

7 studies on Song of Songs

"The capacity to delight in physical beauty, to be attracted by members of the opposite sex, the desire to form secure and intimate relationships, and to express love and affection in demonstrably physical ways – these are all a very fundamental part of our common humanity. The Song of Songs is an unabashed celebration of these deeply rooted urges. In beautiful poetic language, the Song explores the whole range of emotions experienced by the two lovers, as they work out their commitment to each other." From The Message of the Song of Songs by Tom Gledhill p 11.

Study 1	Song of Songs	Overview	p 2
Study 2	Song of Songs chs 1 & 2	Love	p 4
Study 3	Song of Songs	King Solomon	p 8
Study 4	Song of Songs 3:6 – 5:1	Marriage	p 11
Study 5	Song of Songs 3:1-5, 5:2-8, 6:11-13	Dreaming	p 15
Study 6	Song of Songs 5:9-7:13	Repetition and variations	p 18
Study 7	Song of Songs ch 8	Conclusion	p 20

Notes

1. I wrote these studies because I have long been interested in Song of Songs but I have never been able to find a decent Bible study booklet on it. This is my attempt to provide a challenging set of studies on a fascinating yet neglected book from the Old Testament.

2. Without giving too much away, the Song of Songs deals with the very personal topics of love and sex. It is one thing to study this individually and quite another thing to study this in a group of people whom you may or may not know particularly well. I would suggest you do the first two questions of the first study and then decide if you want to study this in a group or individually or not at all.

3. In preparing these studies I've used the following sources: The Message of the Song of Songs (The Bible Speaks Today Commentary) by Tom Gledhill, The Song of Solomon (Tyndale Commentary) by G. Lloyd Carr, Five Festal Garments by Barry G. Webb, New Bible Commentary, 3rd edition (NBC) and Embracing the Love Song a Bible study by Mark Warren.

4. Some groups may find the studies too long for the time allocated. My suggestion is for individuals to do the whole study before you meet but if the group runs out of time then skip to the "To finish" questions for the last few minutes. Or if the group gets involved in a particularly interesting and relevant point then run with it rather than feel obliged to complete all the remaining questions.

5. Throughout the studies I've added paragraphs to fill in the extra detail that I thought would help groups better understand the Biblical text.

6. I'm always trying to improve Bible studies so your comments, good or bad, and ideas about future studies may help produce better studies. Please write down any thoughts you have and send them to me at biridocon@bigpond.com or ring me on 9971 4897.

Study 1, Song of Songs Overview

Getting started

1. What are the most important things in your life?

Did you list love as one of the most important things in your life? What about sex? Among other things, the Song of Songs is about love and sex. If you are working through these studies in a group you may find it embarrassing to discuss these things. Tom Gledhill brings attention to another difficulty some people may have with the sexual aspect of Song of Songs:

“What then if we cannot control our responses as we read the Song as it draws us into its net? The New Testament answer is very clear and straightforward. Jesus said, ‘If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out . . . It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.’ [Matt 5:29] In other words, we are not to walk into temptation open-eyed when we know our particular areas of weakness. Jesus said in effect, ‘If what you read or look at causes a sinful chain of thought which you cannot handle, then don’t look, don’t read.’ It is simply a ruthless self-discipline based on a realistic self-knowledge. Of course, this is a very general principle for maintaining moral purity; some people may be able to read the Song without being tempted to give expression to their sexual desires; others may have difficulties.” (Gledhill p 30).

People will need to consider the above two issues before deciding whether or not to study the Song in a group or individually. A quick reading of Song of Songs is the place to start.

Bible

2. When we study the Bible, particularly the New Testament, we normally choose a few verses, maybe as much as a chapter, and we look at those verses in depth. We are so used to looking at short sections that anything more than a chapter can seem a bit of a chore. I don’t think you will find reading Song of Songs a chore because of the subject matter. Read the entire book of Song of Songs, all 8 chapters, to get an idea of what it is about and assess whether or not you will be able to study this book in a group situation or individually.

(a) What are your first impressions of Song of Songs?

(b) What is the book about?

(c) What is hard to understand in the book? What questions do you have about Song of Songs?

Are you surprised or even shocked to read this in the Bible? Why is Song of Songs even in the Bible? What’s Solomon got to do with it? Who are the “Lover”, the “Beloved” and the “Friends”? These and other questions may have come to mind while reading Song of Songs and we will answer them as we go along.

3. As we progress through these studies we’ll think more about what really matters in Song of Songs. For now let’s think about what really matters in our lives. Look again at your answer to question 1.

(a) What part does God play in your everyday life?

(b) Do you consider some aspects of your life to be more relevant to your faith in God than others?
Which aspects are more relevant?

