

# Love Song

Song of Songs  
2:8-17

*Solomon's Song of Songs  
and The Call of Love*



## The Bride Adores Her Beloved

<sup>8</sup> The voice of my beloved!

Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.

<sup>9</sup> My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Behold, there he stands behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
looking through the lattice.

<sup>10</sup> My beloved speaks and says to me:

"Arise, my love, my beautiful one,  
and come away,

<sup>11</sup> for behold, the winter is past;  
the rain is over and gone.

<sup>12</sup> The flowers appear on the earth,  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.

<sup>13</sup> The fig tree ripens its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.

## The Call of Love

<sup>14</sup> O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,  
in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face,  
let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet,  
and your face is lovely.

<sup>15</sup> Catch the foxes for us,  
the little foxes that  
spoil the vineyards,  
for our vineyards  
are in blossom."

<sup>16</sup> My beloved is mine,  
and I am his;  
he grazes among the lilies.

<sup>17</sup> Until the day breathes  
and the shadows flee,  
turn, my beloved,  
be like a gazelle  
or a young stag  
on cleft mountains.

- Song of Songs 2:8-17



## Notes on Song of Songs 2:8-17

**Summary...** At the heart of this song within the Song of Songs are the captivating words of invitation introduced, reported and then responded to by the Bride.

In her introduction to his beautiful song to her (v.9), she says something about her beloved's *possession*, powerful vitality, his *position*, appropriately outside her "wall," and his *passion*, fixed upon her and longing to be closer.

Then she repeats, for herself and for her listeners, the call of love: Her beloved's poetic invitation to come away with him, to move together to a place neither of them has been before, a place where there is only room for two who then become one (vv.10-15).

Finally, she responds with her own poetic "Yes!" to his call, affirming his beauty in her eyes, his sweetness in her ears, his blessing in her life and his rightful place in her heart (vv.16-21).

Verse 8-9 - **voice...** it is significant that the beloved does more than simply *feel* his love: He *speaks* and she hears!... **leaping...** the comparison to a gazelle speaks of his vitality... **standing...** **gazing...** the beloved has come near. Notice the rapid movement of these verses... she hears him, then sees him leaping toward her, then he is standing just outside, peering in toward her... He stands **behind our wall**, the solid divider between them... It is not a stretch to see this as speaking of his appropriate place at this point in their relationship, before their wedding day... The "wall" of her virtue, the fact of her virginity, the protection around the fertile and delightful garden in which her children will grow, remains solid to this longing lover until the time is right... And from this position of respect for his beloved bride and reverence for their God, he utters his romantic call...

v.10-13 - **Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away...** just as the entire song features an “inclusio/envelope/bookend” element with the image of the bounding antelope at its beginning and end, so the “song within the song,” the man’s call, begins and ends with this beautiful and passionate refrain... **winter is past... flowers... singing... turtledove... fig tree... blossom... fragrance...** once again appealing to all our senses, the call of love from the man uses springtime imagery to encourage his beloved to conclude with him that for them now the time is right for love to awaken... “Have you ever wondered,” asks S. Craig Glickman in his commentary on The Song, “why spring has always been the season for lovers, the background of romantic literature in every century? It must be because the season of spring reflects the experience of the young lovers. Everything is fresh; new life flows through the world; happiness and colors triumph over winter’s boring grays. Whenever any couple falls in love, it is spring for them because their lives are fresh; everything in life has a new perspective; what was black and white is now in color; what was dark is light” (A Song for Lovers, p.46).

v.14-15 - Following his poetic call to love, the man speaks of desire and invites the woman to join him in the beautiful and mutual “game” of love... **dove...** this bird was a symbol in the ancient Near East for romantic love and sexuality... **clefts of the rock... crannies of the cliff... let me see your face...** the woman is beyond his reach, fundamentally inaccessible to him, unless she comes out to him... This theme runs throughout his speeches... For him to secure the pleasure of their union, the love he so desires with her, she must open the door for him... He cannot force his way in by brute strength... Real love must be mutual... So he woos her with his words acknowledging the love he has for her in his heart, praising her beauty in his eyes and longing out loud for the pleasure only she can bring to his whole body... **catch the little foxes...** this phrase and the whole verse is very difficult to interpret... **Foxes** were known as troublesome pests in the ancient world who would steal grapes from vineyards... And as we have seen already, **vineyard** can symbolize a person’s body or life (see 1:6)... but we are still left to wonder what it all means... The summary by Dr. Duane Garrett (New American Commentary) is helpful:

