

6 STUDIES
+ LEADER NOTES

SONG OF SOLOMON

A Seal Upon Your Heart



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BIBLE GUIDES



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SONG OF SOLOMON

BY KAMINA WÜST



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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Pathway Bible Guides: Song of Solomon

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Before you begin

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. That's the full title of the Song of Solomon (1:1). It lets us know that to understand the Song of Solomon, we need to understand King Solomon.

Solomon is a complicated character. He was loved by God at his birth and he received special wisdom from God upon taking the throne. He built God's temple in Jerusalem and reigned over the most prosperous period in Israel's history. He is the attributed author of many of the Proverbs which contain wisdom on the themes of love, sex and marriage.

However, Solomon didn't follow his own wise teaching. He allied himself through marriage with many foreign nations, starting with Egypt (1 Kgs 3:1), the nation of which God had said to his people, "you shall never return that way again" (Deut 17:16). He not only worshipped the gods of his wives personally; he also raised public altars to these gods and led the people of Israel into idolatry (1 Kgs 11:1-8). Following Solomon, Israel's subsequent kings went from bad to worse. God eventually punished Israel by allowing their enemies to conquer Jerusalem, destroy the temple and send the people into exile from their promised land. The seed of this destruction was Solomon's sin.

When the people eventually returned to Jerusalem to rebuild, they fell into the same old sin—they married women from the surrounding nations and began to worship their gods (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-27). This was five centuries after Solomon lived, but his name was still the byword for this type of sin. Nehemiah rebuked the Israelite men: "Did

not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin” (Neh 13:26). This was Solomon’s legacy when it came to love.

The Song of Solomon is part of this legacy. It paints a picture of Solomon that resonates with the way he’s described in 1 Kings 1-11— as a polygamist who collects wives for political advantage and to display his wealth and power. Yet it also presents a picture of a different kind of lover: one who invites rather than coerces, who knows his lover intimately rather than treating her as a chattel, and who is exclusively devoted to his one love rather than having many women. For the Israelites who were perpetually led astray by their loves, it’s a powerful warning to avoid the example of Solomon and love wisely, in a way that honours God.

While the Song is about romantic love and lovemaking, it isn’t only meant for people in relationships. The Song speaks of loneliness and longing, of sexual brokenness and boundaries transgressed. Reading it in a mixed group of God’s people acknowledges that we all have thoughts and experiences to contribute to a discussion about love and sex, regardless of our relationship status. The Song provides a safe and scriptural starting point for frank discussions among brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Song of Solomon is poetry, and poetry works on its readers in a different way than prose. Rather than making explanatory statements or giving step-by-step instructions, poetry uses imagery and metaphors to evoke the readers’ emotions and call up associations with our own experiences. This can be an uncomfortable experience for Christians who are trying to faithfully discern God’s message. It’s wise to be wary of imposing our own ideas onto Scripture. However, the Song is not an instruction manual or a code to be cracked. By its very nature it’s *meant*

to tantalize, to confuse, to stir up emotions, to evoke experiences. Reading the Song faithfully involves embracing its mystery.

Part of the mystery of the Song is that its story is unfinished. In the final verse of the Song, the woman tells her beloved to *run*—away from her, or into her embrace? It's not clear how their love story will end. Imagine how this spoke to the Israelites as they tried to rebuild their broken temple. Where was God? How long would he remain silent? Would he redeem his people, or had he abandoned them?

The Song didn't offer concrete answers. It offered them a picture of God-pleasing love, reminded them of the Solomon-like sin they were prone to fall into, and warned them to guard their hearts against anything that would invoke God's jealousy.

While the Israelites in the Song's time didn't know the end of the story, the Bible goes on to tell it. God would redeem his people through Jesus' death and resurrection. Now we wait until he comes back to claim those who love him. While we wait, we have the same calling as the Israelites: to guard our hearts and stay faithful to God.

Let's step into the story and seek the love that leads to 'happily ever after'.

1. Lovers and others

SONG OF SOLOMON 1:1-2:7



Getting started

Who are the characters in the Song of Solomon? Without looking at the Bible, list or guess as many as you can think of.



Light from the Word

There's some debate about the identities of the characters in the Song. Let's investigate!

Read Song 1.

1. List every character that appears in these verses (try to ignore the headings in the Bible). Is it possible to narrow this down to a definitive list of characters? Where is it hard to tell who's who?

2. Read verses 12-17 again carefully. In these verses:

- Where is the king?

- Where is the woman's beloved?

- Where are the couple together?

Read Song 2:1-7.

6. Notice how the lovers' words mirror each other in 1:15-16 and 2:2-3. Poetically, what does this reflect about their relationship?

7. From 2:2-3, how do the lovers view other men and women? (Notice also how they address each other in 1:7 and 1:8.)

8. From 1:1-2:6, how does the relationship between the woman and the beloved contrast with the woman's interactions with other characters?

In 2:7, the woman sternly warns the daughters of Jerusalem not to stir up or awaken love “until it pleases”. To understand what she means, it’s crucial to know what it means for love to be “pleased”.

To appreciate this, we need to understand *personification*: the poetic device wherein a non-human thing (i.e. love) is given a human quality (i.e. ‘being pleased’). Hebrew poetry uses this device a lot, particularly in the Psalms. When abstract concepts are personified in the Psalms, we naturally make sense of their behaviour in relation to the moral compass of the poetry, which is provided by God’s law and the goodness of his created order.

The moral compass in the Song of Solomon is embodied in the woman. The Bible uses her voice to narrate the Song and express its teaching. When love is “pleased”, we should understand that this means “pleased by the standards of what’s good in the Song”—and the woman’s experience will reveal to us what that ‘good’ love is like.

Hold onto this idea for now. In study 2, we’ll see that there are two kinds of love in the Song: one that is very good, and one that is not good at all. These two types of love will help us understand why the woman warns the daughters of Jerusalem so strongly.



To finish

Is there anything from Song 1:1-2:7 that surprised you? Is there anything from Song 1:1-2:7 that you still don’t understand? (Write it down so you can come back and reconsider after reading more of the Song.)



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for the gift of love in all its shapes, and for giving us the Song of Solomon to enable us to think about love in a fresh way.
- Ask God to help us be open-minded and willing to examine our own hearts as we explore love in the Song of Solomon.