

SONG OF SOLOMON 2:3-13 THE GREATEST THING

From The Wall Street Journal: “Jogging in Atlanta a year ago, Chris Tuff tripped and fell. As his girlfriend, Julie Augustyniak, tried to help him up, Mr. Tuff, already on bended knee, pulled a diamond ring from his gym shorts.

“Julie, I love you more than anything else in the world,” he said.

“Unbeknownst to Ms. Augustyniak, a cameraman lurking in a parked car nearby zoomed in and recorded her running into the street, screaming. She eventually calmed down enough to say yes - on camera.

“In case you missed this scene, you can now watch it on the couple’s wedding Web site...”

Thus another “Wed Site,” where you can watch almost everything associated with the engagement and marriage of people.

Whenever you see things like that, don’t you feel a mix of curiosity and discomfort? You kind of want to see, but you’re not sure you want to see?

That may be how you feel as you read the book of Song of Solomon. You may wonder why it is in the Bible at all. It’s a pretty detailed description of the relationship between a man and a woman, and you don’t even see the name of God anywhere in the book.

But it is here - maybe to remind us that God is involved with everything about our lives. Song of Solomon is part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. So God has preserved it for us, so we can learn from it.

The author of the book is probably King Solomon. We don’t know whether he is writing about himself, or someone else. We simply see the words of one lover, one beloved, and the friends who watch this relationship develop.

But what relationship is he writing about?

Some believe this is just the story of two people who love each other and want to be with each other.

But others say the two people are symbols for God and his people in Israel. They say this book is really about that relationship.

Which is right? It is the story of two people in love. But we should also notice that it is included in God’s bigger story of how he brings people back to a right relationship with himself. The book is about love and marriage, but it also teaches us about God’s greater plan, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

So as we ponder these words, let’s think about how these words describe life in marriage, and direct us to life issues beyond marriage.

Life IN MARRIAGE. What does this book teach us about marriage?

It’s easy to see. In marriage, we delight, and we desire.

WE DELIGHT. In the verses I read, we see the beloved woman delighting in the thought of the one she loves.

Verse 3: “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.”

He comforts her. He is like the shade of a tree to her. As the sun beats down on her, she finds comfort in him.

He enriches her. Like a sweet fruit, he gives her delightful pleasures that add a real richness to her life.

In marriage, we delight. In marriage, WE DESIRE.

Verse 4: “He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love.” This gets lost a bit in the English translation, but Hebrew students say the words here probably describe how he looks at her.

Verse 5: “Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love.” He looks at her, and she longs for him until she is faint.

Verse 6: “His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me.” After they look and they long,

they love each other physically.

Looking, longing, and loving: the desire of a husband for his wife, and a wife for her husband. In marriage, we delight, and we desire.

So what does this mean for our lives? How do these images of delight and desire speak to us?

First, they warn us.

After the woman describes this delight and desire, she warns her friends, “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.”

Like a lot of phrases in Song of Solomon, it’s hard to know exactly what she is saying, but she seems to be admitting that delight and desire can be rather powerful forces in our lives, so we need to be careful about them.

This speaks to the issue of entering into relationships, for all of us.

Have you never been married? Maybe you are 15, or maybe you are 50. Delight and desire, when they are awakened in you, will be strong. It is wise for you to take care in your relationships, until you are ready to awaken such delight and desire, in a marriage relationship.

Were you once married, and want to be married again? You know delight and desire are strong when they are awakened. So you know it is wise to be careful in your relationships, until marriage allows the delights and desires to awaken.

Are you now married? You also know the strength of delight and desire. With those who are not your spouse, wisdom calls you to take great care not to awaken such delights and desires in yourself or others.

We struggle with this. We are consumed by a culture that fuels delights and feeds desires. We are tempted to walk as close to the fire of delight or desire as we can, without being burned.

We like to flirt. We like to fantasize. We like to fool around, and feel good. But it is foolish to awaken delight and desire, before marriage.

And someone should tell us that. Isn’t interesting, as you read this book, to keep reading the words of these friends? Why are they here? Why don’t they just go away and leave these lovers to themselves?

Because as we live before God, our relationships are not a private issue. They are a covenant community issue.

Author Lauren Winner writes, “...the Bible tells us that talking to one another about what is really going on in our lives is...not an intrusion at all, because what’s going on in my life is already your concern...”

“Speaking to one another about our sexual selves is just one...instance of a larger piece of Christian discipleship: being community with each other.”

The beloved woman of Song of Solomon spoke of delight and desire with her friends. No matter what your situation in life: do you have friends, with whom you can discuss issues of delight and desire?

Young people: do you have a friend to help you bear your temptations?

Once married: is there someone you can tell about your loneliness?

Already married: to whom can you admit wanderings of eyes and heart?

Delight and desire. They warn us.

Yet also, they call us.

Some say the Song of Solomon is a description of how life should be, as we live out the blessing of marriage given in Genesis. In the earliest chapters of the Bible, God blessed the man and woman in marriage. So marriage ought to be a blessing. It should be a place of delight and desire.

If you are married today, do you believe this?

We are tempted toward what smart people call “Christoplatonism.” That’s when you mix Christianity with the thinking of Greek philosophers like Plato. If you think this way, you think the physical is bad. What’s really important, for the Christoplatonist, is the spirit. So delight is bad. Desire is bad. We must deny it, or downplay it.

No! It is okay, in the union of marriage, to delight and desire! God made marriage, and God made all the

good stuff that goes with marriage. It is not a sin to look, long and love in marriage.

So if you are married today, I ask, are you intentionally searching for ways to build delight and desire in your marriage relationship?

Or are you too distracted by other things? Maybe you are too busy for this one whom God has said is one with you.

