies more on the senses of sight and sound. As you read the other songs you find sensual analogies from nature to direct your other sensual attentions.

Whether scanning upward or downward, the woman's figure is centered on the breasts "like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (4:5; 7:3). Alter comments, " . . . an invitation to caress . . . as close as the Song will come to a tactile image."13 The breasts are the dividing line, the place where sight may or may not be followed by more intimate sensual contact—taste, aroma, and touch. The woman decides on the basis of her review of the entire sensual experience. In regard to the breasts, Alex Comfort wisely gives this warning: "They are sensitive structures—don't let your residual anger at having been weaned get the better of your commonsense"![14] Certainly many women might echo such a warning!

The Song of Songs is remarkably reticent about the primary sexual organs. These organs are useful in sexual intercourse, and contemporary sexuality resources are right to properly name and describe them and their use, but the Song of Songs is about longing and anticipation more than about completion. Such mention as it might make of the genitals is as subjects of desire and yearning (cf. 4:13; 5:4). They are described indirectly, if at all.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- What are some things a moving woman's body can do that a static representation cannot do? What is the role of dance in culture and in building human relationships? What are some other public ways that the body is presented in motion? Are they erotic to you?
- In his book *Body Theology*, James B. Nelson describes such a theology as "nothing less than our attempts to reflect on body experience as revelatory of God."[15]
- What are some things that a woman's body might reveal about God? In what ways are these similar to, and different from, things that a man's body might reveal?

10. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, p. 122.

11. Ibid., p. 126.

12. Ibid., pp. 122–123.

13. Ibid., p. 128.

14. Comfort, *Joy of Sex*, p. 100.

15. Nelson, *Body Theology*, p. 50.

- The Masters and Johnson glossary mentions *erythematous rash* as "redness of the skin due to vasocongestion"; it defines *sex flush* as "superficial vasocongestive skin response to increasing sexual tensions."[16] This "flush" is one of the few ways a man can *see* what is happening in a woman's emotional life. Yet emotions and sensations are very much a part of her bodily involvement in a relationship. List ways that you have learned to "read" a woman's emotional messages (i.e. to watch her body in e/motion). How can men learn to understand such messages? How important are they?
- There is a theory of human development that sees the senses of taste and smell as developing first—in the nursing child—and having little or no verbal or visual components. Lovemaking returns us to this preverbal arena in a powerful and possibly frightening way. Discuss whether or not caring for a baby increases or decreases your sensual "palette" and whether it helps or hinders your lovemaking.

Black and Beautiful

Interpreters who see a ritual or cultic use behind these songs have fastened on the brief scene in 1:5–6: "I am black and beautiful . . . ." They point to a long history of black goddesses throughout Asia and Europe (Isis, Diana, Demeter, Aphrodite, and numerous Black madonnas throughout Europe). In most cases this blackness represents "the realm of the other, the divine."[17] "She is mysteriously different," says Keel. Many of these black statues seem somehow related to a black stone or meteorite that once fell from heaven. One thinks of the sacred black stone of Mecca and of Kali, the powerful and dangerous black goddess of India. The sun has always and everywhere been an important deity, and this woman's darkness points toward divinity rather than a suntan!

Another common interpretation juxtaposes the Jerusalem Girls with nomad girls from "the (black) tents of Kedar" (1:5). There is a long history of opposition between brown-skinned bedouin girls and white-skinned city dwellers. Sex between racial and ethnic groups continues to be a topic of discord today, and city versus country sometimes still represents a social division.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Whatever its origin, this poem suggesting that "Black is beautiful" has been important to all who value their own blackness. Malcolm X, in his autobiography, made much of Moses' marriage to a Cushite (Negroid) woman as well as to this verse (1:5).[18] What seems clear in the Song (see 1:5–8) is that the woman is proud of her uniqueness and models such pride for other women of color.
- Over the centuries, translators and commentators have revealed their long-standing racism by translating this line as "black, *but* beautiful" (Luther), or by suggesting, as did Origen, that she was black by reason of her sins, but beautiful through her repentance.[19] Can you think of other areas where the color black is denigrated? Look at Lev. 13:29–37 where yellow hair is diseased and black hair is healthy!
- Discuss your feelings about interracial couples or marriages. Is different skin color an attraction or a distraction for you? Have you ever thought of Black as sacred or as pointing to God? What might be the central elements of a "Black" theology? Is the Sacred different from or similar to you?

16. Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, pp. 339 and 344.

17. Keel, *The Song of Songs*, p. 47.

18. See quote in Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 308.

19. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 310.

session three

My Lover's Body (Male) — Song of Sol. 5:9–16

Was the Song of Songs written by a woman? A majority of the lines are written in the first person for a woman's voice. And included in her songs is a fairly rare example of a Descriptive Song or *wasf* describing her "beloved" male partner (5:9–16). As male readers, you will have to decide whether or not "her" words are accurate descriptions of *your* male body.

During the past hundred years or so a dramatic school of interpretation has argued that these songs were written for (or by) two voices, male and female, and that they can somehow be integrated into a story or plot line. They sing back and forth to each other with the "Jerusalem Girls" and the "Brothers" functioning as a female and male chorus.

This format is very evident at the beginning of the male Descriptive Song (5:9), where the women friends of the Shulammite beg her to describe her lover and to tell them why he is "more than another beloved." And so she begins!

> My beloved is all radiant and ruddy . . . .

What do women *see* when they look at the male body? In Session 2 we asked what men see when they look at women; here we ask the opposite question.

These two terms, "radiant" and "ruddy," have far more meaning than is at first apparent. The woman poet and wordsmith Chana Bloch translates them more accurately:

> My beloved is milk and wine . . . . [1]

What we have here are terms that are often used to describe a god, terms suggesting maximum health and wholeness—even holiness! White and red, flesh (or milk) and blood, the eucharistic or communion colors! Marvin Pope noted this connection in his commentary and quoted the following old Latin hymn:

> Hail, O Flesh of Christ divine,
> Hail, O sweet and ruddy wine,
> Blood the cup, and Flesh the meat,
> And in each is Christ complete.
> This is He, the Bridegroom, dight
> In His vesture red and white:
> White, for Him a Virgin bore,
> Red, for He His Blood did pour.[2]

Do women look for something "in" the body such as health, vitality, or vigor, rather than at its surfaces? You will have to test this idea out on your women friends. At any rate, it is the way this woman's description begins. Her man is shimmering white and blood red, vital and lively.

The next phrase is equally complex. The word translated "distinguished" is the same root as the word of intent discussed in Session 1—the word there translated as "banner" or "military ensign." This man's banner flies above ten thousand others—just as it flew above the woman in 2:4! He is her "intended," to use an old phrase. He is a man set apart, someone to look up to. The description begins, not with the visible but with the invisible, with traits or characteristics.

Just as the colors are those of the ideal man and his character lofty and admirable, so the description of this man's material body suggests very much the descriptions of ancient sculptures of male gods (cf. Dan. 2:31–35 or Jer. 10:9–10).

