



THE SONG OF SONGS | A THEOLOGY OF IDENTITY

January 25, 2026

We are currently in the midst of a five-week sermon series based on the Song of Songs. Along with the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes, these three books belong to what is referred to as the wisdom literature in the Bible, and taken together, these three books address some of the most important questions in 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, intimacy, attraction, desire: these things are not marginal, but rather they are central to what it means to be a human being, and the Bible speaks to these topics with seriousness, with honesty, and, I would suggest, with great beauty.

As we've seen, the Song of Songs is intended to be read as the greatest of all love songs — the song to end all songs. It celebrates the passionate, exclusive, mutual love between one man and one woman on their progress toward marriage. But how should we read this book? As we've discussed, there is no explicit reference to God in the Song of Songs. And yet at the same time, it is part of the canon of Scripture, and therefore that means that we have to avoid two opposite errors: one would be to secularize this book, and the other would be to overspiritualize it.

We could secularize it by suggesting that this song really has nothing to do with God. Or we could air in the opposite direction by overspiritualizing it. We might be uncomfortable with some of the sensual language in the Song of Songs and therefore might conclude that it is simply meant to be read as an allegory describing God's love for his people. But as I've suggested, I think that these would both be mistakes that would lead us in the wrong direction.

So how should we read it? We should read it, first and foremost, as a positive and joyful celebration of human love and human sexuality within the context of marriage. That is its primary emphasis. But that primary emphasis does not exhaust the Song's meaning, because there are layers of meaning to this song. Therefore, secondarily, we should read this song as providing us with a glimpse of God's love for us. On that note, we also need to be careful not to cast God's love in erotic terms, because that would be a category mistake. Rather than projecting our experience of love onto God, we have to allow God's covenantal, committed love for us to inform and shape our human love for one another.

So here's the roadmap for where we are headed during this five-week series. We're exploring the Song of Songs in order to identify a theology of the body, a theology of desire, a theology of identity, a theology of marriage, and a theology of love. We've already considered the body and desire, so today we focus on a theology of identity. But what do I mean by that? Well, everybody needs a sense of self. Everybody needs a sense of identity that is stable and enduring across the various roles that

we play and across the various spheres of life which we inhabit. We need a core understanding of who we are that doesn't change with time or circumstance.

The root of the word "identity" actually comes from a Latin word meaning "the same." So your identity is that aspect of you which remains the same over time. It describes the real you, regardless of your age or stage in life, regardless of where you live or where you work, regardless of the clothes you wear or how much money you have in your bank account. And we not only need to know who we are in order to function and thrive as human beings, but we also need to know that our identity matters. That our self has worth. But how? How do we know who we are, and how do we know that our self is valuable? These are the questions we're going to take up today.

So as we turn to the Song of Songs, chapters 4 and 5, let's consider: 1) *the search for identity*, 2) *the struggle with identity*, and 3) *the source of identity*.

4 ¹Behold, you are beautiful, my love,
 behold, you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
 behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
 leaping down the slopes of Gilead.
²Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
 that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins,
 and not one among them has lost its young.
³Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
 and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
 behind your veil.
⁴Your neck is like the tower of David,
 built in rows of stone;
on it hang a thousand shields,
 all of them shields of warriors.
⁵Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 twins of a gazelle,
 that graze among the lilies.
⁶Until the day breathes
 and the shadows flee,
I will go away to the mountain of myrrh
 and the hill of frankincense.
⁷You are altogether beautiful, my love;
 there is no flaw in you.

5 ¹⁰My beloved is radiant and ruddy,
 distinguished among ten thousand.
¹¹His head is the finest gold;
 his locks are wavy,
 black as a raven.

¹²His eyes are like doves
beside streams of water,
bathed in milk,
sitting beside a full pool.
¹³His cheeks are like beds of spices,
mounds of sweet-smelling herbs.
His lips are lilies,
dripping liquid myrrh.
¹⁴His arms are rods of gold,
set with jewels.
His body is polished ivory,
bedecked with sapphires.
¹⁵His legs are alabaster columns,
set on bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.
¹⁶His mouth is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

Song of Songs 4:1-7, 5:10-16

The Search for Identity

Let's begin with the search for identity. I've just read two segments of the Song in which our young lovers describe how they find each other both beautiful and attractive. Now, what you need to understand is that these poems of praise follow a set pattern that was very typical of Middle Eastern love poetry. In each case, the lovers metaphorically describe the other's body parts from head to toe, or sometimes vice versa. In chapter 4, the young man starts with his beloved's eyes, and in chapter 5 she describes first her lover's head.

