

## Sermon Notes

Song of Songs 1:1

“How to Read the Greatest Song”

A Sermon Meditation Series on the Song of Songs

September 15, 2019

### Introduction

- 1) Question: In your opinion, what is the greatest song of all time?
  - a) You probably picked one from your high school years?
  - b) Or your favorite hymn?
  - c) Maybe something more objective? Judging by popularity?  
(“White Christmas”, the “Birthday Song”, etc.)
  - d) There is only one correct answer! More about that later.
- 2) Originally Pastor Doug was going to do one more sermon on the Sabbath and then start a new series on King Josiah and the Book of Zephaniah.
- 3) He has decided to scrap this plan for two reasons:
  - a) Last week's sermon was an appropriate finish to the Sabbath series.
  - b) There seem to be a lot of people struggling, so a series on encouragement and God's love in Christ would seem appropriate.
  - c) In Pastor Doug's opinion the best book for this is: The Song of Songs.
- 3) Before we can get into this sublime, beautiful book we need a sermon explaining how to read it.
  - a) With the possible exception of Revelation, there is no book in the Bible that has been more debated than the Song of Songs.
  - b) Pastor Doug is very, very biased towards one way of reading this book, though there are many good and knowledgeable Christians on both sides.
- 4) So with apologies this sermon will be a bit of lecture, to prepare us to meditate on Christ's love for us found in the greatest song ever written.

### The Title and Author of the Song

- 1) There is even a debate on what to call this book!
  - a) The book is probably most commonly known as the “Song of Solomon” from the superscription.
  - b) It is also known as the “Song of Songs” which is taken from the first verse, “*The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.*” - SoS 1:1
  - c) Older books call it the “Canticles” and is abbreviated as “Cant.”
    - i) This is from the Latin title of the book: “*Canticum Canticorum.*”
    - ii) Or “*Song of Songs*” in English.

- 2) The book itself was written by King Solomon, as the first verse teaches.
- a) Solomon was the son of David and the last king of a united Israel. 1Kgs 1-11
  - b) Spiritually, he is a very ambiguous figure.
    - i) The Bible usually tells us if a king was good or bad with such lines as “*he did evil in the sight of the Lord.*” 2Kgs 3:2; 8:18; 13:2,11  
14:24; 15:9,18,24,28
    - ii) There is no such line for Solomon.
  - c) He was known for his great power and wisdom. 1Kgs 3:6-28;4:20-34; 10:14-29
    - i) He wrote three books in the Bible (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs), and two Psalms (72, 127). 1Kgs 4:31-32
    - ii) He built the first Temple to God. 1Kgs 6; 8:13-51
    - iii) Israel reached its height of worldly power under Solomon. 1Kgs 10:1ff
    - iv) He is a figure and type of the future Messiah, Jesus Christ. 2Sam 7:12-17
  - d) Yet he let his thousands of wives lead him into paganism and he dies with the kingdom on the brink of civil war because of God’s judgment. 1Kgs 11:1
  - e) Could parts of the Bible be written by a person who “wasn’t saved”?
- 3) This is why Pastor Doug prefers the title “Song of Songs.”
- a) The book is less about Solomon and more about the greatest song every written!
  - b) Why is this the greatest song ever written?
  - c) God directly tells us in the Bible: This is “the Song of Songs” to quote verse 1.
    - i) To say something is the “something” of “something” is the Hebrew way to describe it as the greatest person or thing.<sup>1</sup>
    - ii) So God is the “*Lord of lords*”, “*God of gods*” who dwells in the “*holy of holies*” in the “*heaven of heavens*”. Ex 26:33-34; Deut 10:17; 2Chr 3:8,10;  
4:22; 5:7; Ps 136:3; Dan 2:47; 11:36;  
1Tim 6:15; Heb 9:3; Rev 17:14; 19:16
    - iii) The greatest foolishness is the “vanity of vanities.” Eccles 1:2; 12:8
  - d) So if the Bible states this is the “Song of Songs” then it is the greatest song of all time.

### **The Big Debate: How to Interpret the Song of Songs**

- 1) The big debate about the SoS is how to read this book, which greatly impacts how to explain and preach it.
- 2) What makes it so strange is that the book is a fairly steamy love poem that doesn’t mention God.<sup>2</sup>
  - a) Read the next three verses!

<sup>1</sup> Also see: The “King of kings” (Ezra 7:12; Ezek 26:7; Dan 2:37; 1Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14; 19:16), “Age of ages” (Eph 3:21), “Prince of princes” (Dan 8:25), “Servant of servants” (Gen 9:25) and “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5).

<sup>2</sup> The Almighty might be mentioned in SoS 8:6b, depending on how one translates the text from the Hebrew. NASB reads: “. . . *The very flame of the LORD.*” While the NET translates it as: “. . . *it is a blazing flame.*”

b) *“May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine. Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, your name is like purified oil; Therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you and let us run together! The king has brought me into his chambers.”* – SoS 1:2-4a

c) How do you preach that in church?!