The focus is again on the head and face (hair, eyes, cheeks, lips). And here again, in kissing range, the senses of taste and smell predominate. We do not "see" this man; we sense his presence. Have you ever watched young lovers preoccupied with each other's earlobes or locks of hair, touching each other freely and unconsciously and thereby telling you more than they realize about their relationship? One gets a similar impression from this poem. The woman is familiar with this face! She sings—and perhaps twists a strand of hair:

> His locks are wavy,
> black as a raven.
> (5:11)

However, these black tresses hang on a head of pure gold! As one moves down the body one encounters such rare materials as gold, sapphires,

1. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, p. 87.

2. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 532.

ivory, and alabaster dominating the description. Both head and feet are gold. A stature is being described—a work of art! The woman does not see a physical body as much as an awesome presence—a figure. She is idealizing her lover, to use a contemporary concept. Though her hands are never mentioned, one can imagine her touching and exploring every tendon, knob, and cranny. This is a body that is loved—and is thereby made beautiful!

Several words are ambiguous in the description. The "body" which is "ivory work" in 5:14 might better be translated as "loins" or even as genitals. The alabaster legs of 5:15 are more likely thighs or calves—something more intimate than legs. The ambiguity in these terms helps to heighten the mystery of the description. He is a man of mystery and of attraction. And the description ends with the following:

> His speech is most sweet,
> and he is altogether desirable.

Not only is this man well put together, he knows how to talk, to say the things that matter to women. He is not the strong silent type; he is present and desirable to his lover!

The woman's final words to her listeners are surprising. They are not about his body at all, but about her relationship with him:

> This is my beloved and this is my friend,
> O daughters of Jerusalem.
> (5:16)

One gets the sense that this woman knows this man as emotionally as she knows him physically. They are friends as well as lovers, they have shared more than sexual intimacy.

Is not this the missing ingredient in today's sex manuals, where the bodies described are physically attracted to each other, but there is seldom more than that. As we have observed before, the Song of Songs proclaims an ethic of love rather than one merely of sexuality. This woman's description of her beloved is of a full, vital person. She perceives his character, is attracted to his person, and enjoys his company.

- Working in pairs, ask each man to describe himself to his partner, highlighting his most attractive features! Discuss together this question: Does anyone in the world see you as you see yourself?
- Men are often accused of being hard on their bodies and of not taking care of them. Ask if anyone in your group has had a massage and, if so, to describe it. What are some other ways that men might "be good" to their bodies. Is it appropriate for men to give themselves physical pleasure? In what ways?
- Can a woman's touch make you feel "distinguished among ten thousand"? If so, why are men so often afraid to be touched? How good are you at asking for what you need in this regard?
- We are often reminded of the Greek distinctions between different kinds of love (eros, philia, agape), yet the woman in the Song combines them and says her lover is also her friend. How do these differing aspects of love relate to each other in your life? Are these terms separate or are they a continuum (i.e., How physical should you get with friends, male and female)?
- Is the Song correct when it sees men's health and wholeness as attractive to women? What do you think attracts women? How important is "sweet speech"?

The Body Electric

As we noted in Session 1, the petition to "come" permeates the Song of Songs. Both partners beg the other to "come" or "come away" repeatedly (2:10, 13; 4:16; 5:1; 7:11) and variant terms such as "make haste" (1:4; 8:14) and "draw me after you" (1:4) add to the sense of intense emotional and physical demand. Something more than privacy is being suggested. It would be an improper modernism to suggest that this term means the colloquial slang for a sexual orgasm (i.e., "to come"). But the Bible commentators are clear that "In the OT, to 'come' or 'go into' a woman frequently means to sleep with her."[3] There is a sexual implication to this request.

In terms of the male body, the term *come* specifically suggests that mounting emotional and physical drive which, if it is not interrupted, culminates with ejaculation. The male body is not static when involved in lovemaking; Walt Whitman calls it "electric." It hurries toward its goal; it is linear and single-minded. At first any activity will do—setting up a rendezvous with the lover, devising a plan of escape from others. Toward the end there is a sense of inevitability about the experience—an insistence that becomes difficult to control. The Song uses the early phases of this intense desire, the petitions to come aside, to point further—toward its fulfillment.

3. Keel, *The Song of Songs*, p. 181.

> Let my beloved come to his garden,
> and eat its choicest fruits.
> (4:16)

This intensity tends to get focused on the penis in men. The penis is a capricious organ and almost impossible to control. James Dittes writes about it:

> If anything can make a person feel a moment of communion with life itself, bonded with the holy . . . it must be every boy's first amazing experiences of grasping that throbbing, taut, excruciatingly tingling erection . . . . The encounter is so unique, so intense, so riveting, it raises huge quandaries . . . .[4]

Yet the Song of Songs only alludes to this male organ with phrases such as "be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains" (2:17; 8:14). The goal of the songs is to celebrate the whole intense emotional and physical experience rather than to center on its culmination.

We saw in the Dance of the Shulammite that dance could be an important preliminary to lovemaking. The dancing woman excites the eyes of the beholder. In men, dance can both express and direct some of the male's electric urgency. Evidence of this can be seen in the ancient wall paintings of Europe that men with erect penises often danced together as part of some sacred ritual, possibly an initiation.[5] And 2 Sam. 6:5, 20, tells of King David and "all the house of Israel" dancing before the "ark of God" and of his wife's disgust that he was "uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants." In both examples, the connection between sexuality and the sacred is suggested.

Recent men's studies have sought to recapture some of this connection between sexuality and spirituality, and James Nelson even writes: "If we do not know the gospel in our bodies, perhaps we do not know it."[6]

Nelson also makes an important distinction about male bodies that is mostly overlooked in the Song of Songs. While one part of the male experience of the body is phallus—the hard, driving, and upright call of the Song, another, equally common part of the male experience is penis—the soft, dark, flaccid state of most men most of the time. Nelson claims that this restful state also has a spiritual dimension. He writes:

> Sinking, emptying, is a way of spirituality. It means trusting God that we do not need to *do*, that our *being* is enough. It means yielding to our tears . . . . It means trusting ourselves to the darkness of sleep, so like the darkness of death. . . . [S]inking and emptying are as necessary to the spirit's rhythms as they are to the genitals.[7]

Q&A

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Discuss Nelson's suggestion that there are two kinds of male spirituality related to the male experiences of phallus and *penis.* The Song of Songs celebrates only the first. Where in Scripture might the other kind be celebrated? How are both kinds related to your own spiritual life?
- Discuss the sense of inevitability in the male sex drive. Do men sometimes take advantage of this sense of urgency to push women to go further than they wish? Premature ejaculation is a serious problem for many men. What are some ways you have learned to redirect or stop your sex drive until the moment is right? How important is control to successful lovemaking?
- The rush of excitement felt by those in love is a part of the primal experience that is lovemaking. Compare the man's experience with that of the woman. Try to list the specific physical and psychological steps in male orgasm, remembering that it is a total body experience.
- Why do you think our culture is more ready to picture female nudity than male nudity? Is it in some way related to the fact that men's arousal is more visible and their penises are of varying size? (psychological) Or do men have more control over publishing? (political) Or does it have to do with what women want to see in terms of male bodies? (sociological)

Men in the Dark

We have noted that the Song of Songs is a kind of celebration of the Garden of Eden, that it pictures an idyllic world without the snake! Almost no "shadow" or dark side is present in these songs. Only two verses point toward danger or pain; both are about men and both are about men in the dark!