Now, when we read some of these metaphors, I admit they might come across as a bit bizarre. I asked my kids what they would do if a boy texted them a love poem and said, "Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down a hillside." One of them responded, "I would block him from ever texting me again." And that sounds about right. Or how about this? Try this one out. The next time you're out on a date and you're sitting across the table from your beloved, and she smiles, and then you say, "Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes," let me know how that goes. I'd like to hear.

Some of these metaphors may be able to transcend differences of time and culture. We can appreciate lips like a scarlet thread. But others seem like a bit of a reach. So how should we interpret this imagery? Well, my suggestion would be not to press the details in any one particular case. There may only be one main point to each of these metaphors. So here, for example, the young man may be saying that like the sight of a flock of goats that is bobbing and weaving its way down a hillside, so he is suggesting that he loves his beloved's wavy hair and the way it bounces and flows as she walks and as she turns.

There may only be one main point to each metaphor, but the big idea here is that each person finds the other one outstandingly beautiful. They only have eyes for each other. “Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful!” “My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand” — one in 10,000. And so you see, this poetry directs us to the power of love. Nothing can strengthen our sense of identity more than love.

We’ve all been shaped by the past. We’ve all been shaped by our failures, our shortcomings, our missed opportunities. By the uneven treatment that we have received from people over time. The criticisms and accusations that people have made against us. The things that have been done to us. And everything that has happened to us, all the things that have been said to us, they all add up over time, and it shapes the way that we view ourselves.

But when someone loves you — it could be a family member, a parent, a sibling, a friend, a spouse — when someone loves you, one positive word from them can outweigh all the negative ones you ever received. Just one word can challenge all those accumulated verdicts that have ever been passed down against you. If everyone has told you you’re ugly but your spouse tells you you’re beautiful, you’re beautiful. It doesn’t matter what anyone else has ever said. The opinion that matters most is the opinion of the one who is closest to you, the one who knows you the best. So if everyone tells you you’re ugly, you might feel ugly. But if the one who knows and loves you the best says you’re beautiful, you’re beautiful.

Of course, this also works in reverse, too. If everyone says you’re beautiful, but your spouse tells you you’re ugly, well, it’s going to be very, very hard to get over that one. That will inflict a deep, deep wound. And so it shows that we play a critically important role in one another’s lives, helping affirm one another’s identity and sense of self through the power of love.

And so as a result, this song subtly challenges the modern Western search for identity, because here identity is affirmed as already given and already good. That stands in stark contrast to the Western search for identity, which is self-constructed. As contemporary people, we tend to think that we have to create our own identity by expressing whatever lies deep within us, no matter what anyone else might think.

Now notice, that’s a very different way of conceiving of the self as compared to the past. In traditional cultures, people knew who they were by connecting to others and fulfilling their responsibilities to their family, their tribe, their people. But now people feel that in order to be their true, authentic self, they have to break free from the expectations of other people or social conventions and express their innermost desires and dreams. As a result, we’re not looking for others to confer value upon us. No, we bestow value upon ourselves.

I’ll give you a rather striking example of this. In case you didn’t know, I host a podcast entitled “The Resound Project Podcast.” In my most recent episode, I did a follow-up conversation with a man named Dr. Mark Yarhouse. Dr. Yarhouse is a clinical psychologist who teaches at Wheaton College in Illinois, and he’s also the author of

a new book entitled “Emerging Sexual Identities.” In this book, and in our interview together, he explains something that I had not previously heard of, and perhaps you have not either.

Dr. Yarhouse explains that many young people today are using an explosion of terms — hundreds of different terms — to describe in a very granular way not only their sexual orientation or their sexual behavior, but also the ways in which they are attracted (or not) to others, or the degree to which they do or do not experience romantic feelings, or under what circumstances. And then they mix and match these terms (with a very high degree of specificity) with another explosion of terms to describe gender identity. The result is what he refers to as micro-minoritized identities. All of this reveals a hyper-focused effort to not only define but curate, especially on social media, one’s identity in terms of not only desire but also attraction (or the lack thereof).

So how should we evaluate this new cultural turn? On the one hand, the individualism of our modern times emerged for a reason. In the past, people were often locked into a particular place or role or station in life, and you couldn’t break out of it. If your father was a butcher or a baker, but you wanted to be a candlestick maker, too bad. You’re going to be a butcher or a baker too.

