

SONG OF SONGS

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GARDEN OF LOVE



4 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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DES SMITH



matthiasmedia

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what the passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learned.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

We quote from and refer to the English Standard Version, which we recommend. There should not generally be any problems, however, if you are using a different translation. (Nevertheless, it might be useful to have an ESV on hand in case of any confusion.)

» STUDY 1

THE BEST SONG EVER

SONG OF SONGS IS ONE OF THE strangest books in the Old Testament (and indeed, in the Bible). It's not about anything that books of the Bible are normally about: it's not about the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, the salvation of humanity, the law, or any of the other topics that pop up regularly in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, it's one of only two books in the Bible that doesn't even explicitly mention God! (The book of Esther is the other, if you're curious.) Song of Songs isn't just slightly odd—you can sometimes wonder how it ended up in the Bible at all!

But at the same time, Song of Songs is one of the most attractive books in the Bible. It's a love poem in the form of a dialogue between a man and a woman who are clearly besotted with each other. In this sense, it's a deeply human book about a topic all of us are

interested in: love. Moreover, you don't have to scratch too far beneath the surface to realize this poem is not just about love, but sexual love. Whatever else they may be, this man and woman are clearly more than 'just good friends'! For this reason and many others, Song of Songs has proved a firm favourite with readers for as long as there have been lovers or would-be-lovers—which is forever!

And yet despite its intensely human and intimate focus, and its lack of any direct reference to God, Song of Songs—like the rest of the Bible—is ultimately about Jesus. The apostle Paul tells us that “all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Christ]” (2 Cor 1:20), and Song of Songs is one of those promises. In its intimate depiction of human marriage, Song of Songs gives us a glimmer of that passion and self-

sacrifice of which all human marriage is a foretaste: the passion and self-sacrifice of Christ for the world. In that sense it is truly *the* song of songs; it is truly the best song ever.

A note before we start: you may be feeling a bit awkward or even anxious about studying a book of the Bible that is so openly about romance and sex, especially if you're doing so in a group context. This awkwardness may only be compounded if you happen to be a single person. "What could a book like Song of Songs possibly have to say to me?" you may be wondering. But I

hope that by the end of these studies (well, actually right from the get-go) you'll see that, despite its specific (and even explicit) content, this is a book for everyone. Single or married, it's good for us to talk about romance, sex and marriage in a safe context, and to hear God's good words for us on these matters. It's also a book for all of us—single or married—because Song of Songs is ultimately about the gospel, not just about marriage, and the gospel matters for everyone. So with all this in mind let's listen to the song now, in its entirety.

Song of Solomon?

Different Bibles give different titles to this book. Some (e.g. ESV) call it 'The Song of Solomon'. Others (e.g. NIV) call it 'Song of Songs'. Even though we're using the ESV in these studies, my preference is for 'Song of Songs', for reasons that will hopefully become obvious as you study the book.

Read Song of Songs.

1. Who are the major characters?
2. Who are the minor characters?

3. How do the major characters feel about:

- each other?

- those around them?

4. Write down all the themes, images and phrases that recur throughout the book.

5. What do you think is the high point of the song? Why?

Solomon

1:1 introduces the book as Solomon's Song of Songs. As a result, some have concluded either that Solomon wrote the book, or that he is the 'He' of the poem, or both. However, neither is likely.

It is unlikely that Solomon is the 'He' of the song. First, although Solomon is sometimes mentioned (1:1, 5; 3:6-11; 8:11-12), he never speaks. Second, 8:11-14 explicitly distinguishes between Solomon and the man: where the king tries to buy the woman's love, the woman rejects him in favour of her 'beloved'. Third and most significantly, in a poem all about the uniqueness of this woman in the man's eyes, Solomon would be a strange choice for the lead role—he had 700 wives and 300 mistresses (1 Kgs 11:1-3)! Instead, the poem is more probably 'of Solomon' in that it is a part of the Bible's wisdom tradition, of which Solomon is the exemplar. It is a song *worthy of* Solomon in its wisdom.

For the reasons listed above, it is also very unlikely that Solomon wrote the song, as he comes off so badly in it! If anything, the song functions as a critique of Solomon's sexual habits: where he had women on tap, the man has eyes for only one woman. In this sense, the song being 'of Solomon' has a satiric ►

SONG OF SONGS IS A LOVE song between two major characters: a woman, who at one point is identified as a 'Shulammit' (6:13), and a man, who at various points is described as a shepherd (e.g. 1:7). They are joined by a host of other, more minor characters: mothers, brothers, watchmen, the 'Others', women of Jerusalem, and, of course, **Solomon**. But the spotlight really belongs to its two leads, the man and the woman, and their intoxicating love for one another. In a whirlwind of images, the couple describe each other in ecstatic terms: his love is "better than wine", his body is made of gold and jewels, and his lips drip with myrrh; she is a "lily among brambles", her body is a garden, and her eyes overwhelm him. At the high point of the song (8:6-7), the woman delivers her verdict on love:

...for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the **LORD**.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it...

In the end, this is a song—the greatest song, the song of all songs—about the passion of these two lovers for each other. But is it about anyone else as well?

Read Song of Songs 4:12-5:1, 6:2 and 8:13.

6. In these verses, what image is used to describe the lovers' relationship?

Read Genesis 2:15–25.

7. Where do the man and woman in this story live?

8. How do they feel about each other?

9. What does this suggest about the relevance of the story in Song of Songs?

tinge: Solomon may normally be an exemplar of wisdom but in the case of sex, he could learn a lot from the shepherd and his Shulammitte. The author—probably wisely!—remains anonymous.

The LORD

In our introduction we said there is no explicit reference to God in Song of Songs, and that is still true. The word at the end of 8:6 is literally 'flame of Yah'. It could be that the abbreviated divine name 'Yah' (=Yahweh) is just being used as an intensifier (i.e. it's not just a 'flame' but a 'mighty flame'). But on balance, it is more likely to be an indirect reference to God: 'Yah' is used in association with 'flame' and 'jealousy', both of which are linked to God in Israelite tradition (e.g. Deut 4:24).¹

Literal or allegorical?

Throughout history, most interpreters have been reluctant to read Song of Songs as what it seems to be on face value: a poem about human love, and in particular sexual love. Rather, they have preferred to read it as an allegory, either about the covenant love of Yahweh for his people Israel (the Jewish reading) or about Christ's love for his church (the Christian reading). Sometimes these readings have pushed believability to its limits. For example, Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth-century theologian, said of 1:13—"My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh that lies between my breasts"—that one breast was the Old Testament, the other breast was the New Testament, and the sachet was Christ! Although Cyril should get full marks for imagination, his reading—and that of those like him—has far more to do with ancient Greek views of the 'badness' of the body than it does with good Bible reading.

Song of Songs should be read first and foremost as what it first looks like: a rhapsody on the goodness of human love in the world that God has made. Of course it can be about *more* than that, too—as we will see in study 4. But it is about *at least* that.

Song of Songs is primarily a love song about two particular people—one man and one woman. But it has something more to say, too: over and over, it sets that love in a *garden*, which makes us think of another couple—Adam and Eve—who also lived in a garden, and who also were “naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25). In that sense, Song of Songs is a specific description of a general, created reality: human, romantic, sexual love. As such, it has something to say about *all* lovers (or would-be lovers), not just the two lovers in this book.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Is there anything in (or about) Song of Songs that surprised you as you read through it? If so, what was it and why do you think you were surprised?

Endnote

1. See Barry G Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, NSBT, IVP, Downers Grove, 2000, p. 24. I am indebted to Barry for a number of his insights on Song of Songs.