4. James E. Dittes, *Driven by Hope: Men and Meaning* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 18.

5. Randy P. Conner, *Blossom of Bone: Reclaiming the Connections Between Homoeroticism and the Sacred* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 21.

6. James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), p. 116.

7. Nelson, *Intimate Connection*, p. 96.

The first passage, 3:7–8, tells about the sixty mighty men of Israel who accompany King Solomon, "each with his sword at his thigh because of alarms by night." Song after song has sung about peaceful lovemaking in the dark, "until the day breathes and the shadows flee" (2:17; 4:6). But apparently there is also danger in that darkness, and men need to be wary and on guard. A part of men's bodies is this built-in protectiveness, this cultural conditioning toward safety and defense from dangers, including "alarms by night." A question that haunts much male literature is whether or not the woman partner herself might be a threat! And most husbands have one ear cocked for sounds in the night—even as they make love!

The other "shadow" passage is darker yet. The woman singer tells of a dream she had (see Session 4) in which she goes out at night seeking her beloved and runs into the city guards, the night sentinels—no doubt also armed with swords on their thighs. She reports: "They beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle" (5:7). This is the dark side of manhood that we wish we could overlook. Not all men are safe in the dark—especially those with power or weapons at their disposal. The wonderful equality of the sexes so satisfying in most of the Song of Songs is not evident here. While men remain ever watchful in the night, so do women! And sometimes the danger they face is in the man that they meet. The garden of love is often close to the city of danger.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Discuss as a group the things that you have done to make your home secure and your family safe. It has been pointed out that most men find other men dangerous. What is your own sense about the gender of danger?
- How can women trust themselves in the dark with a man when the statistics of date rape and spouse abuse are so serious? Do you think this is a result of feminist hysteria or is it a real danger? What can men in the church do about abusive men? What should they tell their wives and daughters about men at night?
- The power equation in the Song of Songs seems surprisingly equal. But not all situations are as idyllic. Assess the power relationships between the sexes in your experience. Would women be as dangerous as men if they had as much power? Is this why some men are afraid of "women's liberation"?
- On average, male bodies are bigger and stronger than women's bodies. But the fear of the Amazon woman lives on. What has been your experience of big and strong women? An interesting new book is titled, *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons: Raising Adolescent Boys in the '90s*, by Ann F. Caron (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994). How do you respond to this title? What are the keys to raising the next generation of men?
- Do you think the Song of Songs presents a realistic picture of the male body? If something is missing, what might it be? What do you like about the Song's presentation of the male body?
- How do you deal with these questions about your body and your sexuality?

session four

My Lover's DESIRE

Song of Sol. 1:15–17;3:1–5; 5:2–8; 7:10–13; 8:1–4

What do lovers do between sessions of lovemaking? The sex manuals are silent. This is the arena of poets and of a special class of poems called pastorals. *The Norton Introduction to Literature* has this to say about pastoral poetry:

> The world always seems timeless in pastoral; people are eternally young, and the season is always spring . . . . Difficulty, frustration, disappointment, and obligation do not belong to this world at all . . . . Shepherds sing instead of tending sheep here, and they make love and play music instead of having to watch out for wolves in the night.[1]

The lovers in pastorals are "out of touch" with reality, but very much "in touch" with each other. In a word, they dream about their lover and beg him or her to "come away" once again! The Song of Songs is one of the early examples of this kind of poetry.

Several of the smaller songs in this collection are good examples of pastorals, and we will look at two of them: 1:15-17 and 7:10–13. Keel calls them "songs of desire."[2]

"Desire" is an interesting term. It means longing or wishing for something—but it originally comes from looking at the stars! You fix your eyes on one star until you want only it—you cannot see the rest! It is something that happens between the mind and the body. So in 7:10 the woman sings:

> I am my beloved's,
> and his desire is for me.

Everything else has dropped away. They are having trouble concentrating on work or food or other people's conversations. Once a widowed colleague returned to the office with an amazing grin on his face; he had met a woman friend and fallen in love again. He could speak of nothing else. He was as surprised as everyone else at being consumed again by the powerful fixation of desire.

The reason pastorals "work" as poetry is because many of us have had this experience. We know there are wolves at night, bosses in the daytime, and problems in life. But we can't *see* them! Our eyes see only one star. Our lips remember the taste of our loved one's mouth (7:9).

Our brain, that most powerful of sex organs, operates on only one channel. All we can do is sing: "Our couch is green . . . " (1:16) or "over our doors are all choice fruits . . . " (7:13).

But there is more to this term *desire*. In its Hebrew form it appears only in two other places, both times in Genesis and both with a negative connotation. Genesis 3:16 reads: ". . . your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you," and Gen. 4:7 reads ". . . sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." The Song of Songs almost deliberately opposes these readings. It sings repeatedly of mutuality and equality. The woman becomes the object of desire rather than the man, and there is no sin lurking anywhere in sight. "In the Song, sex is free of notions of control, dominion, hierarchy."[3]

This mutuality is pictured beautifully in 1:15–17 where the two voices sing a duet of equal praise for each other's beauty and for their shared love bower. And throughout the Song we find the repeating phrase, "My beloved is mine and I am his . . . " (2:16; 6:3; 7:10). The woman's song in 7:10–13 is preceded by an equal man's song in 7:6–9.

In ancient times, the artistic representation of this shared love was that of a dove, rather than the heart symbol commonly used today. When the man sings "your eyes are doves" (1:15) or the descriptions of both lovers use this symbol to describe the eyes (4:1; 5:12), what is being pictured is the flashing eye signals of love that bill and coo with each other like doves at play. The ancient Near East is full of vases, terra cotta reliefs, and paintings showing doves winging between peoples eyes. When God wanted to announce the newly baptized Jesus as "the Beloved," the spiritual love between them descended like a dove! (Mark 1:10–11).

What are we to make of this timeless world of mutuality and equality? We know that sin *is* lurking all around us and that domination tempts every relationship.

1. Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty, and J. Paul Hunter, eds., *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 3rd ed (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), p. 728.

2. Keel, *Song of Songs*, p. 251.

3. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, p. 207.

Much modern poetry laughs at the pastoral, as in this poem by Peter de Vries:

"Come live with me and be my love,"
He said, in substance. "There's no vine
We will not pluck the clusters of,
Or grape we will not turn to wine."