*This verse is a major enigma. It is not clear whether the singer is the man or the woman (or both of them or the chorus), and the meaning of the verse is much disputed. Proposed interpretations are: (1) The blossoms are the woman, and the foxes are anything that might hinder her blossoming into full feminine charm. (2) The foxes are anything that might hinder the relationship between the couple and ruin the blossoming of their love. (3) The vineyards are girls, and the foxes are lustful boys who would deflower them. In this interpretation the verse is either a moral warning or a coquettish tease spoken by the woman to the man. She in effect could be saying, “I know what you are up to!”<sup>43</sup> (4) The line is the woman’s and should be translated, “Little foxes have seized us,” meaning that she is no longer a virgin. (5)*

*The call to catch the foxes in the garden is a call to civilize the wildness and freedom inherent in the sexual experience (the foxes) and domesticate it. The “wild life” of sexuality is integrated into society.*

*Despite the endless variety of interpretations that have been heaped upon v. 15, I rather doubt that either the “little foxes” or the “vineyard” has a specific referent here. The speaker probably is, as the NIV has it, the man. Prior to v. 16 there is no reason to suppose a change of speaker. More importantly the call to come catch foxes is a natural continuation of his invitation song begun in v. 10b. The diminutive “little” removes any sense that the foxes are a significant threat. The vineyard maintains the atmosphere of romance and love without specifically “symbolizing” anything. What is meaningful is that this is a call to join a chase—a chase that is really a game. The operative metaphor, therefore, is not the foxes or the vineyard but the chase itself. It is the kind of childlike play that young lovers often engage in. The verse thus speaks of the playfulness of love. He is calling her away to a game.*

vv.16-17 - The woman responds to her beloved’s call to love... **My beloved is mine; and I am his...** these are perhaps the central words of the whole book... They look back to God’s design for marriage expressed in Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” They look ahead to 1 Corinthians 7:4: “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” They express the monogamous nature of true love within the bond of marriage and the importance not only of devotion but also of fidelity. *The expression emphasizes the mutual devotion and exclusiveness of the lovers for each other... this verse stands in strong contrast to the wanton rampage through the vineyard. Here her lover is not the spoiler, but the gentle, caring companion* (G. Lloyd-Carr, Song of Songs, p.111)... **grazes among the lilies...** a lovely euphemism for intimate love making... The woman invites her man to the privilege of expressing their exclusive love by sharing in the pleasures she has to give... **Until the day**

**breathes... shadows flee... turn...**

Commentators disagree whether this is evening time (and so means “We’re not married yet and it’s getting late, my love, so you’d better go. It’s time to *turn away from me*.”) or morning time (meaning, then, “I want you to stay with me all night, and I long for the day, soon to be here, when you will be able to *turn toward me* with reckless abandon!”)... **gazelle... stag...** (see vv.8-9) she invites her man’s attractive vitality to spend itself in the private expression of their love relationship... **cleft mountains...** some commentators search for an unknown “Mt. Bether” (the Hebrew word for “cleft” or “split”), but almost

certainly this is instead a veiled reference to the woman’s breasts as a place for her beloved’s exclusive enjoyment (note “cleavage” means “the state of being cleft”)...

*Let your fountain be blessed,  
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,  
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.*

*Let her breasts fill you  
at all times with delight;*

*be intoxicated always in her love.*

*Why should you be intoxicated,  
my son, with a forbidden woman and  
embrace the bosom of an adulteress?*

- Proverbs 5:18-20

## Read & Reflect - 2:8-17

**First Reading:** Describe your feelings as you read about the feelings of these two lovers.

### Search & Consider - *Invitation to Depart* (2:8-17)

**vv. 8-9** - By the beloved woman's poetic testimony using her symbolic images, what does her man possess as he cries out to her with his call to love? How does she feel about what he has?

What is the man's position, where is he located as he calls to his beloved? (What is the "wall?")

**vv.10-13** - How does this "song within The Song" express the man's passion toward the woman? Why is it important that the man actually voices *to* the woman his deep desire *for* the woman? Which phrase do you find most beautiful or meaningful?

**vv.14** - What does it mean that the man sees the woman "in the clefts and crannies of the rocky cliffs"? Why is this significant?

What does the man say he wants? How will this happen?

**v.16** - What does this verse suggest about what the "call of love" is a call to? (Love brings *pleasure*. What else does it bring?)

*To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, & fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.*  
- Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, p.95

### Apply

This passage speaks powerfully of the power of our words. When have someone's words meant much to you? Who is someone in your life for whom your words might be a strong force for health, wholeness and love?

