

Our Bodies Tell God's Story

Hello, & thanks for listening to *Voice of the Church*. I'm Pastor Ryan Swale, & want to look at Song of Songs Ch. 7 today, into the beginning of Ch. 8. One of the more sensual passages in the book, where the bridegroom describes bride's beauty, & she responds by offering her love & then giving a *warning* to those listening not to awaken love before the proper time.

It says: "How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your 2 breasts like fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Carmel, & your flowing locks are like purple. A king is held captive in the tresses."

"How beautiful & how pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, & your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree & lay hold of its fruit. *Oh*, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, & the scent of your breath like apples, & your mouth like the best wine..." And then she says, "It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth. I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me."

And then invites him out into the fields to lodge in the village, to see whether the vines have budded in the vineyard, & whether the grapes are ready to enjoy, & says, "there I'll give you my love... I wish you were like a brother to me; I'd kiss you & none would despise me. I'd lead you into the house of my mother & give you wine to drink... His left hand is under my head, & his right hand embraces me... I adjure you, O daughters of Zion, not to stir up or awaken love until it pleases."

Maybe you're wondering why a passage like this is in the Bible. *What's the use of it...?* That's a good question. One that I think is answered well by a recent denominational report on human sexuality, that commends the Song of Song's for the church's use, saying, "In an era of incessant media depictions of unrestrained lust, contrasted by segments of the church that speak only negatively – or not at all – to human sexuality, ***the Song of Songs celebrates the beauty of bodies & boundaries of sexual love...***" The beauty of bodies & boundaries of human love... That well captures this passage – let's think just a bit about those 2 things.

First, the beauty of the body. As the king describes the bride, the first words out of his mouth are “*how beautiful!*” And he starts with her feet, & goes up to her head in vv. 1-5, naming 10 body-parts in which he delights, stating in verse 1, “You’re like the work of a master hand” – acknowledging the goodness of the body as created by God. Implying sexuality is not *dirty*, but a *good* thing given by God...

And the goodness & beauty of the body, he goes on to describe in v. 2, comparing her to a rounded bowl never lacking mixed-wine – meaning his delight in her *form* is like the privileged enjoyment of the best wine... He compares her waist to a bundle of wheat encircled with lilies, using Promised Land imagery, describing her as a fertile-plain, a rich vineyard, a place of precious jewels set with *lilies*... And likens her chest to fawns (twins of a gazelle), as if to say, “they’re like graceful animals in the midst of the promised land under God’s blessing.” Your body is a paradise! And because it is, life-sustaining. He describes her neck, & eyes & nose with more Promised Land-imagery. Like an ivory tower, pools of Heshbon, tower of Lebanon. And is held captive by her beauty. He’s *mesmerized* by it!

Here, we see the goodness of bodily beauty celebrated. He says, “How fair & pleasant you are, O love, with your delights!” and compares her to a palm tree, whose clusters he’ll take hold of. He says her mouth is like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips & teeth...”

We see the beauty of the body in this passage. The Word is not afraid to acknowledge bodily beauty... Sometimes the church *is*; but the Word is not... “The Song,” to quote that sexuality report, “helps us recover a theology of the body that’s rooted in creation & resurrection theology. We believe in Creation; we believe in the resurrection of the body; we believe in the Incarnation where Christ dignifies our created humanity by taking on flesh... And *deny* the heresy of Gnosticism that says our souls are good but bodies are bad.”

And where we sometimes stray from these confessions in practice, the Song brings us back, celebrating the physicality of our created being & bodily-beauty designed by God to be delighted in. This whole section celebrates bodily beauty as created by God, and the privilege that those united in marriage *have* of enjoying that beauty together... It’s a gift from God. And the church has sometimes so emphasized the dangers of enjoying it in the *wrong* way that we’ve failed to celebrate the beauty of enjoying it in the *right* way! And in so far as we’ve done this, we have unwittingly communicated that Satan somehow has a corner on pleasure...