It's autumn of their second year,
Now he, in seasonal pursuit,
With rich and modulated cheer,
Brings home the festive purple fruit;

And she, by passion once demented
—That woman out of Botticelli—
She brews and bottles, unfermented,
The stupid and abiding jelly.[4]

While many have experienced the euphoria of desire, at least as many have seen such relationships fall on hard times and lose their luster. All the other stars begin to crowd in on the one special one until it gets lost in their midst. How can we keep desire strong?

In an extensive study of "lasting marriages" we find this summary: "These stable marriages had endured for a number of reasons . . . . Differences between spouses had little impact on satisfaction, although equity or a sense of fairness in relationships despite differences had a significant effect . . . . "[5]

Apparently something in the experience of sharing life *equally* helps relationships endure—the dove of desire has settled into its nest!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- We will look at the five characteristics that support lasting marriages in Session 6. Here we are interested only in the sense of equality or mutuality between the partners. Ask those in your group with longtime marriages to comment on how these factors have impacted their relationships.
- Pastoral poetry is obviously not realistic—except for those involved! Ask those in your group most recently in love to comment on the impact of "desire" in their lives. Perhaps you have watched your children fall in love; what are its "signs"? Has anyone seen doves "bill and coo," and how does that describe this situation?
- Should the church teach a theology of desire and mutuality as pictured in the Song of Songs as well as a theology of sin and domination as pictured in Genesis? If so, how might it do so successfully?

Thwarted Desire

Even for lovers, the pathway can get rocky. Three poems in the Song of Songs spell out such situations. One might be named "poor planning" (3:1–5). A second might be called "poor timing" (5:2–8). And a third might be described as "poor circumstances" (8:1–4). The first two are often called "dreams" because they happen to the woman when she is in bed; the third is more of a wish song—possibly a daydream. However, since the Hebrew term for "dream" is never used, all three might be seen as fantasies or daydreams that happened to the woman in a half-awake state ("I slept, but my heart was awake" [5:2]).

In the first poem (3:1–5), the woman is in bed thinking of her beloved, but he is not there. So she does an unreasonable thing—either in reality or in her imagination. She goes out into the city streets at night to "seek him" (3:2). It was no safer then than it would be today. She would be assumed to be a harlot by the guards and by anyone else who saw her. But she meets and confronts the sentinels anyway—with her own question for them! Such is the passion of a lover on fire. And it pays off again, in reality or in imagination. She finds her beloved and drags him home to her mother's bed (i.e., her own bed inherited from her mother). The song ends with the old refrain to the Jerusalem Girls: ". . . do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready" (3:5)! She is stirred up in the right place—but at the wrong time!

Most men can recall times of such poor planning. They are in bed and aroused and there is no one with whom to share the moment. Unfortunately, many of us do things at least as foolish as did the young maiden. Some prowl the streets and movie houses; some find a bar and perhaps pick up a poor substitute for the loved one; some stay at home, with pornography filling the void. We are very vulnerable when longing and desire overcome our common sense.

The second song (5:1–8) is similar except that this time she hears her lover at her gate! But she is naked in bed and has just washed her feet, so she hesitates. Poor timing; when she finally gets to the gate her lover has gone. The description of this missed moment is so full of the symbolism of sexual encounter ("thrust," "open," "dripping") that one wonders if something more was going on than is specified—poor timing in lovemaking! When the woman realizes what has happened, she uses a

4. Peter De Vries, "Bacchanal" as quoted in *The Norton Introduction to Literature,* p. 801.

5. Richard A. Mackey and Bernard A. O'Brien, *Lasting Marriages: Men and Women Growing Together* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), p. 142.

phrase that means "I nearly died . . . !" (5:6b). And out into the streets she again goes, this time to be accosted by the guards, who beat and strip her. The poem ends with a changed refrain to her girlfriends: "Tell him this: I am faint with love."

In lovemaking, timing is everything. To find each other at the right moments, to say the right things at the right time, and to help one another through the stages of sexual excitement are all matters of careful timing. Most lovers know how difficult it is to "be there" for the other person in every situation.

There is a scene in David Guterson's popular novel *Snow Falling on Cedars* in which fisherman Carl is making love to his wife, Susan Marie:

> He read all her movements as signs and when she was close to coming retreated just enough so that her excitement became more desperate. . . . Carl timed matters so as to begin to come while she was and thus carry her back up so that when she was through she did not feel satisfied and was compelled to press on toward a second coming that the pastor at the First Lutheran Church could neither approve nor disapprove of because—she felt certain of this—he had no idea that it was possible."[6]

Finally, there is a wish song that appears in 8:1–4. The woman imagines or wishes that her lover might be one of her brothers so that she could meet him on the street, kiss him publicly, and bring him home without social comment. Obviously she is feeling the social pressure to conform as an irritant. Probably most lovers do. If they can successfully maneuver through the difficulties of planning and timing the relationship itself, they still need to fit it into a social fabric and mores that do not share their passionate blindness. Any reality that gets in their way is seen as a "poor circumstance" that wishing might change! When it doesn't happen that way they sing a lament, a wish song for better circumstances.

The Lover archetype often runs up against stern reality. Our passion for life gets thwarted by life's little stumbling blocks. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette write:

> The man under the influence of the Lover does not want to stop at socially created boundaries. . . . In the history of our religions and the cultures that flow from them, we can see this pattern of tension between the Lover and the other archetypes of the mature masculine. . . . To this day, many Christians are still scandalized by the one truly erotic book in the Bible: the Song of Solomon."[7]

The task for mature Lovers is to bring their passion and desire into the life of their culture (which needs its enrichment badly) and at the same time to accept the boundaries of their culture into their lovemaking (which will consume them without such limits). It is a difficult balancing act. If they fail to negotiate it they become Addicted lovers who cannot escape their fixated feelings. Or else they become Impotent lovers who are so frightened by their cultural boundaries that they cannot express their passion at all. Christians need to learn to be Lovers in a responsible way, to have strong desires but not to be blindly overwhelmed by them. That is one of the goals of this study.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Read the three songs of thwarted love aloud (3:1–5; 5:2–8; 8:1–4). Discuss as a group whether they are dreams, daydreams, or some kind of reality. How do you respond when your desires are thwarted? Do you trust your dreams as a source of insight?
- What happens when desire turns into addiction? If someone knows the famous Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, discuss how they help an addicted person.
- Discuss masturbation as a possible response to "poor planning, poor times, or poor circumstances" in your love life. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sexuality curriculum for youth states: "Although we believe our sexuality is to be shared with someone else, masturbation can be a good choice to make in some circumstances."[8] List such circumstances and discuss how you might share this teaching with young people in your church.
- Role-play a visit by a thirty-five-year-old accountant to his therapist. He is complaining that his life is bland, routine, and without passion (no Lover energy). If the person playing either role is at a loss for words, he may turn to the group for suggestions.