4. Song of Songs is set in Israel at about 950 B.C. We'll look at what it meant to trust God in those times. Read the following passages and comment on how faith in God related to the everyday lives of God's people.
(a) Deut 6:4-9

(b) Prov 3:1-7

5. The big difference between the faith of God's people in Old Testament times and the faith of Christians today is Jesus. Is there any difference between how they related to God in their everyday lives and how we relate to God in our lives? Read the following New Testament passages and comment on how faith in God relates to our everyday lives.
(a) Rom 12:1-2, 14:7-9

(b) Col 2:6-7

To finish

6. How does love and sex and Song of Songs relate to our faith in God?

"[For God's people in Old Testament times] the whole of life was sacred. God was both transcendent and immanent. He was over all and in all. . . this idea of God permeating every area of life was fundamental to Israelite society. . . It was a world of crops and cattle and sheep, of rain and sunshine, of floods and famine, of fertility and barrenness, of life and death. But it was all God's world, thoroughly integrated with the spiritual dimension. . . . So in the Song, we have an expression of God's goodness in creating humankind in its complementary sexes. The mutual delight in physical beauty and sexual expression is all part of the creation upon which the Creator himself passed the verdict that it was very good [Gen 1:31]" (Gledhill pp 36 – 37).

"A frequent Old Testament term for the sexual union of man and woman is the verb 'know' (e.g. Gen 4:1 etc.). It is worthy of note that the most intimate knowledge of another person is not on the basis of intellectual exchange and the discussion of theological ideas, but in the intimate secular union of male and female¹. In this light it should not be considered obscene that at least one book of the Bible be dedicated to the celebration of one of the central realities of our creaturehood." (Carr p 35).

¹ 'This is piquant irony: here we are with all our high notions of ourselves as intellectual and spiritual beings, and the most profound form of knowledge for us is the plain business of skin on skin. It is humiliating. When two members of this godlike, cerebral species approach the heights of communion between themselves, what do they do? Think? Speculate? Meditate? No, they take off their clothes. Do they want to get their *brains* together? No. It is the most appalling of ironies: their search for union takes them quite literally in a direction away from where their brains are.' From Hallowed be This House by T. Howard (Harold Shaw, 1979) pp 115f.

Study 2, Love, Song of Songs chs 1 and 2

Getting started

1. What is love?

2. How would you describe the love of two people who are married to each other?

When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouths. Billy - age 4

Love is when you kiss all the time. Then when you get tired of kissing, you still want to be together and you talk more. My mommy and my daddy are like that. They look gross when they kiss. Emily - age 8

Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day. Noelle - age 7

Love is when mommy sees daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford.
Chris - age 7

When you love somebody, your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you. Karen - age 7

You really shouldn't say "I LOVE YOU" unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget. Jessica - age 8

I found this on the Internet. I don't know who these children are or if they really said these things but it gives some personal ideas on what it is like to love someone of the opposite sex. This is what Song of Songs does. It lets us in on the feelings of intimacy and passion of two people during an exciting stage of their relationship.

Bible

3. Read Song of Songs chs 1 and 2 keeping in mind that the NIV uses the word "Beloved" for the woman, "Lover" for the man and "Friends" for a group of unidentified people. The ESV uses "She", "He" and "Others" to describe approximately the same sections².

(a) What is happening?

(b) What emotions are being expressed?

(c) What phrases are used to show that (i) the woman is special to the man?

(ii) the man is special to the woman?

(d) What do these phrases tell you about their culture?

(e) What other comparisons are being made?

² I've designed these studies expecting that most people would use the NIV Bible but if you are using an ESV you will have noticed headings in most of the books and specifically headings like "The Bride Confesses Her Love" and "Solomon and His Bride Delight in Each Other" in Song of Songs. These headings are not part of the biblical text but are inserted at the discretion of the editor. The NIV also has headings in most of the books but not in Song of Songs (some other versions like KJV and RSV don't use headings in any book) except the words "Beloved", "Lover" and "Friends" to distinguish who is speaking. Different editors make different decisions and have different opinions on what certain parts of the Bible are about. From the headings in the ESV you get the impression that the editor thinks this book is about the love between King Solomon and his bride. Some commentators think that too, some don't. We will have a look at the different interpretations later.

The NIV uses the word "Beloved" for the woman, "Lover" for the man and "Friends" for a group of unidentified people. These aren't part of the biblical text either. The ESV uses "She", "He" and "Others" to describe the same sections except they are not exactly the same sections - a few verses or parts of verses are attributed to different people. The gender of the speakers has been worked out by looking at the gender of the Hebrew pronouns. Attempts to determine which bits are said by "Others" or "Friends" involves some uncertainty, hence the differences between the ESV and the NIV. Verses attributed to "Friends" appear throughout Song of Songs. The "Friends" make comments or suggestions or ask questions. The woman addresses some of her comments to the "daughters of Jerusalem" and the only other voice besides the man's is "Friends" so we can assume that the "daughters of Jerusalem" and the "Friends" are the same people. If you hold to the shepherd hypothesis (see footnote 4) then these people are Solomon's harem but they could also be a poetic device to comment on what is happening and steer the Song in the desired direction.

(f) Are they married? Why/why not? (1:6 gives a hint on her marital status)

(g) How is the mood different before and after 2:7?

