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## THE SONG OF SONGS | A THEOLOGY OF LOVE

February 8, 2026

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Today we conclude our series on the Song of Songs. This, the greatest of all love songs, poetically describes the passionate, exclusive, mutual love between one man and one woman as they progress toward marriage. Over these last several weeks, we've discussed how we should read this song. On the one hand, we must be careful not to secularize it — to treat it as if it has nothing to do with God. On the other hand, we also have been careful not to overspiritualize it — to treat it as nothing more than perhaps an allegory describing God's love for his people.

Rather, we have read this song first and foremost as a positive, joyful celebration of human love and human sexuality within the context of marriage. That's its primary emphasis. And yet that primary emphasis does not exhaust the Song's meaning, for there are multiple layers of meaning. Therefore, secondarily, we have considered what this song has to tell us about God's faithful, covenantal love for us, his people.

So thus far, as we've made our way through the Song of Songs, we've used this, the greatest of all love songs, to consider a theology of the body, of desire, of identity, and of marriage, and today I'd like us to consider what the Song tells us about a theology of love. We'll do this as I just indicated by considering the song from two angles. First, what does this song tell us about not just love in general but romantic love in particular? And then secondarily, what does this song tell us about God's divine love for us? So as we turn to Song of Songs 8 this morning, I'd like us to consider: 1) *the promise of love*, 2) *the passion of love*, and 3) *the power of love*.

<sup>6</sup>Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
the very flame of the Lord.

<sup>7</sup>Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.  
If a man offered for love  
all the wealth of his house,  
he would be utterly despised.

*Song of Songs 8:6-7*

### **The Promise of Love**

We're drawing near to the end of the greatest of all love songs, and here in chapter 8, we hear once again the voice of the young woman. Although as we make our way

through the passage, it seems that the narrator's voice begins to blend with hers in order to provide us with this poetic statement on the very nature of love. She begins by singing about the promise of love. In verse 6, she says, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm." This is a deeply evocative image that speaks of possession and priority as well as promise.

First, what do we mean by a seal? You could think of the seal of the President of the United States. The presidential seal is the emblem of a bald eagle holding an olive branch and three arrows in its talons, representing peace and war. So the presidential seal is used on official documents as a symbol of presidential authority or executive power. And therefore, a seal is simply a publicly visible mark that both authenticates and guarantees identity, possession, belonging, and authority.

In the ancient world, there were at least two different kinds of seals. There was a cylinder seal and then there was a signet ring or stamp. If you go to the Metropolitan Museum or the Morgan Library, you can view hundreds of these little cylinder seals. They're no more than about an inch tall. They might have a hollow interior, but they're round like a cylinder. And in the ancient world, people would take these cylinders made out of precious stone and they would engrave an image or perhaps some words on that cylinder so that if you rolled it through wet clay, you would leave a distinctive mark. It might even include the signature of scribe-so-and-so. So that's how the cylinder seal worked.

On the other hand, there was the signet ring or stamp. You could think of Pharaoh's signet ring, which he gives to Joseph in Genesis 41. If you press that signet ring into hot wax, it too would leave a distinctive mark like a signature. That's why, if Joseph had Pharaoh's ring, he could make legal decisions on Pharaoh's authority.

So both images may be at play here. The woman sings, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm." But that word "arm" could also be translated as hand or finger, because the Hebrew is not so precise when it comes to anatomy. So what she might literally be saying is, "Set me as a seal upon your heart and as a signet ring on your hand." Now if that's true, on the one hand, that means that this image speaks of possession. What she's saying is, I want to be publicly identified as being with you. I want all the world to know that I belong to you — I am yours, and you are mine.

But secondly, this image also connotes priority. You see, those cylinder seals were made out of precious stones, sometimes even gemstones, and it might have been a person's most valued possession. For that reason, they might string a cord through that cylinder seal and literally wear it around their neck. It would be with them always. And when she says, "Set me as a seal upon your heart," what she's saying is, "I want to be your treasured possession. I want to be the object that hangs around your neck, close to your heart. I want to be close to you. I want to know everything about you. I want to know everything that's on your heart and mind."