6. David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 293–94.

7. Moore and Gillette, *King Warrior Magician Lover* , pp. 125–26.

8. Mary Lee Talbot, ed., *God's Gift of Sexuality: A Study for Young People in the Reformed Tradition—Parent's Guide* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1989), p. 16.

session five

My Lover's EMBRACE

Song of Sol. 4:16—5:1; 6:1–3

This chapter might as easily be titled "My Lover's Garden." The garden metaphor dominates the book, as it dominates the Bible as a whole. The Bible story begins and ends in a garden (Gen. 2:8–15; Rev. 22:1–5) and in the garden's center is "a well of living water" (Song of Sol. 4:15). It is water that makes a garden possible in the arid Middle East. Jesus becomes that source of living water when, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he accepts "the cup that the Father has given me" (John 18:11).

Everywhere in the Song of Solomon the "garden" is a metaphor for sexual intercourse—for the lover's embrace. It is a sexual embrace, but it is also more. It is the source of life giving (and life making) nourishment. It is that place of passionate commitment of one person to another that bodes no interference and gives a profound sense of peace in return (8:10). In this sense the Old Testament writers rightly saw God's love for Israel in such terms, as a cosmic embrace. It was passionate, jealous, and singular in its intensity. In the final two sessions we will explore the dimensions of this cosmic love—in life and in death. Here we focus only on its intensity. It is all consuming!

In the words of the Song, intercourse feels like being "drunk with love" (5:1). It is eating and drinking in the garden of delight until we are intoxicated, consumed. The little poem in 4:16—5:1 has been titled "The Garden of Delight," "The Paradise of Love,"[1] or "the magical garden."[2] This garden is populated with fig trees (2:13), palm trees (7:7), nut trees (6:11), and apple trees (8:5), but most especially it is a vineyard (2:15; 7:12; 8:12). Each item in it has sexual connotations, and the songs are endless in their exotic descriptions. The external *wasf* descriptions of each lover's body (see Sessions 2 and 3) here become internal and intimate landscapes. All lovers develop this secret language as the parts of their shared bodies gain new and private titles. A shared language of love is created: myrrh with spice, honey with honeycomb, wine with milk! (5:1). And although the NRSV translation puts it in the present tense, the Hebrew makes it very clear that this is a consummation. It has already been experienced. One commentator suggests that the man smacks his lips and uses the colloquial phrase "I could eat you up"[3]

This garden is the luxurious flowering of a lover's embrace. It is "locked" (4:12) to all but the beloved. To him or her it is wide open and inviting. A metaphor for this openness is the season of springtime when all living things come alive again and bloom into abundance. The winter of waiting is over, and the lovers sing: "our vineyards are in blossom" (2:15), "the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom" (7:12). In other words, the time for living and loving has come! The garden is ready to be enjoyed.

Another implication to this garden image is often missed altogether in most current writing about sexuality. It is the implication of growth. As a person enters into such a secret garden, he or she learns things they cannot learn in any other way. The Hebrew language is clear that the verb "to know" someone has sexual implications. The sexual embrace is not just about pleasure, it is about growing up—knowing oneself in a new and fuller way. We struggle with ways to say this today and use circumlocutions just as strained as the garden images given here. We say that a certain movie has "adult content." We say that teenage lovers "lose their innocence." What we mean is that sexual experience teaches us something new and profound.

In an interesting book titled *Magic Kingdoms*, Regina Higgins looks at classical children's literature as a means by which children are taught about life. She writes:

> Like the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's comedies, a magic kingdom is a place far from distractions, where true character can emerge and become known, free from the normally inhibiting restrictions of ordinary life. . . . All these magic kingdoms take the form of gardens—places set apart for the cultivation of young life, a natural landscape where the essential self can blossom and grow.[4]

1. Keel, *Song of Songs*, p. 167.

2. Bloch and Bloch, *Song of Songs*, p. 179.

3. Keel, *Song of Songs*, p. 182.

4. Regina Higgins, *Magic Kingdoms: Discovering the Joys of Childhood Classics with Your Child* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 84.

Perhaps we have overlooked this as a kind of sex education in recent years. In our emphasis on sexuality as pleasure we may have lost its character as a learning experience, a milestone of maturation. When young people report that their "first-time" sexual experiences are not as meaningful as anticipated perhaps they have come to the garden too soon. Recall the Song's refrain: "Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!" (2:7; 3:5).

The poem begins with the woman inviting the north and south winds to send out a message of readiness to her beloved. As we have seen, it is cast in the language of smell and taste:

> Blow upon my garden
> that its fragrance may be
> wafted abroad.
> Let my beloved come to his garden.
> and eat its choicest fruits.
> (4:16)

About sexual odors Alex Comfort writes, "The clean genital odor of both sexes is a built-in stimulus. If it is distasteful, something is wrong."[5]

The study of these odor pheromones has been an important part of recent sexuality research. It is quite likely that they take us back into earliest childhood at a preverbal level. So we find that the sexual embrace is both "adult" and "child" at the same time, a powerful return to animal origins and also a glimpse into cosmic truth.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- When we say that someone has "lost his or her innocence," what do we mean?
- Sex is universal, but lovemaking is highly particular and uniquely personal. Take a quiet moment to recall terms in the private language of love you might know. You need not share them, but after the quiet period discuss as a group where such terms come from, how they evolve, and why they are important.
- Recall the "magic kingdoms" of childhood. What messages get taught there and how are these re-taught in lovemaking? At the center of these magic gardens there is always a fountain or a spring of life-giving water. Read aloud the invitation at the very end of the Bible (Rev. 22:16–17). What do you think it means?
- Oral sex or genital kissing is a highly intimate subject seldom discussed in public. It is still often referred to as "eating" someone. While not everyone has had satisfactory experiences with this, discuss your feelings about it and build a list of "rules" for doing it well. Why might it be an important part of lovemaking? For a good description of the how and why of cunnilingus see chapter 4 in Claude M. Steiner's book *When a Man Loves a Woman* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1986).
- Build a list of less well-known erogenous zones and how to stimulate them successfully. Many of the famous "positions" in sex manuals are designed to increase the areas of bodily stimulation. (For example, The woman's perineum discussed in Session 2 is stimulated by the various rear entry positions.) What might be a comparable area in men and how might a woman stimulate it?
- Have you ever thought of God as a jealous and consuming Lover? Look at Isa. 58; Ex. 20:4–6; 1 Cor. 10:21–22.

Threats to the Garden

If the "garden" is a place of lovemaking, the "wilderness" is a place of testing. It has no living water in it. An oasis is a garden spot in the midst of the wilderness simply because it has water; it is a place of renewal. In real life there often seems to be a lot more wilderness than there is oasis. Men never tire of asking each other whether they are "getting any"—meaning sex. Many men feel that they are not "getting" enough, that their situation is not fully satisfying. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is that their sexual appetite is far greater than their lovemaking ability. They are not willing to cultivate the garden sufficiently to get a good crop! The mutuality described in the Song of Songs and perhaps found momentarily in early years of lovemaking gets lost in repetition. Being a good lover involves ongoing learning, patience, and practice, and a willingness to give as much as one receives. Selfishness and laziness are as much of a threat in this area as in any other.