(h) What do you think 2:7 means? (Also repeated at 3:5 and 8:4.)

Notes:

The poetry of Song of Songs intrigues and teases, and leads to plenty of speculation. It is important to get the general thrust of the book but if you wish to better understand some of the details, I've added the following notes taken from various commentaries.

1:1 The title of this book, "Song of Songs", comes from the first verse of chapter one which is translated as "Solomon's Song of Songs" in the NIV or "Song of Songs which is Solomon's" in the ESV. This could mean that Solomon wrote it or it could mean that it is about Solomon or that it was dedicated to Solomon or that it was placed in the Solomonic collection of songs or that it uses the imagery of Solomon to make certain comparisons or that the real author used Solomon's name to give the book added importance or that it was just Solomon's favourite song (Gledhill p 91).

"The expression 'Song of Songs' has the same form in Hebrew as the better known 'Holy of Holies'. It does not mean 'the song consisting of many songs', but 'the song to end all songs', 'the greatest song'." (Webb p 22).

This book is called "Song of Songs" in the NIV and GNB but "Song of Solomon" in the ESV, RSV, KJV and LB.

1:2 "Let him kiss me" is sensuous in itself, but here that particular quality of the language is intensified by the additional words, 'with the kisses of his mouth'. And this is just the beginning. In what follows there is going to be a lot of description of the various parts of the male and female body and of the delights of seeing, touching, tasting, hearing and smelling. As for imagery, love-making is compared here to the drinking of wine, with its strong connotations of intoxication and physical pleasure, and again it is but a beginning; more extravagant imagery will follow as the Song unfolds." (Webb p 18).

1:6. "[S]he was under their [her brothers'] authority; this alone is sufficient to indicate that she was unmarried." (Gledhill p 104).

"[I]t makes sense to assume that the lovers are a betrothed couple. Now betrothal in the ancient world was very different from our modern concept of engagement. Betrothal was the point of no return, and the future of the couple was irrevocably sealed. Their marriage had been arranged; they were not isolated individuals who had casually crossed paths and happened to have fallen in love. Members of their larger family units had brought them together, and when all the negotiations between the families had been finalised and the bride-price agreed and paid, then the couple were considered to be officially betrothed. All that remained was for the wedding to take place and the union to be consummated." (Gledhill p 27).

1:6 uses two meanings for the word "vineyard". We'll look at this more in study 7.

1:7-8. "She is intent on going to find him. But how can she do so with propriety? If she has no specific directions, she will be wandering around blindly in search of him, and she will be in danger of being mistaken for a [veiled] prostitute, plying her trade amongst the other shepherds. . . If she comes with her own little flock of kids, then it will not be so obvious why she is out on the hillside." (Gledhill pp 108-109).

2:4 has two words/phrases, "banquet hall" and "banner", that don't fit in with the context of a romantic rendezvous in the countryside. The Hebrew word translated "banquet hall" is literally "house of wine". Elsewhere in the Song wine is associated with kissing (1:2, 7:9) and the line before 2:4 is "and his fruit is sweet to my taste" so it may be better to interpret "house of wine" metaphorically as his mouth. 2:4 then explains that his fruit was sweet because they were kissing. The word for "banner" means a pole with a flag or insignia attached. In Numbers it was used to act as a rallying point for the appropriate tribe as they made their way through the desert. This doesn't seem to fit in with what the two people are doing. Instead, it has been suggested that a similar word, with the same Hebrew consonants, be used because it means looking or glancing. 2:4b then becomes something like "he looked at me with love". (Gledhill pp 125-126 Carr pp 90-91).

2:7 (also 3:5 and 8:4). "The gist of this is, 'Don't interfere. Let love take its natural course. The consummation will come at its proper time' (cf. Carr 1984: 94). This refrain creates anticipation and suspense. It suggests a relationship between two people moving steadily towards consummation in spite of separation, hostility and interference from others. It encourages us to look for progression towards a climax." (Webb p 23).

2:15. Although the NIV has the man saying 2:15 three other interpretations have the woman quoting the man from verses 10 to 14 and then the woman replies in verse 15 rather than the quote going from verses 10 to 15 as it does in the ESV (there is nothing in the Hebrew to indicate where the quotes should start or finish or if there is any quotation at all):

Interpretation 1. The woman replies that anything that spoils the vineyards of their lives should be removed e.g. lust, adultery, promiscuity or anything that would spoil the true love that they share.

Interpretation 2. 2:14 suggests that the woman is hard to find in the clefts and crannies and the man asks to see her face and hear her voice. She replies teasingly that she is not that hard to catch, like catching foxes in the vineyards, and her vineyard is in blossom.

Interpretation 3. The woman is gently warning the man that he shouldn't take too much for granted because there may be other foxes (men) who want to raid the vineyards and her vineyard is in blossom.

(Gledhill pp 138-139).

2:17 is deliberately ambiguous. The verse could refer to evening or morning. It could mean the woman wants the man to keep coming as in 2:8 or to go away or to stay with her (Gledhill pp 141-142).

