



---

## THE SONG OF SONGS | A THEOLOGY OF DESIRE

January 18, 2026

---

We are now in the midst of a brief five-week sermon series focused on the Song of Songs. But don't worry. I've promised to make this series mostly rated PG, in case you're concerned about that... Along with the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs belongs to what we call the wisdom literature in the Bible. These three books take up some of the most pressing questions of human life. The Book of Job explores the riddle of suffering, the Book of Ecclesiastes explores the riddle of existence, and the Song of Songs explores the riddle of love.

That right there tells you something important. Love, attraction, desire, intimacy: These are not things that are marginal. Rather, they are central to what it means to be a human being. And the Bible speaks to these topics with honesty, with seriousness, and, I would contend, with beauty. So before we jump into our main topic for today, let me offer a quick recap by sharing a few words about the authorship, the content, and the interpretation of this book.

### **Background**

First of all, a word about the authorship. The Song of Songs is often ascribed to Solomon, the son of King David. But this book was almost certainly not written by Solomon. It's much more likely that the Song belongs to the wisdom tradition for which Solomon was so famous. You see, unlike in the life of Solomon — who it is said had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and whose love life is marked by power and by excess — this song celebrates the passionate, mutual, and exclusive love between one man and one woman. And that's why even very conservative scholars agree that almost certainly this book was written by an unnamed author about an idealized man and woman.

We know very few details about this young couple other than how they feel about one another as they progress toward marriage. And you see, that lack of specificity is intentional. This young couple could be anyone. They could be you or me. And that's the point. That's what makes this song so accessible and so enduring.

But secondly, let's consider the content of this book. The book is entitled The Song of Songs, and in Hebrew that's a superlative description, like speaking about the Holy of Holies, the King of Kings, or the Lord of Lords. It's a way of describing the greatest of its kind. And so this book is intended to be read as the greatest of all love songs, unsurpassed in its subject, its artistry, and its depth of meaning.

But this title also reminds us that this book is a song, and therefore it includes all the typical elements of poetry. For that reason, this song doesn't provide us with a straightforward plot in chronological order. Therefore we shouldn't force a narrative upon this book, but rather we should pay attention to the recurring themes that come back again and again. And as we will soon see, this is very important, because at

times it's not altogether clear if this young couple is describing a memory, a dream, a fantasy, or a real event. But in any case, it doesn't matter, because the author is not trying to give us a simple, tidy little storyline, but rather the author is seeking to evoke our senses, our feelings, and our imagination.

Then finally, how should we interpret this song? Well, let me suggest that we need to avoid two opposite errors. One would be to secularize this song. The other would be to overspiritualize it. Some secularize it by saying this is nothing more than a secular love account, removing God entirely. But then there are others who are a little bit uncomfortable with the evocative and sensual language used in this song, and so they dismiss it as nothing more than an allegory meant to describe God's relationship to his people.

So how should we interpret this book? Well, I would say that first and foremost that we should read it as a positive, joyful celebration of human love and human sexuality within the context of marriage. That is the primary emphasis. But that primary emphasis does not exhaust this song's meaning, because there are multiple layers of meaning. Therefore, secondarily, we should read this song as being intended to give us a window into God's love for his people. Because after all, it is part of the canon of Scripture.

But we need to be careful, because God's love should never be cast in erotic terms. That would be a category mistake. And so rather than projecting our human experience of love onto God, we need to reverse that order. We need to realize that God's perfect, committed, covenantal love for us is meant to inform and shape our human love for one another.

So let me give you the roadmap to orient you. During this five-week series based on the Song of Songs, we're going to explore a theology of the body, a theology of desire, a theology of identity, a theology of marriage, and a theology of love. Last week we began with a theology of the body, and today we'll turn to a theology of desire. So here's my outline for today. I'd like to consider how: 1) *desire is divine*, and yet 2) *desire can be disordered*, and therefore 3) *desire must be directed*.

<sup>7</sup>I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
by the gazelles or the does of the field,  
that you not stir up or awaken love  
until it pleases.

<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.

<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 2:7-17*

## **Desire is Devine**

The first point that I'd like to make is that desire is divine. Desire in and of itself is not sinful or shameful, but rather it is godly. Now that may come as a bit of a surprise to some of us, because Christians, at least in some circles, haven't always been comfortable speaking about physical or emotional desires. There are certain corners of the Christian world where desire is seen as something that must be suppressed, ignored, or perhaps feared. But the Song overflows with expectant longing, and it affirms that desire is a good gift of God.