In the Song of Songs, the threats that are mentioned are external. They are the famous "little foxes" (2:15) who invade the vineyard as the tiny grapes bud—almost certainly prowling suitors who want to eat from the garden without tending it. They are also those who "speak for" the "little sister" in 8:8, men who feel that they can make a claim on a young maiden without her consent. In both cases it is her brothers who try to give a protective response and the woman herself who insists on her freedom of choice.

These "mother's sons" (1:6) or brothers of the maiden act as a male chorus just as the "Jerusalem

5. Alex Comfort, ed., *More Joy: A Lovemaking Companion to The Joy of Sex* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), p. 120.

Girls" act as a female chorus. They become angry with their sister because she does not "keep" her own vineyard secure but rather shares it with her lover. In 8:8–10 they try to protect her from unwanted suitors only to find her sharing her "breasts . . . like towers" with her beloved. This maiden is a very modern, self-willed woman!

It is possible that Solomon himself figures as a threat to these lovers. He comes streaming in from the wilderness with his "mighty men" (3:6–11) to turn the heads of all the daughters of Jerusalem, only to find the lovers staggering in from the same wilderness to "awaken" each other under their own apple tree (8:5). And in 8:11–12 Solomon has his own prolific vineyards at Baalhamon, to which the maiden retorts, "My vineyard, my very own, is for myself!"

Our own search for our true lover has to make its way through many such intrusions and diversions. Young men and women still have to compare their choices with the attractive stars of today's media display, and there is no end of "little foxes" out to raid the gardens of the unwary. In her famous play *The Little Foxes*, Lillian Hellman sees the threat to love as coming from within the family itself and recognizes that the young maiden has to be very strong-willed and independent in order to survive.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- What are the threats ("the little foxes") to young lovers today, both internal and external? Discuss the role of the media and of the family in this regard. How could your family members help protect the "gardens" of the young—or do you find young people's embracing to be distasteful? How will you know when your son or daughter's suitor is the right choice?
- From your experience, were your peers (i.e., the "Jerusalem Girls" and the "Brothers") helpful or hurtful in your selection of a lover? Or were they both? Did you come to a time when you had to be strong-willed and firm about your choice? Describe any such moments. What was the outcome?
- Claude Steiner distinguishes between really good lovemaking and the unique experience of "conscious conception" when both partners want to extend lovemaking to the making of a child. ". . . When we finally decided to and made love without contraceptives, without fears, with complete abandon, the experience was without equal in all my years of lovemaking."[6] Discuss this distinction. Is conception a fuller expression of lovemaking than all other kinds? Explain your answer.

6. Claude M. Steiner, *When a Man Loves a Woman: Sexual and Emotional Literacy for the Modern Man* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1986), p. 68.

session six

My Lover's CHOICE Song of Sol. 4:8–15

So far, we have followed these lovers from intention to consummation—from longing to fulfillment. Theirs is the age-old story of love, told beautifully and with insights still important to us today. But in the final two sessions we want to step back a bit from the process and look at its purpose. We want to place these songs of love in their full perspective, which includes seeing them as part of the Bible, our book of faith. We asked in the Introduction how those songs ever became part of sacred Scripture; here we want to develop a satisfying answer.

Protestants, and especially Presbyterians, are generally very suspicious of doctrines espousing human free will. They have a very high doctrine of God's sovereignty, and when God's will and human will collide they tend to favor God's side in the argument. It is right, then, that they should have a very suspicious attitude about a book that everywhere affirms human free will and nowhere mentions God!

The solution to this dilemma lies in the very topic of that book—the topic of love. The Song of Solomon is a collection of love songs, as we have seen. Christians affirm that "God *is* love" (1 John 4:8), and any quick check of Scripture passages about love make it clear that this is *the* central teaching of the Bible. But to include in the Bible a book that is *only* about love, and erotic and sexual love at that, is still something of a leap for most of us.

Many years ago, I had a chance to teach a course for church families titled "Parents Are Lovers."[1] For four evenings my wife and I gathered with other couples to do four things which might strengthen our love for one another. Looking back on it I realize that those four activities noted in *Parents Are Lovers* are central to the way we describe God's love for us! They include the following:

Memories—seeing love as an ongoing history of relationship rather than a momentary phenomenon.

Listening—actively communicating between one another rather than seeing the world only through our own eyes.

Replaying—noticing how the things we value continue through us from generation to generation.

Life-Giving—exploring the wonder of creating life anew.

Those were powerful evenings for my wife and me. Our family still tries to build strong memories, listen to our differences, affirm our values, and create new opportunities for living fully. All the promises of early love take form in these ways, and our choice of partner is also a choice of a way of life.

It might be accurate to say that the Song of Solomon got into the Bible not because of what it says but because of what it doesn't say! Staying firmly grounded in the human experience of lovemaking, at the same time it points continuously beyond itself to a world where being a lover is affirmed as the pinnacle and goal of life. No wonder the Jewish and Christian theologians who have commented on this book have seen in it allegories of God's love for Israel and Christ's love for the church. The passage we quoted earlier from 1 John ends with these words: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). This means that in being neighbors, grandparents, friends, and especially parents—we have a chance to point beyond ourselves to the God we affirm by the ways we love each other. Where better to learn these lessons of love than in the incredible experience of falling in love with someone else?

We have seen that being lovers deepens self-understanding, sensitizes us to the natural world around us, and heightens our sense of personal freedom and worth. We *become* someone when we give and receive love. Our free will is most fully realized when we bind ourselves passionately to another in abiding love!

The male singer in the Song of Solomon often refers to his lover as "my sister, my bride." This is especially true in the song or songs included in 4:8–15. What do these titles imply? To begin with, they are not to be taken literally. The Old Testament condemns sex between siblings (Lev. 18:9), and no hint of marriage appears anywhere in the Song of Songs except a reference to Solomon's wedding in 3:11. The terms are relational, affectionate ways of expressing "equality and solidarity."[2] "Sister/ brother"

1. Fr. Chuck Gallagher, S.J, *Parents Are Lovers* (New York: William H. Sadlier, Inc., 1976.

2. Keel, *Song of Songs*, p. 163.

are common terms of address in Egyptian and Sumerian love poetry as well as in the Bible (Gen. 19:7; Prov. 7:4; 1 Cor. 9:5). "Bride" may imply a hoped-for outcome, a dream, as in "my bride to be," but it is most likely not yet reality.

Much more likely, however, is that these terms point back to an ancient use of the songs in cultic rituals where the lovers were gods and goddesses! Before we find the hand of our God on these songs, we need to look at their role in prehistoric cults focusing on gods long dead. A whole school of interpretation has gathered around these songs as ancient hymns to fertility originating in the famous fertile crescent.

The particular song we are looking at actually gains in understanding when we apply this interpretation. The poem begins with a strange reference to a series of mountains around the highest peak in the north, Mount Lebanon (10,131 feet). But when we read the famous Gilgamesh Epic of Babylon from at least 2000 B.C. we find Lebanon referred to there as "the cedar mountain, abode of the gods, Throne seat of Ishtar."[3] This warlike goddess Ishtar was often associated with predatory animals (lions, leopards) as she is in 4:8.