4. Do you think the man and the woman are in love or lust or both? Why/why not?

5. (a) What sort of love is God talking about when he talks about the love he has for his church (John 3:16, Eph 5:25-29)?

(b) How is this love reflected in the love between husband and wife?

(c) (i) What is different about the love expressed in chapters 1 and 2 of Song of Songs and the love expressed by God in John 3:16, Eph 5:25-29?

(ii) Do you think we give both these aspects of love their proper respect and honour? Why/why not?

To finish

6. What practical steps can be taken so that you "not arouse or awaken love until it so desires"?

Study 3, King Solomon

Getting started

1. Besides Jesus, what historical figures have impressed you the most?
2. Why were they so impressive?
3. Do you know of any serious flaws in these people?
4. What have you heard about Solomon's greatness, if anything?
5. Have you heard of any flaws in Solomon's character? What were they?

Bible

6. Solomon³ gets a mention in verse 1 of Song of Songs and a few other times in the book. Let's look at Solomon's life and see how (and if) it fits into Song of Songs. Read the following passages and make notes on whom Solomon was and what he was like:

(a) 2 Sam 5:13-14, 2 Sam 12:24-25

(b) 1 Kings 2:10-12

³ What happened before Solomon? Very briefly, God brought his people out of Egypt under Moses' leadership. They wandered through the desert for 40 years and eventually entered the land God had promised to Abraham. A series of battles ensued until the former occupants of Israel were all but conquered. God's people wanted a king and they were given Saul followed by David, Israel's greatest king, followed by Solomon.

(c) 1 Kings 3:1-15

(d) 1 Kings 4:29-34

(e) 1 Kings 5:13-6:2, 6:37-7:2

(f) 1 Kings 10:1-13

(g) 1 Kings 10:23-11:8 cf. Deut 17:14-17

(h) 1 Kings 11:41-43

7. What aspect of Solomon's life would it be encouraging to remember?
8. Take another look at Song of Songs. Is Solomon the main character? If not, who is?
9. Does it matter if Solomon isn't the main character? What does matter in Song of Songs?

One interpretation is that Song of Songs is about one of King Solomon's marriages⁴. When the woman refers to the man as "the king" (1:4, 12) it may not be King Solomon she is talking about. "She calls her lover, '*the king*'. If we want to think that he is Solomon, then obviously he is king. But it is more likely a literary device. She wants to accord her lover the dignity, nobility, the honour of royalty. He is her *king*. She is proud of him. An association with royalty may be an enhancement of self-esteem and public honour. The glory rubs off a little. Some commentators here mention the fact that in some Ancient Near-Eastern marriage ceremonies, as in those of the Orthodox Church today, the bride and groom were called king and queen for the period of the wedding festivities." (Gledhill pp 96-97).

To finish

10. Read 1 Kings 3:5-14 and 1 Kings 4:29-34.
Why is it worthwhile learning from Solomon?

11. Read Matt 7:24-29 and Matt 12:38-42.
Why is it worthwhile learning from Jesus?

⁴ Song of Solomon has been interpreted in 3 main ways. One interpretation is that the book is an allegory of Christ's love for the church. A second interpretation is called the shepherd hypothesis where the man (the shepherd 1:8) and the woman (the Shulammitte 6:13) are in love but Solomon captures her for his harem and marries her but is unsuccessful in gaining her love. A third interpretation is simply that the Song expresses the love between a man and a woman around the time of their marriage.

The problems with the allegorical interpretation is that there is nothing in the book itself that suggests it is an allegory and the book's celebration of human love and sexuality is at odds with the believer's relationship with Christ which is never at an erotic level. The allegorical approach fits in with the idea that the book needed to be "cleaned up" in order to be accepted as Scripture.

Problems with the shepherd hypothesis are that Solomon is cast in the role of the villain. A love triangle involving King Solomon seems improbable and the plot has to be contrived to fit the text.

In these studies we will not go any further into the debate about the relative merits of the different interpretations. Instead we will look at prominent ideas in the Song of Solomon and see how those ideas relate to us today.

Study 4, Marriage, Song of Songs 3:6 – 5:1

Romantic one-liners from Song of Songs:

- 1:3 "Your name is like perfume poured out"
- 1:9 "I liken you, my darling, to a mare"
- 1:13 "My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh"
- 1:15 and 5:12 "Your eyes are doves"
- 4:1 and 6:5 "Your hair is like a flock of goats"
- 4:2 and 6:6 "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing"
- 4:3 and 6:7 "Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate"
- 4:4 "Your neck is like the tower of David"
- 5:15 "His legs are pillars of marble"
- 6:4 "majestic as troops with banners"
- 7:2 "Your waist is a mound of wheat"
- 7:4 "Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking towards Damascus"
- 7:7 "Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit"

The man and the woman express words of praise and affection for each other. What sounds funny to us may have been charmingly beautiful to people in Ancient Israel.

This study is about a marriage described in 3:6-5:1. We will jump over 3:1-5 and come back later to the woman's two dreams in 3:1-5 and 5:2-8.