### Marriage Builder's Corner

**Question for Couples:** Read the quote from Timothy Keller (above). Then ask each other: *How is our marriage liberating, humbling and/or fortifying for you?*

**Activity for Couples to Share:** Speak aloud to one another your own "Call to Love"... *Arise, my [spouses name], my beautiful one, and come away for a moment and let me woo you once again with my words. Listen and I will tell you what I know of you that I find so wonderful and why I am so glad that you are mine and I am yours...* [then share out loud some of the things that make your spouse beautiful to you].

**Prayer:** *Lord God, thank You that You have called out to us in many ways, but especially in Jesus Christ: "Arise, my love, my beautiful, and come away..." Help us in our marriage to reflect for each other, for our church family, and for our friends and neighbors, your love for us.*

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## The Allegorical Fallacy

for both Christians and Jews of treating Solomon's Song of Songs as a flesh-denying allegory. Rabbi Aqiba (late 1<sup>st</sup>-century) gave blunt warning against literal interpretations of The Song: "*He who trills his voice in the chanting of the Song of Songs and treats it as a secular song, has no share in the world to come!*" Many Jews have preferred to see The Song as a symbolic expression for the history of Israel's redemption or the love of wisdom, or as an outline of Israel's history [1. The Exodus, Sinai and conquest (1:2-3:6), 2. The temple of Solomon (3:7-5:1), 3. Israel's apostasy and exile (5:2-6:1), 4. The return and the rebuilding of the temple (6:2-7:11), & 5. The dispersion and the messianic era (7:12-8:14)]. Maimonides (1135-1204) offers a more philosophical reading, suggesting that the Song is not about the nation of Israel but about the love between God and the individual. Others saw in The Song a mystical allegory of the intellect, or of Solomon's love for Wisdom. The Mystical Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac ha-Levi Tamakh (a 13<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jew) wrote a commentary offering this creative idea: "*The breasts are the king and high priest.*"

Our Christian forefathers found in Solomon's Song a variety of imaginative deeper meanings allowing them to discount what was actually being celebrated in song... This little book of Wisdom didn't have to be about real, physical, soul-stirring-but-also-body-tingling sexuality because it was about the love between Christ and His church or Christ and the individual believer's soul (or maybe about Mary whom we ought to venerate as something like a goddess)... Hippolytus (d.235) said The Song describes salvation history and that the "two breasts" are "*the Old and New Testaments that Christians suck upon.*" Origen (3<sup>rd</sup> c.), perhaps the allegorist par excellence of Christian history said The Song celebrates the love between Christ and the soul or Christ and the Church, and his approach came to dominate Christian interpretation of this book. He shows little concern for logic as he follows thin strands of word associations to discover the "real meanings." For example, he says: *We can, then, take the trees of the wood (Song 2:3) as meaning those angels who have been the authors and promoters of every heresy; so that in this passage, when the church compares the sweetness of Christ's teaching with the sourness of heretical dogmas and their barren and unfruitful doctrine, she describes as "apples" the sweet and pleasant doctrines preached in the Church of Christ, but as "trees of the wood" those that are asserted by the various heretics (Origen, Song of Songs, 181).*

Why would intelligent church leaders favor such fanciful interpretations? The answer is probably in the neo-Platonic worldview, more gnostic than Christian, that crept into the early church featuring an un-biblical rejection of all things physical and material in favor of the "higher and deeper realities" of mind and spirit. *This worldview asserts that the body, with its needs, appetites, and excretions, is by nature base, unspiritual, and finally evil. True spirituality is liberation from the powers of the body. It is true that some pagans and Gnostics claimed one could attain this liberation through indulging bodily appetites, but the more standard route, and certainly the one that religious monotheists chose, was asceticism [a philosophy of harsh denial of physical needs and desires]. Ascetic or libertine, the philosophical foundation is still the same: the physical is bad and anti-spiritual. Thus, an allegorizing interpretation of the Song was inevitable. The Song cannot be about sexual love, the reasoning goes, since we know that sexual love is the quintessence of carnality and therefore is by nature evil, even if licit in marriage (Duane Garrett, Song of Songs, Word Biblical Commentary, p.75).*

There are two viewpoints that biblical theology equally disavows. Fertility Paganism (sex is a point of intersection between the physical and the divine) and Gnostic Asceticism (the physical, & especially the sexual, is innately evil). *The language of sexual love is brought into the realm of spiritual devotion to the detriment of both (Garrett, p.76).* For example, in The Song (7:8-9) the man declares that the woman is like a palm tree and her breasts are like its clusters of dates. He will climb the tree and seize the clusters! This is not language to describe God's love for His people. This is not language for use in corporate worship. Spiritualizing the words prevents the hearer from appreciating how they celebrate the joy a young man has in his wife's body. The Bible clearly pronounces the creation of the physical world, the living creatures, and man as male and female to be "good," and which explicitly celebrates the union of man and woman (Gn.1; 2:18-25). Against flesh-rejecting Gnostic Asceticism, the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ—God became flesh!—speaks a full and final "No!"