In 4:9 we read of the mere glance of the woman's eye as "ravishing" her lover's heart. Keel translates the word for "ravish" as, "you drive me crazy!"[4] and it has the implication of an enchantment. When we read the following quote about the power of the goddess' eye to excite passion in men we get a better understanding of what is being said here:

> If but a glance from Thine eye falls on a blind old man incapable (through his years) of love, then hundreds of youthful women with loosened hair will follow him, their upper cloths slipping from their breasts rounded like jars and their girdles and lower cloth falling from about them (A. Avalon, 1953, 18, vs. 13).[5]

Now there's a goddess worthy of a man's attention!

The eight exotic plants found in the garden (4:13–15) are wonderful for their variety (Chinese, Indian, Arabian, African) and power. Three are used to anoint the king's wedding garments in Ps. 45:8, and all have erotic properties and associations with royalty and even divinity. They are clearly listed to suggest the range and power of the goddess who wears them.

Finally, the fountain flowing from Lebanon in 4:15 is a powerful symbol throughout ancient mythology and appears repeatedly in the Bible as a bubbling "spring," as living water (see Jer. 18:14; Gen. 26:19; John 4:14). The "river of the water of life," in Rev. 22:1 carries this image into the future. The goddess Ishtar is often pictured as a "mother" pouring rain from heaven or mountain springs into the irrigation ditches that carry water to the garden plots in the valley below.[6] This "living water" is their source of life.

What seems probable is that we have in this song the remnants of an ancient fertility ritual that was celebrated in the spring to unite the farmer's wish for fertile growth with the god's wish for sacred marriage or union. The commentaries are full of examples from all the ancient Near Eastern cultures. Here is but one song of the goddess Inanna:

> My brother has brought me into the garden.
> Dumuzi has brought me into the garden. . . .
> By an apple tree I kneeled as is proper.
> Before my brother coming in song, . . .
> I poured out plants from my womb . . . .[7]

These songs apparently outlived the gods they celebrated and were most likely sung in the spring to celebrate new life and possibly to bless new marriages. They clearly seek to bind human will or choice (to farm, to propagate) with the divine will or choice (to give life), just as they may still do for us today!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- Look again at the four activities in the "Parents Are Lovers" program. From your experience as lovers, parents, or spouses, what might be missing here? What characteristics of God (or human lovers) are not included here? Discuss the role of "pleasure" in today's lovemaking—and in your understanding of God.
- Do you think your choice of partner or spouse was "free will" or "predestined"? Is God "in" your love relationships in some way? Explain.
- Does it lessen or strengthen your appreciation of these songs to find that they may be from ancient cults no longer practiced? Why?

3. Keel, *Song of Songs*, p. 155.

4. Ibid., p. 161.

5. As quoted in Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 482.

6. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 496.

7. As quoted in Keel, *Song of Songs*, p. 172.

Marriage?

In today's culture of "family values" marriage is an important concept. It is reported that in the Billy Graham Crusade paraphrase of Scriptures this poem (4:9ff) was edited to emphasize the importance of marriage and avoid any possibility of incest![8] Yet we have carefully avoided referring to marriage until now. The songs almost completely overlook it! An interesting reason for this appears in Alex Comfort's *More Joy of Sex* where he writes: "Over a large part of human history, marriage hasn't primarily been concerned with sex but with two other things—property and kinship. . . "[9]

Church, state, and society at large have all had a stake in lovemaking—to bless it, tax it, and recognize it as legal and proper. These songs help us get behind the institution of marriage to the human experience from which it has grown.

That human experience is choice—choosing a partner or lover. Many other areas of human experience depended on that being a wise choice, and many personal reasons suggested that it be a permanent one. So these external reasons were loaded on to the original choosing and institutionalized as marriage.

This institution called marriage has taken a great many forms throughout history, and it continues to evolve today. With life spans twice as long as our recent ancestors and divorce a common phenomenon, marriage today is often serial polygamy—several spouses in sequence over one life span. King Solomon himself was famous for his harem of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). What is celebrated in the Song of Songs is not marriage but freely chosen and faithful love. The Bible is everywhere focused on this love ethic and its place at the center of our lives; it also pictures a variety of institutional settings in which this love can flourish. We need to keep this distinction clear as we turn to the Bible for guidance in today's supercharged climate of sexual debate.

Q&A

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- In Session 4 we noted that equality was critical in "lasting marriages" and promised to consider later the five other factors critical in assuring that our choice of partners lasts for a long time. They are the following: containment of conflict; mutuality in decision making; quality of communication; relational values of trust, respect, empathic understanding and equity; and sexual and psychological intimacy."[10] How can the church support these real "family values"?
- Two interesting proposals for changing the rules about marriage have emerged in recent years. Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan has argued that we should train our adolescents in all the varieties of lovemaking and allow them free reign—except for intercourse (genital penetration), which should be reserved for later marriage. His argument is fascinating and worth reading in full.[11]

In contrast, Alex Comfort argues that sex should be freely allowed between consenting adults but that "it's about time we kept the word 'marriage' for a lifestyle devoted to raising [children] in a stable environment, ... which is indissoluble until they are psychologically self-supporting."[12]

As a group discuss these options and suggest your own ways to institutionalize love in the modern world.

8. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 480.

9. Comfort, ed., *More Joy,* p. 147.

10. Mackey and O'Brien, *Lasting Marriages*, p. 142.

11. Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 58–65.

12. Comfort, ed., *More Joy,* p. 149.

session seven

My Lover's CONFIDENCE

Song of Sol. 8:6–7

One of the things we learn in successful lovemaking is confidence; we learn to trust another person with our body, mind, and soul. For many men, the lover is the only person to see behind their shield, to know their emotions, and hold tenderly their vulnerabilities. Recent efforts at men's and women's liberation and empowerment have sought to lessen this unidirectional dependence, but, without the trust-building experience of lovemaking, progress has been slow.

An important part of this process is developing a healthy spirituality, building a base for trust of self and others that is itself based on trust in a higher power, for Christians trust in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This does not lessen the importance of the primary love relationship, but in fact strengthens it—uses it as a springboard into confidence about all of life.

"Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8). This simple statement of confidence is at the heart of Christian living. It is echoed repeatedly in Scripture (Rom. 8:7; 1 John 3:14) and sets our temporal existence in eternal dimensions. The "last enemy to be destroyed is death," says the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:26), and we realize that he is talking about a cosmic battle that has been fought on our behalf.