In fact, it's important to realize that desire predates sin. Before humanity fell into sin and misery, there was desire. In Genesis 2:22-23, God serves as the original matchmaker, and he presents Eve to Adam. When this happens, Adam bursts into song. The first recorded words of Adam in the book of the Bible are, “at last.” At last, my love has come along. He says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my

flesh.” You are the one I’ve been waiting for all my life. You are bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. You’re the opposite of me and yet equal to me. Now I know who I am in light of who you are.

This song captures that same expectant longing between our two lovers in the most beautiful of language. The poetry here uses the metaphor of springtime to suggest that the time is almost-but-not-quite ripe for love. So beginning in verse 8, the woman recalls a recent memory, it seems. And even though she describes a past event, she speaks of it with present anticipation. The woman hears her beloved approaching, and so in verse 8, she says, “The voice of my beloved!” She imagines him leaping over the mountains and the hills like a swift gazelle, light of foot and bounding with energy. And he gets close. He gets so close. He gets right outside the wall of her home.

But now there’s a separation. The wall stands between them. He can only see through the window. He can only gaze through the lattice. But he calls to her through the lattice, and she hears him say, “Arise my love, my beautiful one, and come away” with me. He announces that the winter has passed. The rain is over. The spring has come. Flowers are blooming. Birds are singing. The fig tree ripens and the vines are in blossom. They yearn to be together, and so he calls to her once more, “Arise my love, my beautiful one, and come away” with me.

He likens her to a shy dove hiding in the cleft of rock. And so he tries to coax her out of her hiding, and his words are filled with longing in verse 14. “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.” But notice nothing happens. Desire is affirmed, but it is not yet fulfilled. There’s still a wall separating them. We might think of Romeo calling out to Juliet while she remains up on the balcony. There’s still a distance between them. Even though they finally found one another, what they’re left with at the moment is longing.

Now this desire for romantic love is perhaps one of the strongest emotions that we human beings can ever feel. As the Scottish singer Lewis Capaldi has sung, we long for “somebody to hear, somebody to know, somebody to have, somebody to hold.” Now whether or not God, in his wise and sometimes strange providence, brings such a person into our life remains something of a mystery. But even if this desire is left unfulfilled, or even if we have once tasted love and then lost it somehow, the Bible affirms that this desire in and of itself is right and good.

### **Desire Can Be Disordered**

Desire is divine, and yet in verse 15, the author introduces a word of caution. See, even though desire is divine, desire can be disordered, and therefore love has to be properly tended. So it’s the woman who appears to speak in verse 15, and she says, “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.” The vineyard seems to represent their budding relationship. It’s new and it’s fresh, but it’s tender and delicate. And what are these little foxes? She’s not worried about ferocious wolves. No, she’s worried about little foxes that can spoil the vineyard. They’re the small but real threats that can damage not only our love but our lives.

These small but real threats could be as simple as little misunderstandings in a relationship that are blown out of proportion. Lovers quarrels, harsh words, or an impatient tone. Or they could be something as serious as deceitful lies, broken promises, crossed boundaries, controlling behavior, excessive jealousy, perhaps moral compromise. You see, these “little foxes,” whatever they may be, can undermine a good gift of God if not dealt with early on and altogether. You can't just catch one; you have to catch all the little foxes that might spoil the vineyard.

One danger, of course, is that in any relationship, it's all too easy to allow our imagination or our physical intimacy to run ahead of a real relationship. And that's why we need to make sure that our desires are properly ordered rather than disordered. Let me offer a little paradigm for how to think about this from a biblical point of view. Let me try this out on you, and you can tell me what you think: I would say that from the Bible's point of view, our desire for physical and emotional intimacy has to be reserved for the right person at the right time in the right way. For the Christian, that means that the ultimate fulfillment of desire has to come within the context of a permanent and exclusive covenant of marriage. And if that's the paradigm, you could imagine a number of different scenarios where things might be disordered. So let me give you three potentially disordered scenarios.

For one, you could desire the wrong person. You could desire someone real or imagined who could never really be yours, either because one or both of you is already committed to someone else, or it could be that this relationship with the wrong person is nothing more than a fantasy. It's not someone you could ever be with. It might not even be a real person. It's nothing more than a figment of your own imagination.

Or here's a second scenario: You might desire the right person, but at the wrong time. You could think of an engaged couple that is not yet married who have allowed their thought lives or their physical relationship to get out in front of their actual commitment to one another.

Or a third scenario: You could desire the right person at the right time, but in the wrong way. In this case, you could imagine a married couple who have made their vows to one another, but perhaps the one has a desire for his or her spouse that turns self-giving into self gratification. The one person is simply using the other to have their own needs met, in which case the one is objectifying the other by treating his/her spouse as nothing more than a physical body or a possession.