Nevertheless, as early Church leaders embraced, foolishly and sometimes tragically, celibacy and sexual renunciation as the spiritual ideal, an allegorizing interpretation of the Song became inevitable: *The emerging ideal of the Christian man or woman who not only renounced all sexual activity but also was free of sexual desire made a "plain sense" interpretation of the Song inconceivable (Garrett, p.67).* And so we find the tragedy of Jovinian (d. 409). This monk stated that a married woman was spiritually equal to a virgin, and he rejected the notion of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Jerome bitterly opposed him, and he was declared a heretic and exiled by Emperor Theodosius.

So, St. Jerome (*Adversus Jovinianum*) relegated marriage to a licit but second-class status in the church and even pillaged classical literature for example of shrewish and unfaithful wives to better make the point that happiness is best found in celibacy. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) famously preached 86 sermons on the first two chapters of the Song of Songs (not about the Song itself, certainly not commenting on the real meanings of the real words found there, but using these words as launch pads into discussion of the love between the Christian soul and God).

Mary is frequently found in the Song by this sort of logic: the woman of the Song represents the church; Mary is the embodiment of the pure church; therefore, the Song points us to Mary. Thus Rupert of Deutz (ca. 1075) calls Mary the saving counterpart to Eve saying "My nard gives off fragrance" (Song 1:11) refers to Eve's "stink of pride" and to Mary's fragrant humility. Even Martin Luther, who generally distrusted allegorical interpretations from the medieval church saying "it takes no effort to invent allegories," comments on the Song using typical allegorical models ("kisses" (1:2) are the Word of God... "dark skin" (1:5) is the sinfulness of the church, "my beloved is like a young stag" (2:9) means the Word of God is leaping from one city to another, and "turtledove" (2:12) is godly people learning the Word of God).

Many problems attach themselves to Allegorizing Interpretations. 1. The imagination of the individual drives the entire process: Instead of reading *out* of the text what God and His author intend, he can read whatever he wants *into* the Song! 2. Interpreters invariably see their own religious traditions in the text. 3. Allegories are often suggested by too-simple psychological association (ex. "Breast" = nurture, and therefore symbolize great leaders in Israel or Christian pastors. And the number two suggests things that come in pairs, like Moses and Aaron or the two testaments of the Bible.) 4. Allegories are often suggested because of loose word associations to other passages in the Bible. *To read a single allegorical interpretation is to be impressed, and to wonder if the author is on to something profound; to read a hundred allegorical interpretations is to be depressed, and to want to discard the whole. Allegorizing interpretations cannot withstand comparison and analysis. No single interpretation has any more claim to legitimacy or makes any more sense than any other. Allegorical interpretation is forced, subject only to the creative imagination of the interpreter, and extraneous to the Song of Songs (Garrett, p.74).*

Added to all this is the fact that true allegory, that is, a story that is actually intended to be read as an allegory, generally tells the reader that it is an allegory in a very obvious and deliberate way. For example, Jotham's allegory of the trees (Judges 2:7-21) could hardly be more conspicuously a political allegory. Conversely, THE SONG OF SONGS NEVER SUGGESTS THAT AN ALLEGORICAL MEANING IS INTENDED.

The Song certainly does speak of God, but not by denying the goodness of real, human, fleshly realities. Instead, it brings out the deep structure of human transformation, and this process has its quintessential expression in the Christian gospel. Understood in this way, we may yet achieve some reconciliation of the natural reading of the text and the spiritual reading of the text.

*When the Song is allegorized, its transformational image is lost. The woman and her loss of virginity become invisible. To put it bluntly, the Song of Songs really is a song about kisses, physical beauty, and sexual union. When Song 4:5 mentions female breasts, it means female breasts and not Moses and Aaron, Mary as spiritual mediatrix, or the nurturing power of the church. But physical sex is not the whole story; transformation is at the heart of the Song. Understood in this way, the Song of Songs and the gospel both speak of the same need for intimacy and transcendence. One can find this message only when one is willing to give the Song an honest reading (Garrett, p.76).*