It is the conviction of Marvin Pope, author of the giant commentary on "Song of Songs" in The Anchor Bible series, that these ancient songs of love are most likely to have their origins in ancient celebrations of life over death and that, hard as it may be for us to grasp, they probably originated in funeral settings! The heart of his argument lies with what he sees to be the core of the whole book, the line in 8:6 that reads, "for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave." We know that many ancient cultures founded their religious faith on myths of dying and rising gods who acted out in cosmic proportions the annual cycle of seed time and harvest—death and new life. We know that even today in places like Mexico "the Day of the Dead" is a time for taking flowers and food to grave sites and recalling—as though still present—the lives of dead loved ones. Pope argues that these love songs were part of such an ancient festival and that at their heart is a conviction that love is the one thing that can challenge even death. He reminds us of the confidence of Saint Paul in that same first letter to the Corinthians: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). This famous hymn to love also never mentions God, yet it stands at the very heart of our confidence as Christians.

However you decide about Marvin Pope's conclusions, it is clear that this little song at the end of the Song of Solomon has played a central role in understanding the whole book. Its language is indeed cosmic—flashes of raging flame, billowing floods, and all the wealth available; but they cannot prevail against love! All these attributes—fire, water, wealth—are assigned to gods in the ancient mythologies, and this song is far more than a personal affirmation of faith; it is a divine battle plan. Pope recalls a passage from ancient Ugaritic mythology in which Mot (Death) struggles with Mighty Baal (god of fertility):

> They push (?) like pachyderms (?)
> Mot is strong, Baal strong;
> They gore like buffalo,
> Mot is strong, Baal strong;
>
> They bite like serpents,
> Mot is strong, Baal strong;
> They kick like steeds,
> Mot is down, Baal down.[1]

The prophets of Israel struggled endlessly against this kind of Baal worship and pictured instead a different battle plan:

> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make
> for all peoples
> a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, . . .
> And he will destroy on this mountain
> the shroud that is cast over all peoples, . . .
> he will swallow up death forever.
> (Isaiah 25:6–7)

1. Pope, *Song of Songs*, p. 668.

Clearly there is a dimension to these songs that is far greater than the love between two persons. That love simply illustrates the profound struggle for meaning in all of life. And, in the words of 1 John 3:14. "Whoever does not love abides in death."

The poem begins with one lover asking the other to "wear" him or her on the other's heart or arm, a familiar request even today. The "seal" mentioned was comparable to our "signature" today, a legal way of giving assent. In the form of a ring, pendant, or cylinder, it was a most valuable possession and was worn close to the heart for safety as well as to imply sincerity. It stood for its owner's identity, integrity, and honor.

This request is probably as near as we come in the Song to a legal "marriage." It is a request for permanent relationship. And the concluding phrase about love's strength is much like our wedding vows—"In plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health; As long as we both shall live." Real love involves serious struggle, and the threats it will face are not always known ahead of time. To "sign" one's life into another person's keeping is a powerful act. It is properly set in a religious context. As James E. Dittes has remarked, "The religious enterprise is always played with pieces that move off the board."[2]

Love has often been cheapened in our time. It is too easily equated with sex and seen as weak and insignificant in the bigger picture. The church has a responsibility to teach and practice a love ethic in all that it does and to offer such a perspective to the society-at-large. As we have seen, a key ingredient in this ethic is equality and justice between women and men. Despite much current evidence to the contrary, the Song is correct; love cannot be bought (8:7). It is a free and life-affirming relationship which, when fully lived out, can stand toe to toe with everything the world might throw at it. The story of faith is often the story of love triumphant. As in ancient times, so today, it is profoundly true to see the hand of God on all loving relationships. We do not struggle alone. We affirm a God more passionate than any human lover, more ready to come into our lives than any waiting spouse, a God who signs the love contract with us using the sign/signature of a cross.

The Song of Solomon is a book full of mystery. Its interpretation is often unsure. But it has always been a pointer book for those who read it, directing their attention to something beyond its words—to the victory of Love.

- Jesus tells the woman at the well, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13–14). How would you describe this "living water" concept to an unbeliever? Jesus and the woman immediately get into an argument about her marital status (John 4:16–30). Read the passage and discuss what you think is going on here.
- The wedding vows end, "As long as we both shall live." Marriage clearly ends at death. But what about love? Do you still love those who are dead? Explain. What obligations to a dead loved one, spouse, are appropriate when you remarry? What might be inappropriate?
- Love is not all sweetness and light. It involves struggle and firmness as well. Describe your experiences with "tough love" and love that is as "strong as death."
- What do you think Jim Dittes means when he says that the religious dimension of life is played with "pieces that move off the board"?
- As you work at your love relationships, do you ever feel as though you are involved in a cosmic struggle between good and evil, love and death? How do you stay open to the possibility that your choices are mistakes?
- What are some ways that your church can teach equality and justice between women and men? What stands in your way of doing so?

A Summary and a Quiz

Arguably the most famous "song" in the Song of Solomon is one passage we have not yet studied. The NRSV calls it the "Springtime Rhapsody" (2:8–17), and we will use it as a kind of test or review quiz to see how much you have learned in your study of the Song of Solomon.

Every verse of this "rhapsody" is packed with implications. Some of these, such as the references to doves and little foxes, we have already noted. About others we have made only suggestive comments. You are now asked to fill in the meanings for these nine verses, to see if you have learned to "sing" the Song of Songs with insight.

Ask someone to read the song aloud, slowly and passionately. Listen for words and ideas that seem to tell you more than they say. Jot these words down on a slip of paper and then go around the group asking each person to mention one thing he

2. Dittes, *Driven by Hope*, p. 48.

noticed, one insight he has gained. Here are a list of possible terms you might choose:

1. "My beloved . . . bounding over the hills" (2:8)
2. "My beloved . . . a young stag" (2:9)
3. "My beloved . . . gazing . . . looking" (2:9)
4. "Arise, . . . come away" (2:10)
5. "the winter is past" (2:11)
6. "the time of singing has come" (2:12)
7. "the vines . . . give forth fragrance" (2:13)
8. "let me see . . . let me hear" (2:14)
9. "Catch us the . . . little foxes" (2:15)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

- When our youngest son got married, my wife hooked a rug for the new couple. It pictured a man and a woman dancing in a garden. Written on it were the words, "My beloved . . . come away." It was the invitation to love from this "Springtime Rhapsody." When the Bible ends (Rev. 22:20) with the oft-repeated call "Come, Lord Jesus!" what are we really asking for?
- Go back now and outline the steps of lovemaking you have covered in these seven sessions. From your own experience, what has been missed? What still needs to be said? Compare your list with the popular understanding of sexuality in our society. Where is each strong, where weak?
- Discuss ways that your church could build this study into its instruction of the young, the married, those with families. Discuss how you might use this teaching material with a group of single people, both young and old.
- We began the introduction to this study with three observations about the Song of Solomon that we will use at the end as questions:

1. Why do you think God is not mentioned anywhere in this book? Do you see it as a secular or as a religious book? Why?
2. What is the place of erotic love in your own religious understanding?
3. Why is love poetry so often timeless?

And, finally, the question that sums up all these others and that continues to be asked about the Song of Solomon: How would you now explain the presence of the Song of Solomon in the Bible?

The Writer

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