So we need to channel our desires to the right person at the right time in the right way. But let me also address two special cases where, on the one hand, desire might run out of control, or on the other hand, desire might be non-existent. See, for some, desire might be running out of control. And as a pastor, I think it would be naive and perhaps even irresponsible of me to not at least take a brief moment to say a word about pornography, or what we might call solitary sexual experience. If I don't talk about it, who is going to talk about it?

On the one hand, pornography has always been around. It's nothing new. But the proliferation of pornography on the internet has dramatically, exponentially increased

its reach and has wreaked destructive havoc on both men and women alike. Now I don't want to make anyone feel awkward, so I'm not going to stay long on this topic, but let me just read a quote that I find insightful by an Australian pastor and professor named John Kleinig. He writes:

As has been shown in many studies, the regular use of pornography does immense damage...

It reprograms the brains of young people and desensitizes all who keep using it, so that they are no longer sexually aroused by the actual presence and touch, the smell and the taste, the speech and sight, of a real body, but instead require artificial stimulation in their imagination to awaken and sustain sexual desire. Like a drug that delivers a short high to its user that is followed by an emotional slump, it delivers a charge that does not last but requires ever-increasing indulgence to maintain its diminishing intensity and ward off the ever-increasing severity of its consequent low...

So, oddly, indulgence in pornography does not actually awaken normal sexual desire—it switches it off. Instead of increasing healthy sexual enjoyment, it decreases it. It does not enrich the sexual imagination but actually impoverishes it.

Now if you feel that your desires are perhaps not only disordered but maybe even out of control, then please reach out. Reach out to me. Reach out to anyone on our staff, to any one of our officers. We would be more than happy to help you.

Some of you may feel like your desires are out of control, but others may feel that they are non-existent. You may say that you do not feel any romantic or sexual desire at all. And of course, that might be developmental, in which case you've got nothing to worry about. But for some it could be a sign that significant issues need to be discussed with a wise counselor. Perhaps you've experienced trauma, neglect, or abuse. Maybe you find yourself attracted to the same sex. Maybe you have been in unhealthy relationships, which have left you feeling guilty, ashamed, confused, or numb and just not feeling anything at all. But the main message that I want you to hear is that you're not alone, and that help is available in all of these situations

You see, guilt and shame fester in the dark. The first step toward healing is to let the light in. Once you open up and tell a trusted friend the truth, guilt and shame lose their power over your life. And so there's no shame. There's no judgment. Please come speak to me or to any one of us on staff. Trust me, after 20 years in ministry, there is nothing you could tell me that I haven't already heard in at least some form before, and there's no reason to struggle alone in isolation, because we really are here to help. The Church is not a museum for saints; it's a hospital for sinners. This is the place where we come to get healed.

### **Desire Must Be Directed**

That brings me then to the final movement of our text. Desire is divine, but it can be disordered, and therefore it needs to be directed. See, desire is a good thing, but it's not an ultimate thing, and therefore it needs to be properly channeled. And that's

why the woman urges us at the very beginning of the passage in verse 7, “[do] not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” Do not stir up or awaken love until the right time has arrived.

In offering this warning to the daughters of Jerusalem, this woman is speaking to herself. Earlier in this very same chapter, in verse 5, she says that she is sick with love. She’s faint with desire. She wants their love to come to full fruition, but the right time has not yet arrived. And therefore, according to verse 17, she acknowledges that she must wait. We human beings, especially in the 21st century, are not good about waiting for anything. But she acknowledges that she has to wait for the promised day when the shadows will flee and a new day begins to breathe.

It’s interesting that this word “desire” in the Hebrew only appears three times in the Old Testament: once in Genesis 3:16, once in Genesis 4:6, and then again in Song of Songs 7:10. In those Genesis accounts, desire is linked to a struggle for domination and control in relationships. For example, God warns Cain, as it relates to his brother Abel, that sin is crouching at his door. Its desire is for him, but he must rule over it. But in Song of Songs 7:10, desire is now cast in an altogether positive light, because there the young woman sings, “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me.” This is desire transformed. Broken relationships are marked by power grabs and emotional manipulation, but this relationship is marked by mutual affection and belonging, which leads to mutual self-giving.

You see, this song stands in stark contrast to so much of what we know about relationships in the ancient world. There’s not even a whiff here of male chauvinism or sexist double standards. This relationship is completely reciprocal, which would’ve been shocking for its time. She says it again in verse 16 in our passage, “My beloved is mine, and I am his.” Absolute mutuality.