Pre-modern cultures were rigid, and they were highly stratified. If you didn’t fit the mold, then very likely you would be ostracized. So the modern world has made some gains. We don’t want to go back to an earlier time that was more stifling or more oppressive. We should be able to determine the shape of our lives in ways that our ancestors could hardly have ever dreamed of. But on the other hand, there is a shadow side to modern individualism, because it can lead to not only a kind of self-indulgent obsession with oneself, but also deep insecurity and anxiety about who we are. We may worry even more about whether we’ll be accepted as we seek to define and to curate our own identity.

As much as we may say, “I don’t need anyone else to validate my choices. I’m gonna do my own thing,” our surrounding culture is constantly shaping our desires and telling us what we should feel and what we should value. Let’s say we do break free of the narrow confines of our family or our religious tradition, or our small town community, but then we just need to win the acceptance, the approval, the acclaim of a different audience. It’s not enough to say, “I’m gonna be creative. I’m gonna be beautiful. I’m gonna be smart. I’m gonna be accomplished.” *They* have to think so, whoever *they* may be. It’s very likely that we’ve simply switched the audience we’re seeking to please.

The English author Paul Kingsnorth recently wrote a book entitled “Against the Machine” in which he writes that it’s only people who are living in a modern culture that has been uprooted from a particular place or people or past or religious path who are agonizing over their identity or trying to invent themselves. You don’t find people from rooted cultures worrying about who they are. If you’re from a rooted culture, you don’t worry about who you are because you already know.

The Struggle with Identity

Let's turn from the search for identity to the struggle with identity. Why is it so hard? Well, there are at least three problems with basing your identity on expressing your own desires. If your identity *is* your desires — if you equate yourself with your desires — then you're never really going to know who you are. You're never really going to know how you're supposed to live. And here's reason number one: because your desires change.

If you are your desires, then how can you have an enduring sense of self, because your desires are constantly changing. Young people in particular should not be so quick to identify with their desires, especially as they're going through adolescence or puberty. Because what you want when you're 16 is not necessarily the same as what you want when you're 46, or when you're 76. Our desires change. What you want when you're successful may not be what you want when you're failing. What you want when you're in love may not be the same as what you want when you're lonely. If your identity *is* your desires, then you'll never have a sense of self. The only thing you'll have is a constantly moving target.

So number one, your desires change. But the other problem is that, number two, your desires sometimes conflict with one another. Let's say you want two things. You want autonomy, and you want intimacy. You want to achieve career success, but you also want to have a meaningful relationship and a family. Okay, well then let's say you land your dream job in one particular place, but then you fall in love with someone on the opposite side of the globe. What do you do then? Which of these desires takes precedence? Which one is more important? How do you decide? Is it possible to have it all? Do you have to sacrifice one desire for the other, or can you find some kind of perfect balance?

So, number one, our desires change, number two, sometimes our desires conflict with one another, and then three, your desires can't correct. In other words, they can't correct themselves. They can't correct your impulses. And here's what I mean by that. Your desires can only tell you how you feel; your desires cannot tell you what you ought to do. You can't tell through desire alone if that desire is disordered or perhaps misaligned. Your desires, your feelings can't tell you if this particular inclination could cause harm to you or to someone else — whether you realize it or not — in the immediate present or perhaps long in the future. Desire itself can't tell you which desires should be followed and which desires should be rejected.

I'll throw this in as well: Your desires also can't tell you whether you should do something that is hard or costly if you don't feel like it. If you don't feel like doing something hard or costly, then why should you do it? Desire alone only points to self-expression, not self-giving. And yet we all know that self-giving is one of the things that makes us most truly, fully human.

So do you see the problem? We need an enduring sense of self that remains the same across time and circumstance, but we can't get that by just expressing whatever lies deep within us, because our desires change, our desires sometimes conflict, and

our desires cannot correct misguided impulses. All of which just goes to show that we simply cannot escape the need for some kind of external source of identity.

The Source of Identity

And so we come now to my third point, the source of identity. The good news for us is that this is precisely what Christianity provides. Rather than looking out to other people or into ourselves, Christianity calls us to look up to God to figure out who we are. We're called to look up to God as the source of our true identity. Our identity is something that we receive as a gift from God by responding to the call that he places on our life. Relying on other people to tell you who you are can be stifling and even repressive, and relying on yourself to determine who you are can be circular as well as anxiety-ridden, but relying on God to determine who you are is freeing.