Getting started

1. What does "falling in love" mean?

Bible

"[W]e should look upon the Song as the joys and tensions of a young couple on their progress towards marriage. But we cannot derive a complete doctrine of sexual morality or marriage from the Song alone, for it is a unique literary genre in the Old Testament. As such it must be informed by the wider social, moral and theological context of the Bible as a whole" (Gledhill p 29). So we will look, briefly, at what the Bible says about sex and marriage.

2. Read Gen 2:24-25. What aspect of the relationship is left behind and what aspect of the relationship begins?
3. Read Ex 22:16-17. How important is the woman's virginity in Ex 22:16-17 (cf. Song of Songs 4:12)?
4. Read Ex 20:14 and Lev 20:10. How serious is adultery?
5. Read Deut 24:5. How important are the early stages of marriage?

6. Read Prov 5:18-19. How important are the later stages of marriage?

7. Read Matt 5:27-30. How does Jesus tighten up the restrictions of sex outside of marriage?

8. Read Eph 5:22-33. What has Jesus got to do with marriage?

Marriage is the joining together of two people physically, mentally and socially so their relationship has priority over all other relationships, even over the relationships they had with their parents. We are encouraged to rejoice in our partner and be intoxicated in our mutual love. The married couple are to love each other by giving everything they have for the other just as Jesus gave everything he had for his people.

9. Read Song of Songs 3:6-11.
 - (a) Given that 3:6 begins with "Who is this" in the NIV and "What is that" in the ECV, what are the possible answers to the question posed in 3:6?

 - (b) Read 3:7-11. What is happening here?

10. Read Song of Songs 4:1-5:1. How is this different to the gratuitous sex scenes in the movies?

“3:6, which I take to be an isolated independent verse, unconnected with what precedes and what follows; an exclamation of the breath-taking beauty of the girl, creating an atmosphere of ethereal beauty and fantasy. 3:7-11 is a description of Solomon's sedan chair used on the day of his wedding. . . It is obvious from verse 11 that a marriage is taking place, indeed Solomon's own marriage. But which one? For Solomon had 700 wives of royal birth [1 Ki 11:3]. Presumably he did not have a sumptuous wedding for each one of them. But it is most likely that 700 is a round number. However it is certain that Solomon would have had a grandiose ceremony for his marriage to the Egyptian princess [1 Ki 3:1], the daughter of Pharaoh, for this was a political alliance. . . Here the lovers are getting married and celebrating their own wedding. The allusion is rather indirect, however. The lovers are perhaps singing a snatch of a wedding song originally sung at one of Solomon's own nuptials, which had gradually been assimilated into the popular musical choruses sung at village weddings. At their own banquet, the couple and their guests are celebrating their own 'royal' occasion. . . The thrust of this section is to convey something of the pageantry of a royal wedding. Some have suggested that there is something ironic in all this extravagance; our lovers could never afford so great an affair as this; their love, so simple, so single-minded and faithful, stands in contrast to Solomon's extravagance” (Gledhill pp 147-151).

11. Read Prov 31:10-27, Eph 5:22-33 and 1 Pet 3:1-7.
 (a) How do husbands and wives relate to each other in each passage?

- (b) How does the man and the woman relate to each other in what we have been reading in Song of Songs?

The Bible would be much the poorer without this book. "At the Council of Jamnia in AD 90, Rabbi Aqiba defended the Song in the words, 'For in the entire world, there is nothing to equal the day on which the Song of Solomon was given to Israel. All writings are holy, but Song of Songs is most Holy'. . . The Song is sometimes classified as Wisdom Literature along with Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and a few of the Psalms. . . It has been suggested that just as Job explores the riddle of suffering, and Ecclesiastes the riddle of existence, so the Song explores the riddle of love⁵." (Gledhill p 35).

"The chief difficulty that certain rabbis of the first and second centuries AD felt with the Song was its secularity; that it apparently dealt with merely human matters rather than divine. The answer was found in mystical interpretation of it, whereby its real theme was found to be the love of Yahweh for Israel. The rabbis did not absolutely repudiate the literal interpretation, for they were not prudish about married love, but did strongly object to the book being quoted or sung lasciviously, and emphasized its mystical meaning. . . The adoption of the Song of Songs as a lectionary reading for Passover has recently been described as a stroke of pastoral genius which saved redemption from ever being reduced to a mere dogma or ritual. . . To be redeemed is to be loved, and to be called to love in return, and the Song of Songs as part of the Passover liturgy is a powerful reminder of this fact. It is the way Israel found to read the Song as Holy Scripture, and it is to this that we probably owe its preservation. It has also had a powerful influence on the way in which Christians have traditionally read the Song. Nevertheless, the allegorization on which it depends is open to serious question and must, in the final analysis, be rejected if the Song is to be allowed to be what it is and to speak with its own voice." (Webb pp 27-29).