But sexual pleasure & bodily beauty are *part* of God's good plan... And the warnings Scripture gives regarding it are not because God is some sort of cosmic killjoy, but because in his kindness, he wants this gift to be enjoyed in the right way...

Which brings us to the *boundaries* of sexual love. I'll say just 2 things about this. V. 11 implies that it's to be enjoyed *privately*, as she says, "let's go somewhere private." 8:1, she says the same, "I wish you were like my brother." Where, in ancient time, public displays of affection were inappropriate, except for siblings. So, she says, "I wish I could embrace you right now!" But recognizes there are boundaries to sexual love; & one of them is *it's to be enjoyed privately*. Not on screen for everyone to see. But in the privacy of the marriage bed... And, so, there is a disapproval of the kind of thing that so pervades our modern age: "the incessant media depictions of unrestrained lust..." The Bible says, "There's no place for that." And no place for believers to view it...

We see the Song speaking more to the boundaries of sexual love in 8 v. 4. "Do not awaken love until it pleases..." The 3rd time this phrase comes up in the book, as it emphasizes waiting to enjoy this kind of intimacy until the proper time in the context of marriage... In fact, everything we see in 7:1-8:3 is in the *context* of marriage... The enjoyment of bodily beauty, the description of bodily beauty, even the kind of passionate open-mouthed kissing of 7 v.9 seems to be reserved for marriage. Outside the context of marriage there is a *longing* for it (we see that in Ch. 1), but only *within* marriage do we find descriptions like we do in 4 v. 11 or 7 v.9, because the bride & king recognize certain activities, certain kinds of touch, certain kinds of speech stir up & awaken love, in violation of 8 v. 4... And, so, the Song sets boundaries on sexual-love.

And the *reason* it does, the reason the Song extols the beauty of bodies & boundaries of sexual love is ultimately because of what it represents. The *bridal mystery of the gospel*. Gerald Hiestand says the reason you shouldn't awaken love before the proper time with someone who's not yet your spouse is because it paints an unclear picture of Christ & the church, "who from the beginning of time reserved his deepest affections & desires for his bride, even before he met her... This image should be expressed in our *own* wait for marriage. Christ was faithful in body & heart to a bride he'd not yet met..." And we should be too. The reason for the boundaries of sexual love in the Song is because of the "bridal mystery of the gospel" *contained* in sexual love...!

Paul says in Eph. 5, “This mystery [of the one-flesh union] is profound, & it refers to Christ & the church.” Our bodies tell God’s story. One writer says, “Sex is not just about sex, but the way we understand & express our sexuality points to our deepest held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Christ is, what the church is, the meaning of love, ordering of society, and mystery of the universe.” And that’s the whole point of this Song. That the biblical ode to erotic love found in the middle of the Bible takes us to the very heart of the biblical faith, & is an entrance to the wedding feast that never ends. It takes the song of heaven, one writer says, & transposes it to an earthly key... That’s how the church has always taken this Song: it’s called the “*Song of Songs*” because it sings the “mystery of mysteries” in the *love of loves* of the King of Kings... That’s why it matters that we take these things seriously...

As one pastor said, “Knowledge of this higher reality helps us know how to live in the *earthly* reality, patterning our sexuality after the way Christ & the church relate spiritually,” with not only **unabashed celebration of beauty and desire**, but enjoying those things within certain boundaries... In an era of sexual chaos in the world & sexual silence in the church, *we need this Song!* It sings God’s love for us & teaches us how to love... And as we fall short of its pattern – which all of us do – it reminds us that the love of heaven’s bridegroom took him to the Cross to **heal, cleanse, & restore** even our sexual sin, disordered desires, & guilt-ridden pasts...

Whatever state you find yourself in, may the Lord encourage you by this Song, to receive his grace, & to live faithfully before him whether married or unmarried... Thank you for listening, and may God bless you.