3) There are two major ways of reading this book:

a) Approach #1 – **Literal**

- i) It is a straight up love poem between a young man and woman who greatly desire each other.
- ii) So the book is interpreted as giving wisdom about married life.
- iii) This is the most popular way for reading the SoS among modern evangelical and conservative scholars.

b) Approach #2 – **Allegory**<sup>3</sup>

- i) The book is not really about two young people who want to be together, but is an allegory between Christ and His Church.
- ii) The bridegroom (the man) is Christ and the bride (the woman) is the church.
- iii) So this isn't about marriage and male/female relations, but a poem about what it is like to long for Christ and His love for us.
- iv) This approach is not popular today, but it was the exclusive way of reading it from the ancient through early modern times.

4) Pastor Doug is fully (100%!) in the allegory camp, though there is certainly freedom on which camp one can be in.

5) But why all the concern about allegory?

a) In Late Antiquity and into the Middle Ages the allegorical method was popular and viewed as the more “spiritual” way of reading the Bible.

b) This has two big problems:

- i) You can make any verse mean anything you want.
- ii) Or only the spiritually advanced priestly class can truly get the Bible.

c) The Protestant Reformers correctly condemned the allegorical approach.

- i) They called for the plain (or literal) reading as the only approach.<sup>4</sup>
- ii) Trying to understand the intent of the author through the study of the text's grammar and historical setting.
- iii) Thus the critical Protestant doctrine of “*sola Scriptura*” (Scripture alone).
  - That Scripture alone is the final authority.

<sup>3</sup> An allegory is "to express a truth by using symbolic characters or ideas."

<sup>4</sup> Called the "Grammatico-historical approach". Literal means the plain simple meaning. It seeks to take the biblical words and settings at face value, though it is sensitive to linguistic, cultural and historical nuances. So a literal interpreting of Psalm 63:7 (“Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice.”, KJV) does not mean God has wings.

- And the critical parts of the Bible (God, salvation, etc.) can be understood by anyone who has the Spirit.

- 6) Pastor Doug strongly believes in *sola Scriptura* as a core doctrine of the Christian faith.
  - a) He also believes the allegorical method is wrong and dangerous.
  - b) With one exception: The Song of Songs.
  - c) He believes the “literal” way to read the SoS is an allegory, even though the book doesn’t directly tell us to read it as an allegory.
  - d) It is the only book in the Bible where one should use the allegorical method.

### **In Defense of an Allegorical Reading of the Song of Songs**

- 1) First and foremost, the title tells us this is the greatest song ever written.
  - a) Even though God is never mentioned in the book, the greatest song has to be about Christ and His love. 1Cor 13:13
  - b) Because Christ is the “King of kings” and “Lord of lords.” 1Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14; 19:16
  - c) Christ Himself taught that all the Bible is about Him. John 6:39-47; Luke 24:25-27; Acts 13:27
  - d) We are commanded to sing a “new song” unto the Lord, and the new song is about Christ. Ps 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Is 42:10; Rev 5:9; 14:3
- 2) The imagery of the SoS is common throughout the Bible, which is about God.
  - a) God the Father is like a bridegroom. Is 62:1-5; Hos 2:14-20
  - b) Jesus is the bridegroom. Matt 9:14-17; 25:1-10; John 3:25-30; Rev 18:21-24
  - c) The Church is the Bride of Christ. Is 61:10; Rev 19:7-19; 21:1-9; 22:17
  - d) Love is defined within the context of the church. 1Cor 12:27 – 14:1
  - e) Unfaithfulness/idolatry is described as adultery: To play the harlot after false gods.<sup>5</sup>
  - f) Faithfulness is described as marital fidelity. Hos 3:1-5; Eph 5:21-32
- 3) The Hebrew word for sensual love (*'ahabah*; אָהַבָה) is found throughout the SoS and is used for God’s love for His people.<sup>6</sup> SoS 2:4-5,7; 3:5; 5:4; 8:4,6-7
- 4) Historically, the universal way to read the SoS is an allegory up through the Reformation.
  - a) The reason the ancient Jews thought the SoS should be included in the Bible was that it was meant to be read as an allegory.<sup>7</sup>
    - i) The SoS is read during the Passover, the most important Jewish holiday.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ex 34:11-17; Lev 17:7; 20:1-6; Num 15:39; 25:1-5; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27,33; 1Chr 5:25; 2Chr 21:11-15; Ps 106:34-39; Ezek 6:9; 16:9-59; 20:30; Hos 4:7-19; 5:3; 9:1; Rev 2:20-24; 17:1-13.

<sup>6</sup> As sensual love: Gen 29:20; 2Sam 1:26; 13:15; 1Kgs 11:1-2; Eccl 9:1,6; Ps 109:4-5; Prov 5:19-20; 7:18; 15:17; Jer 2:2,33. For God’s love for His people: Deut 7:8; 2Chr 2:11; 9:8; 31:3; Hos 3:1; Mic 6:8; Zeph 3:17.

<sup>7</sup> At the Jewish Council of Yabneth (Jamnia), in the 1st century AD, Rabbi Aqiba defending an allegorical reading, and that the SoS should be in the Bible said, “Perish the thought! No man of Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs, that it did not defile the hands (i.e. that it is sacred). The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” (Pope, 19).