To finish

12. Song of Songs 3:7-11 is an image of a royal wedding. People can think about, dwell on, even romanticise about their wedding and marriage. What is good about this line of thinking? What is bad about it?
13. In a relationship a couple will have "feelings for each other". What are these feelings and how important are they before the couple makes the commitment of marriage?

⁵ M. Sadgrove, *The Song of Songs as Wisdom Literature* (Studia Biblica, 1978), I, pp. 245-248.

14. What aspects of the relationship need to be worked through before marriage?
15. In Biblical times families often brought together people who they thought would make a suitable couple. Today "match making" can have a similar effect.
- (a) How much do other people's opinions affect your thinking in choosing a partner for marriage?
 - (b) Should you discuss your thoughts about marrying someone with other people?
 - (c) What things should you discuss, if any?
16. What would you say to an unmarried couple who just want to live together?

Study 5, Dreaming, Song of Songs 3:1-5, 5:2-8, 6:11-13

In the Bible God sometimes uses dreams to give messages to his people e.g. Joseph has dreams about ruling his brothers (Gen 37), Solomon has a dream about God asking him what he wanted (1 Ki 3), Nebuchadnezzar has a dream which is later interpreted by Daniel (Dan 2) and after meeting the baby Jesus, the Magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod (Matt 2:12).

Dreams, visions and prophecy often amount to the same thing in the Bible (Num 12, Deut 13:1-5, 1 Sam 28:6, 1 Ki 22:17-19, Job 4:13, Jer 23:25-32). But there are the other types of dreams, which aren't related to any kind of vision or prophecy from God. The writer of Ecclesiastes comments that dreams come "when there are many cares" (Ec 5:3) which are probably dreams caused by the unconscious mind going over the events and emotions of the day. This is probably what is going on with the woman in Song of Songs 3:1-5 and 5:2-8. The two passages are probably dreams because they begin with the woman in bed (3:1) or asleep (5:2), she runs around the city streets at night, scantily clad (more likely to do this in a dream than in reality), meets the watchmen each time and gets beaten up once, falls into the arms of her lover in the first dream and asks her friends to "not stir up or awaken love until it pleases".

A third type of dreaming is daydreaming. This type of dreaming involves wishful thinking where thoughts are directed to produce a desirable outcome of events. Perhaps this is what happens to the woman in 6:12 where she momentarily sees herself among some chariots and then the "Friends" call her back to reality in 6:13.

Getting started

1. What sort of dreams do you have?

"Between the expressions of longing at the beginning and the consummation that is reached at the end, there is a dream sequence. Its precise limits are difficult to define (my own view is that it spans chs. 3 – 6), but it certainly exists. . . In this central part of the Song the bride-to-be is dreaming about her wedding day and the love-making that will follow. In these chapters we find everything we might expect in such circumstances: erotic fantasies, nightmares, fears of losing her lover, and romantic transformations of him into a prince and of her own wedding day into a grand, royal occasion. In fact it is not Solomon's wedding she dreams about in 3:6-11, but her own . . . Confirmation, if needed, is provided by 6:12 (RSV): 'Before I was aware, my fancy set me in a chariot beside my prince.' and more significantly, by the repetition of 3:6 ('Who is this coming up from the desert?') in 8:5, where fantasy at last gives way to reality. Solomon is not an intruder into the relationship between the lovers, but a somewhat remote, ideal figure, who merges with the shepherd in the girl's dreams." (Webb pp 25-26).

Bible

1. Read Song of Songs 3:1-5 and 5:2-8.
 - (a) What are the woman's feelings in her dreams?

(b) How do the woman's dreams relate to her relationship with the man?

2. Among other things, there is an element of fear in the woman's dreams. What are your fears?

3. How does your trust in Jesus help quell those fears (see Rom 8:31-39)?

4. Read Song of Songs 6:11-13. What do you think it means?

"The boy's song in praise of his beloved clearly ends at 6:10 with his quotation of the words of the queens and concubines. A new section begins here at 6:11, but the meaning and context of the next few verses are very obscure. It is not at all clear who is speaking these words. The NIV puts these words on the lips of the boy. However, I take it that the girl is speaking since the words of 6:13 are obviously addressed to her, where she is bidden to return from the place to which she had gone. So 6:11 most naturally describes the girl's own departure to the walnut grove, and 6:13 represents a request that she return from there. . . 6:12 is probably the most obscure verse in the Song. The Hebrew text as it stands hardly makes any sense at all. . . The general sense seems to be something like this: before the girl knows what is happening, she finds herself in some heightened ecstatic state, as though she is out of the body. She has lost her balance or normal sense of composure, because of the great joy and excitement her lover instills in her. Overwhelmed with ecstasy, she is transported dream-like into the presence of her lover; she imagines she is alongside him, being taken away in his royal chariot. . . It is most likely that all this is fantasy." (Gledhill pp 199 – 200).

6:13. Shulammite could refer to the village of Shunem, mentioned in Josh 19:18, although the spelling is not quite right, or it could refer to the feminine for "Solomon" as if it was the title for Solomon's bride, or it could refer to the word "shalom" meaning peace, wholeness or well-being and the woman refers to herself in 8:10 as one who finds or brings shalom. (Gledhill p 202).