And in our heart of hearts, isn’t this what we want? Isn’t this what we long for? Consider our modern love songs. Consider our romantic films. Consider the lyrics, the poetry. What are they telling us? They all could have come straight from the Song of Songs. When lovers meet, the earth quakes. Stars fall out of the sky. When lovers are separated from one another, they hunger and they ache for one another’s touch. They long for a love that will last forever. Even if the sun should refuse to shine, and even if the mountains crumble into the sea, they will be there for one another. And even if the world is ending, there’s nowhere they would rather be than next to one another, wrapped up in one another’s arms.

Now what are we supposed to make of this language? At times, it seems so over the top. Should we dismiss it as nothing more than naive romanticism or the foolishness of youth? No, I don’t think so. In 1941, the Oxford professor C.S. Lewis delivered a sermon entitled “The Weight of Glory,” and he argued in this sermon that there are certain moments in life when we have an experience of beauty, of music, of romance, and these moments seem to stab us with desire. They awaken within us a longing that is deeply personal and yet elusive. As soon as we catch onto it, it seems to slip through our fingers. The moment is gone, and we can never be satisfied by the original event that triggered it.

So think not of the worst, but think of the best. Think of the best moments of your life. The best sunset, the best walk in the park, the best night under the stars, the best day in the snow, the best day on the beach, the best concert, the best meal, the best date — the very best day of your life. Once that moment has passed, there's no going back. All we are left with is longing. All that poetry, all those love songs, they all leave us with the same thing, and that is desire. We ache. We ache so much that it hurts. And we think sometimes that if only this person, this love, this embrace could be ours, well then finally it would be enough for us.

But C.S. Lewis was wise enough to know that the problem with our desires is not that they are too strong, but that they are too weak. It's not that we aim too high, but rather that we aim too low. You see, romantic love, as great and wonderful as it is, was always meant to point beyond itself to something greater. Romantic love is not the final destination; it is merely the signpost. It's always pointing us to something beyond itself.

Earthly love awakens a desire that it can't possibly complete, but that is why these love songs are often cast in cosmic terms: the earth shaking, the sky falling, the world ending. Because we sense intuitively that love is meant to touch eternity. It really is. That is not foolishness or fantasy, because, as Lewis said, it might be the truest index of our actual situation. If we find ourselves longing for something or someone that nothing and no one in this world could ever satisfy, then perhaps that is the evidence that we were made for another world. And even the greatest love that we experience now is merely the echo of another voice.

So as we close, I want us to return one last time to where we began, which is to desire itself. I said that desire is divine because God is the one who has planted these good, godly desires within us. But now I want to say more than that. I'd like to suggest that desire is divine because desire is not only godly; it is godlike. Desire is not only a gift of God; it is an attribute of God. Desire is not only something that God gives us; it's something that describes himself.

You see, the Bible does not present God as being emotionally distant or removed from us, but rather as one who loves and who longs, who seeks and who pursues. And from the opening pages of Genesis to the final vision of Revelation, the Bible tells a story of a God who desires to be in relationship with us. And regardless of whether God has ever given you a person to love or desire like we read in this song, the ultimate point is that Jesus longs to be in a relationship with you like this. Again, not in erotic terms, but Jesus longs and desires to know you.

Those words that we read in verse 14 are the words that Jesus sings over you. "Let me see your face. Let me hear your voice." You see, all of our desires to be fully known for who we really are and yet fully loved at one and the same time are meant to lead us back into his arms. We long for a love that will cross any barrier, that will pay any price, that will last forever. And that true love is what we celebrate here at this table.

Jesus didn't just come leaping over mountains and hills; he was willing to move heaven and earth for you. And for Jesus, it wasn't just idle words: "I'll give my life for you." No, Jesus didn't just risk his life; he gave his life for you on the cross, and that is the assurance that you have. That because death itself could not even hold him down,

his love is the love that truly will last forever. Even if the sun refuses to shine, even if mountains crumble into the sea, his love will never fail. See, this is the love, this is the person, this is the embrace that we were meant to receive, because Jesus is the only one who will never disappoint us. Jesus is the only one who can ever truly satisfy us. And what we remember here at this table is that his desire is for you.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father God, we thank you that desire is divine. You have planted these good, godly desires within us, but these desires can be disordered, and therefore they need to be properly directed. So help us to channel our desire to the right person at the right time and in the right way. But all along the way, Lord, we pray that you would help us to know that desire is not only godly, it is godlike, and even our best experiences of love in this world are meant to point us to something greater that is supposed to drive us into your arms — the one who longs and loves, who desires and seeks, and who pursues us. Because your desire is for us. Help us receive that truth and live in light of it today. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*