- ii) For the ancient Jews there were four parts of the Scriptures that were considered too profound for children to read.<sup>8</sup>
    - They were called the “holy of holies.”
    - Which were the beginning and ending of Ezekiel, Genesis, and the Song of Songs!
  - c) The earliest of Christians read the SoS as an allegory.
    - i) For the medievals, the SoS was considered the most profound book in the Bible, because it was about our mystical union with Christ.<sup>9</sup>
    - ii) The one ancient that argued for reading the SoS as a literal love poem concluded it should be removed from the Bible! Because of this, he, Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428 AD), was condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.
  - d) Though the early Reformers and Puritans strongly rejected the allegory method, those who wrote on the SoS interpreted it as an allegory.<sup>10</sup>
  - e) With the rise of liberalism, simplistic fundamentalism, and our secular culture’s worship of sex, the allegorical method has become less popular.
- 5) The “literal” reading about marriage doesn’t make any sense.
- a) There is nothing wrong with physical relations between married people, which is a good, enjoyable and holy thing created by God.
  - b) However, this book isn’t about marriage!
    - i) It’s about two young people who really, really desire each other.
    - ii) And the lovers are not married! SoS 3:1-4
    - iii) Remember Solomon’s main problem in life: Chasing after too many women!
  - c) One has to torture the book more trying to get hear it only about marriage than reading it in the traditional fashion as an allegory.
  - d) So by “the impossibility of the contrary” we are forced to read the SoS as an allegory.
- 6) Finally, the canonical order (how the books are ordered in the Bible) of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs brings great insight.
- a) By ancient Jewish tradition Solomon wrote these three books at certain times at his life:
    - i) Song of Songs as a young man very much interested in a woman.
    - ii) Proverbs as a middle aged man concerned about life and wisdom.
    - iii) Ecclesiastes as a bitter old man.
  - b) It is interesting to note how our, and the most ancient, Bibles order these books.
    - i) Not SoS, Prov, Eccles, but: Proverbs – Ecclesiastes – Song of Songs

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<sup>8</sup> Hieron, Praefat. In Ezekiel. Origen, Prolog. Cant. Cantic.

<sup>9</sup> For the best of the medieval writes on the SoS see Bernard of Clairvaux’s amazing commentary.

<sup>10</sup> See Martin Luther’s commentary on the SoS. In the beginning he decries the allegorical method and then spends most of the time in the book talking about Christ.

- ii) Pastor Doug thinks this is the key to interpret all three of these books.
  - iii) Yes, pursue earthly wisdom and being a good person (Proverbs),  
but if that is your hope, it ends in desire (Ecclesiastes );  
the real answer to life, however, is to love Christ (Song of Songs).
  - iv) Please note the next book, Isaiah, is the most Christocentric prophetic book.
- 7) Therefore, Pastor Doug argues the literal way to read the SoS is as an allegory.  
(Though again this is very debatable.)

### **Conclusion – How to Read the Song of Songs**

- 1) Though the Bible is meant to be read by all Christians, the SoS does require maturity.  
Its sexual imagery could be distracting for more juvenile minds.
- 2) Instead, we are to hear Christ in this book.
  - a) We the church are the bride and Christ is the bridegroom.
  - b) No other book in the Bible so beautifully patterns how we should desire union with Christ and His complete love for us.
- 3) Unlike any other book in the Bible, the SoS isn't about systematic doctrine, like reading the Law, which can never be read allegorically.
  - a) It's about poetry, art, emotion and experience.
    - i) It paints images with words.
    - ii) Encourages the imagination to “wander” about its images.
    - iii) More like looking at a painting, or listening to music, than reading Romans.
  - b) It encourages you to be creative in understanding it.
    - i) Again like the feelings caused by looking at great art, instead of reading the law.
    - ii) Thus Pastor Doug's sermon series will be “meditations on the SoS.”  
One does not dogmatically cite the SoS.
    - iii) This requires a great deal of maturity and biblical knowledge, however,  
to have firm orthodox boundaries while pondering this book.
- 4) Finally, SoS is propaedeutic.<sup>11</sup>
  - a) Patriotic music doesn't teach how to be a good citizen, but does excite patriotism.  
Romantic music doesn't teach how to be a good spouse, but does make us romantic.  
Martial music doesn't teach how to fight, but it does put one in a fighting mood.  
Energetic music doesn't teach how to exercise, but can make one want to exercise.  
Like Harry Chapin's “Cat's in the Cradle” convicts about fatherhood.
  - b) The Song of Songs doesn't teach how God loves us, or how we must love God,  
but excites the believer to greater love of God and trust in Christ's love for us.
- 5) So the Song of Songs is about contemplating and meditating on the love of God.

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<sup>11</sup> Propaedeutic: something that introduces a subject and excites the imagination. Reading a manual about spacecraft engineering is didactic (about teaching). Watching Star Trek can be propaedeutic to a child by exciting the imagination which leads to a career in engineering.