"*Mahanaim* . . . The NIV rendering of it as a proper name identifies the site in Gilead where Jacob met the angel on his return to Canaan (Gen 32:2) . . . but there is no indication that the city was famous for its contribution to the art of the dance. . . The best rendering seems to be 'the dance of the two groups (hosts)' . . . Her question then becomes, 'Why do you want to look at me when there are so many others in this dance?' Both these questions underscore the modesty of the beloved and her self-effacement that appeared as early as 1:6." (Carr pp 155-156).

To finish

The dreams we have looked at in this study suggest fears of loss, separation, pain and problems in a personal relationship. So the following questions run with those ideas and relate them to our everyday lives.

The following 4 questions (5 - 8) are for people with partners.

5. "True love never runs smooth".
 - (a) What are some of the things that cause problems in your relationship?

 - (b) Do problems strengthen or harm your relationship with your partner?

6.
 - (a) Have you been away from your partner for any length of time?

 - (b) If so, how did you handle it?

(c) Did it help or hinder your relationship?

7. (a) Do you ever tease your partner? Why?

(b) Is it fun for both of you? What are the dangers involved?

8. (a) Is there a need to be by yourself to "do your own thing"?

(b) How do you work out a compromise between togetherness and aloneness?
If you have children how do they fit into this?

For everyone:

9. (a) Do the general problems you face in your life effect how you feel about God? Why/why not?

(b) If you haven't prayed or read the Bible or had fellowship with other Christians for a while, does it effect how you feel about God or inhibit you from starting up again? Why/why not?

(c) How do you get back to prayer, Bible reading, fellowship etc.?

Study 6, Repetition and variations, Song of Songs 5:9-7:13

Getting started

1. In what situations do you intentionally repeat yourself?

"[Song of Songs] is a love-song of haunting beauty; it was meant to be sung as a celebration of love, beauty and intimacy. The Song found its early popularity within the social and religious life of ancient Israel. It was most probably sung as entertainment at local celebrations of the various harvest festivals, accompanied by dancing at a village wedding, sung as court entertainment at the royal palace in Jerusalem, or at happy family reunions or gatherings. . . With that in mind, we should not be surprised at some of the characteristics of the Song. It is cyclic and repetitious." Gledhill p 19. We'll look at some of the repetitions in this study.

Bible

2. Read 4:1-5:1, 5:9-6:3, 6:4-7:13.

(a) Are the passages 5:9-6:3 and 6:4-7:13 repeating 4:1-5:1?

(b) What is similar in each of the three passages?

(c) What are the differences?

(d) Why are they different?

3. (a) Does it seem odd that the couple praise parts of their bodies?

(b) Why do they do that?

(c) Shouldn't they rather be praising God for creating those bodies?

4. (a) What is the difference between praising someone and flattery?

(b) Is this flattery in Song of Songs? Why or why not?

Some of the place names in these passages may be suggesting personal qualities but they are all but lost to us because we are not familiar with what images came to the minds of the Israelites when a certain city or town was mentioned. The following notes from the commentaries may help us better understand these images.

4:1, 6:5. "*Hair*. The imagery indicates that the beloved does not have her whole head covered with the veil, but that her long black locks ripple and tumble freely. Most Palestinian goats have wavy black hair. The movement of a large flock on a distant hill makes it appear as if the whole hillside is alive. . . *Gilead*, the high plateau east of Galilee and Samaria, is noted for the high and rugged cliffs which climb over 3,500 feet from the floor of the Jordan Valley. They present a beautiful but mysterious aspect in the shimmering heat of the afternoon." (Carr pp 114-115).

4:4. "The point of comparison is not the *size* of the girl's neck, but the fact that it is decorated and built up in layers, with row upon row of beads (as in the Masai women of East Africa). . . *The tower of David*, built in layers, surrounded by shields, gives an impression of uprightness, of defence, of inaccessibility and an intention to repel intruders." (Gledhill p 157).

4:8. Hermon, Senir and (probably) Amana are mountains on the Israel / Lebanon border. The verse is about the distance and danger of being that far away, figuratively, from the man. (Gledhill p 160). "[According to the shepherd hypothesis] the true lover calls upon the maiden to leave the splendour of Solomon's northern court in Lebanon." (NBC p 584).

4:11. Lebanon in Hebrew is similar to the word for full moon and frankincense and the cedars of Lebanon had a particular scent. Overall the impression is that the woman is fragrant, mysterious and ethereal. (Gledhill p 161).

4:16. "The word for 'awake' in *awake, north wind*, is the same as that used in the refrain to the daughters of Jerusalem, 'Do not awake love until it please.' There it was a call to avoid premature awakening. But now the time is ripe." (Gledhill p 166).

5:15. "[A] reference again to firmness and strength. The *bases of gold* are the feet. His whole appearance is like the majestic mountain of *Lebanon*, or like the *cedar*, king among trees." (NBC p 585).