Or maybe you have lost your interest in this. Maybe you read how the lover and beloved talk in the Song of Solomon, and you don't feel that way.

Last year at a Presbytery meeting, Rod Mays, who leads the college ministry of our denomination, Reformed University Ministries, said this:

“We have raised a generation of young men who cannot relate to a woman who is not air-brushed.”

What did he mean? Our culture surrounds us with images of women who are supposedly perfect. After that, reality might seem a bit dull.

And it's not just young men, for our culture surrounds us with images of men who are supposedly perfect. Reality might also seem dull for women.

Marriage is not about perfection. No human being is close to perfect in any way. Marriage is about delight in, and desire for, your husband or wife. The words of Song of Solomon call us to this.

So I call you to this. If you are struggling with this, I urge you to pray and seek counsel for this. Delight and desire should flourish in our marriages. It can happen. By God's grace, with the work of God's Spirit, it can be so.

But the words of this book do not just warn and call us in marriage. We also learn and grow from them, when we think BEYOND MARRIAGE.

What do I mean by that? When we talk about marriage, we are talking about more than marriage. As we see the joys of marriage in this book, and as we see how the rest of the Bible uses this image of marriage, we see the greatness of the love and hope that are ours in Jesus Christ.

Beyond marriage, WE SEE THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he writes about marriage. You have probably heard the main points. Husbands, love. Wives, submit.

But we easily forget Paul's larger purpose. As he writes about marriage, he proclaims, “I am talking about Christ and the church.” In other words, as we read Paul's words about marriage, and as we realize that he knew all about Song of Solomon, we realize that the delight and desire in Song of Solomon is a picture of the delight and desire of Jesus Christ, for his church.

Jesus' delight and desire was expressed this way: he gave his life for the church, so that the church might be holy and blameless, and so that his people might dwell with him forever.

The writer of the Song of Solomon knew all about such love. He knew God had chosen Israel as his special, beloved people - his bride. Now we who know Jesus Christ have received the same love! God has chosen to delight in us and to desire us as his own.

When we see the delight and desire of marriage, we see the delight and desire of Jesus for his church. Jesus loves us that much!

Yet beyond marriage, we not only see the love of Christ, WE HAVE THE HOPE OF CHRIST.

Let's fast-forward to the last part of the last book of the Bible: the book of Revelation. The journey of marriage started in Genesis, and it will conclude with a wedding meal.

Evil has been defeated. A great multitude worships God, and the angel declares God's blessing upon...who? Upon “the bride”.

And where is this “bride” invited to go? To the wedding meal, with the One who has made her, his own.

Jesus is the groom. The church is the bride. It will be time for a wedding feast to top all wedding feasts.

Jesus has not just loved his church. Jesus will love his church forever. Through faith in Jesus, we have the hope of eternity with the Savior whom God has joined to us. And what God has joined, no one will ever

separate.

When we see the delight and desire of marriage, we see the hope of eternity. The union established at the cross, reaches full flowering when eternity arrives. That is our hope.

We see the love of Christ. We have the hope of Christ. These words also provide us with a warning, and a call.

They warn us that marriage is great, but something is greater.

If you seek the delight and desire of marriage, that is fine. If you enjoy your marriage, that is good.

But we can idolize marriage. It can become as a false god to us, whether or not we are married. We might believe marriage is the solution to every one of our problems, and the relationship that will meet all of our needs.

It is not. And when we think it is, we ask marriage to bear a weight that it was never meant to bear. Yes, we strive for oneness. We pursue intimacy. But the love of marriage never removes our need for God's love, and the hope of marriage is small, compared to the hope of heaven.

Author Francis Schaeffer wrote, "The trouble with human relationships is that man without God does not realize that all men are sinful, and so he hangs too much on his personal relationships, and they crush and break."

Marriage is great, but something else is greater.

So these words also call us. They call us to find our greatest desire and delight, in Jesus Christ.

"...earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

Where are those words from? Are they from the Song of Solomon? No. They are from Psalm 63:

"O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

"I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

"Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

"I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

"My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you."

Our souls are satisfied in God, who has reunited us to himself in Jesus. Even the best of marriages cannot satisfy, like Jesus Christ.

Are you young or not so young today, and hoping to be married someday? That is good. But the most important relationship you will ever have, is your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Have you lost a spouse through divorce or death? It is all right to grieve. But the most important relationship you will ever have, is your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Are you married? It may be grueling, or it may be glorious. But the most important relationship you will ever have, is your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Whatever your season and station in life, do you have that relationship? Do you know the love, and have the hope, of Jesus? Turn from the sin that keeps you from God. Look in faith to Jesus.

If you do know the love and the hope of Jesus, does your life reflect the fact that this is your most important relationship?

Relationships involve communication. In relationship with Jesus, you hear from him in his word, and you speak to him in prayer.

Relationships involve commitment. In relationship with Jesus, you are "sold out" to serving him, in whatever he may ask you to do.

In the relationship of marriage, Christians do not just settle for "survival" or "maintenance". We strive for oneness.

In our relationship with Jesus, Christians do not just settle for a "passing acquaintance" or an "occasional contact." We strive for oneness.

You may remember the bestseller from a few years ago, “Tuesdays With Morrie.” It is the story of conversations between a professor named Morrie and one of his former students, as Morrie faces death.

During one conversation, Morrie says, “In the beginning of life, when we are infants, we need others to survive, right? And at the end of life, when you get like me you need others to survive, right?”

“But here’s the secret: in between, we need others as well.”

In marriage, we delight in each other, and we desire each other. But married or not, we need this other Person: Jesus Christ. Through his love, and with his hope, knowing him is the greatest thing.