The Bible teaches us that every single human being is created in the image of God, and we are therefore imbued with inestimable dignity and worth. Now of course, we have fallen as human beings into sin, and sin can deface the image of God, but it can never erase it. However distorted or disfigured God's image in us may be, there's always hope for renewal, because Jesus is the exact representation of God. He is the ultimate image of God. And Jesus lived and died and rose again in order to renew God's image in us.

So a Christian is simply someone who has put their trust in Jesus for their acceptance before God. And the moment that you do that, you are indwelt by Jesus' own Spirit, the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit begins his work immediately to take that broken image of God in us and transform it from one degree of glory to another. And that work, of course, will not be completed until that day when we see Jesus face to face in unveiled glory. But when we see him, we will see him as he truly is, and we will see that we are like him, because the Holy Spirit's mission is to transform us progressively into the very image of Jesus — the perfect image of God. And that work is happening now. The moment you're united to Jesus by faith, that work begins. Little by little, bit by bit, you are being transformed from one degree of glory into another as the Spirit renews the image of God in you.

So what does that mean? The core message of Christianity is that the Creator God, revealed in the person of Jesus, knows you. He knows you for who you really are, and at the same time, he loves you more than you could ever imagine. God knows you better than you know yourself, because he made you. He knows the real you. He knows what makes you unique and special. He sees your full potential, and only he can make you the greatest version of yourself.

But he also knows those aspects of your personality and your character that may cause more harm than good, either to yourself or to others. And yet the wonder of it all is that he still loves you. He still loves you despite all your faults and failures — so much so that Jesus was willing to give his life for you on the cross. Jesus is willing to do whatever it takes to transform you into the person that he has always destined you to be. The opinion that matters most is the opinion of the one who is closest to you, the one who knows you the best. And no one knows you better than the God who made you.

And if God knows you and yet loves you, even in all your sin and failure, then you only discover who you really are in light of who God is. Whatever God loves, whatever God desires, whatever God affirms within you forms the real you, whereas everything else that runs counter to his intentions for you will only distort and misshape you. God knows you and yet loves you, and therefore only he can show you who you really are.

So let me conclude by coming back to what the Song of Songs tells us about love and identity. Our love for one another, in a derivative way, simply reflects God's love for us in the gospel. This song affirms the biblical truth that we do not create our own identity, but rather we receive our identity as those who are known and loved and restored by God himself. And so the lovers in this song, they delight in one another. They delight in one another as those who have been created good, have been damaged by the Fall, but are on their way to glory even now. And their love for one another enables them to see each other not only as they are but as they will be in glory.

You see, this is a glorified picture of who they will be. How else could chapter 4, verse 7 tell us, "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you." See, already these young lovers are channeling the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, which describes who we will be when Jesus finishes his work in us. They already see one another in splendor, without any wrinkle or spot or any other blemish.

I once heard N.T. Wright reflect on the question of identity. Someone once asked him, how do we really know who we are? And he said that René Descartes, the great philosopher, engaged in a thought experiment, and he concluded, "I think, therefore I am." But the Christian answer is more satisfying, because the Christian answer to that question "How do I know who I am?" is this: "I am loved, therefore I am." When someone loves you — it could be a parent, a sibling, a friend, a spouse — but when someone loves you, then you begin to understand who you really are. And ultimately this discovery comes through the love of God himself.

When you experience the love of Jesus, you not only discover who you are, you discover who you are meant to be. And the point is that our identity is inherently relational. We discover who we are not in isolation but in community. Because when we're loved, the most natural thing to do is to love in return, and to want to be part of a community of love. When we're loved, especially when we're loved by God, we want to extend that love to others. And it's as we extend love to others that we discover the hidden depths of our personality.

"I'm loved, therefore I am." When someone loves us — and when Jesus loves us, even at the cost of his own life — we realize the extraordinary value of our self. But then we also learn that the most important thing that we could do with our self is to give it away in love. Jesus famously said that if you lose your life, you will save it. If you give up your life, you will find it. And here at this table, we celebrate the fact that Jesus gave up his life for us. And as we give up ourself in love for others, well then we finally discover our true identity.

Let me pray for us.

Father God, we acknowledge the search to discover who we really are. We need an enduring sense of self that transcends the change in time and circumstance, and yet we also acknowledge that this is a struggle, because we cannot rely merely on the validation of other people or the validation of ourselves. We need an external source of identity. And so, Father, help us to see that we can only discover who we are in light of you. You are the one who knows us and yet loves us to the point that Jesus gave his life for us. And it's only as we receive that love and reflect it out to the world that we discover who we really are and who you intend for us to be. Help us to live in light of these truths. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.