6:4. Tirzah was an ancient Canaanite city of great beauty. The word comes from the root meaning "to be pleasant". Jerusalem is described as "the perfection of beauty" (Ps 50:2, Lam 2:15) and means something like "a fountain of well-being". These meanings could have been meant to describe the woman. (Gledhill p 191).

7:4-5. Heshbon was a town east of the River Jordan and Beth-rabbim was probably one of its gates. The pools were not natural but reservoirs cut out of solid rock. Mt Carmel is a range of hills jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea. The woman's neck could refer to her stateliness, her eyes could refer to her calmness and depth, the word for nose can also mean face so the metaphor could be referring to her courage and determination and her head may be compared with Mt Carmel because it is outstanding and majestic. (Gledhill pp 206-207).

7:13. "*Mandrakes*; literally 'love plants'. . . having emetic, purgative and narcotic qualities. Here, only the delightful fragrance is referred to. . . In addition to the new fruit the Shulammite has laid up old fruit in cupboards over the doors that they might enjoy them together. This foresight has a very tender touch and reminds us of the loving foresight of God who has laid up in store such good things for those who love Him; cf. Jn 14:3; 1 Pet 1:4. These verses strike one of the highest notes of the whole book." (NBC p 586).

To finish

(Note: The answer to the following question is appropriate for you and your partner rather than in a group situation.)

5. After looking at the sentiments expressed in Song of Songs how would you express your love for your partner, in your own words?

5. When is jealousy good (8:6) and when is it bad?

"Finally, it can hardly be without significance that it is at this point that we have the only, if veiled, reference in the book to God. Love is the 'flame of Yah' (salhebetyah) [8:6]. It could be that the abbreviated divine name Yah (= Yahweh) on the end of this word is used simply to indicate a superlative, and it is so taken by the NIV, 'a mighty flame'. But the context speaks against this. 'Yah' is used here in close conjunction with 'jealousy' (qin 'a) and fire ('es), both of which are closely associated with Yahweh in Israelite tradition. Furthermore, it is most fitting that there should be an allusion to Yahweh when the poem moves transparently into wisdom mode, since the very first principle of Old Testament wisdom is the fear of Yahweh. More particularly, what is being suggested is that the love depicted here, and hence in the Song as a whole, has its ultimate source in Yahweh, and indeed partakes of his very nature. In keeping with the allusive character of the Song, however, this powerful point is made with exquisite indirectness rather than being forced crudely upon us. The Song is not as secular as at first it appears." (Webb p 24).

6. Read 8:11-14 and look up the other passages in Song of Songs about vineyards (1:6, 1:14, 2:15, 6:11) and gardens (4:12-5:1, 6:2-3, 8:13).

(a) What are the two meanings for vineyards/gardens?

(b) What possible connections are made between Solomon and his vineyard (8:11-12 cf. 1 Ki 11:3)?

(c) What possible connections are made between the gardens in Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden in Gen 2:8-25?

"The way the Song ends shows clearly that the anticipated consummation has been reached (8:5-7). The lovers walk together openly arm in arm, perfectly at ease at last in each other's company and fearing no-one's censure (8:5; contrast v 2). As they approach the girl's parental home, they reminisce happily about the past: 'Under the apple tree I awakened [NIV "roused"] you' (that is where they fell in love), and 'there [probably in the house] your mother conceived you' (that is where the girl was born). Anxious anticipation has given way to happy reminiscence; they are man and wife at last. There is no torrid sex scene at this point, for the true consummation of love is not sex, but relationship – the sort of relationship portrayed here. As they walk, she leans upon her beloved (8:5a). It is a little cameo of the married relationship as envisaged in both the Old and the New Testament." (Webb p 23).

8:11-12 "The 'vineyard' of verse 12 is the girl's body with its capacity for sexual pleasure (cf. 1:6). Solomon's 'vineyard' in verse 11 is his harem. Paradoxically, the more women Solomon has, the less deeply personal and fulfilling can be his relationship with any one of them. He has to hire 'keepers'. The shepherd does not begrudge him his wealth, nor does he envy him, Solomon has *his* vineyard and the shepherd has his own, his *very own*, and with her he is well content. (The speaker in 8:12 may be the girl rather than the shepherd, but the general import is the same.)" (Webb p 27).

7. The man and the woman have the last say in vv 13 – 14.
 (a) What matters to them?

(b) Why is this final perspective important in marriage?

To finish

8. Look back to your previous answer to the question "what is love?" in study 2, Q 1.
 (a) Would you now have a different answer to that question as a result of studying Song of Solomon?
 If so, what would be your answer now?

(b) What have you learnt about loving your partner in Song of Songs?

A final verse from the Beatles:

I could be handy, mending a fuse
 When your lights have gone
 You can knit a sweater by the fireside
 Sunday mornings go for a ride
 Doing the garden, digging the weeds
 Who could ask for more?
 Will you still need me, will you still feed me
 When I'm sixty-four?⁷

⁷ Verse 3 from *When I'm Sixty Four* from Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967) by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.