And perhaps even more. Not only is she saying, "I want to be your treasured possession"; she might even be suggesting that I myself want to be stamped upon your heart. In Deuteronomy 6, God promises that one day he will write his law on his people's hearts so that we will never forget what we have to do, how we have to live

in order to please him in response to the love that he's showered upon us. And so she might be saying, "I want to leave my distinctive mark, I want to leave my signature on your heart. I want my name written over your heart forever."

Thirdly, that brings me to this ultimate aspect of the seal, which is promise. The seal is a sign of promise. You could think of our wedding rings. When couples get married, if they exchange rings, the ring is not merely a symbol that you went through a ceremony. The ring doesn't simply signify that you're married. No, there's a special significance to a wedding band. The wedding rings are the symbols of your vows. They're the symbol of the promises that we've made to one another. We literally wear our promises on one another's hands.

And the reason why is because what makes a marriage is not present feelings of love, but rather future promises of love. When a young couple gets married, we all know that they love each other on their wedding day. They're young, they're beautiful, they've got their whole life ahead of them. But what counts is, will you love one another in the future, no matter what, come what may? Because as time goes on, through time and circumstance, we change. Life changes. And so that's why we need our promises. That's why we make vows to one another, because what we're saying is, "I'm making a promise to you that in the future, no matter who we both become, no matter what happens to us in life, I will be there and I will be there for you."

So what makes a marriage is not our present feelings of love, because feelings come and go. What makes a marriage is our future promises of love. You're making a pledge to work at your relationship. Because marriage does take work. And you're making a pledge to work at your relationship through all the ups and downs of life. So "set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your hand" speaks of possession, priority, and ultimately promise.

## **The Passion of Love**

Let's turn from the promise of love to the passion of love, which is the focus of the rest of verse 6. Our lovers sing, "for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave." Now what you need to realize here is that in Hebrew poetry, when two lines are written in parallel with one another, the second line is meant to intensify the first. If you put these two lines together, what we see is that love is being paralleled with jealousy. Death is being paralleled with the grave, and the word "strong" is being paralleled with the word "fierce."

So the jealousy that we're talking about here in the context of love should not be seen as sinful envy. We're not talking about jealousy that is overly possessive or fearful or resentful, but rather we're talking about the devotion, the zeal, the single-minded passion that will tolerate no rivals within a permanent and exclusive covenant. And this single-minded passion, therefore, is the kind of jealousy that is appropriate for one's spouse to have for his/her beloved. It's the kind of jealousy that is appropriate for God to have for us, his beloved, his people.

What we're being told here then is that this kind of love is as strong as death. This kind of love is as fierce as the grave, meaning that like death, once this love overtakes

you, there's no escaping it. It is unstoppable, irreversible. And that's why our lovers sing, "Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord." So here the romantic love between a husband and a wife within marriage is being likened to a flame of fire. And that's a useful image, because it helps us navigate this terrain and avoid two opposite errors.

You see, on the one hand, it is true that our culture does seem to lift up romantic love as the end-all-be-all of existence. Romance is everything. I once heard someone liken the Hollywood version of love to the striking of a match. When we strike a match, there's a spark, and the flame, though small, is bright and beautiful and intense. The only problem is that it doesn't last long, and then it burns out. Many people treat relationships like that. They strike the match, they enjoy the spark, they enjoy the flame, but as soon as the flame burns out, when the spark is gone, well then they throw the relationship away like an old match, and they go looking for a new relationship. They go out looking to strike another one — looking for that new spark.

But on the other hand, it may also be possible that there are some who devalue the importance of romantic love within the context of marriage. George Whitfield was one such person. He wasn't really interested in getting married, but he thought that it would be good for him spiritually. So this is how he proposed to a widowed woman who was independently wealthy, whom he thought could perhaps support him in his ministry. There was no poetry. No candlelight. He didn't even ask in person. He did the equivalent of asking via text message. He sent a letter, and in this letter, when he proposed to this woman, he said, "I bless God that I do not suffer from the foolish passion which this world calls love." Amazingly enough, this woman said yes to the proposal. I don't know if you would want to marry this man. As you can imagine, it ended up being a rather unhappy marriage.

But you see, the point is that some so spiritualize marriage that they say that human desire, human attraction, human romance is unnecessary. Of course down through the centuries there have been people who have enjoyed very successful arranged marriages. And I don't know, some of you might say, "That sounds pretty good to me. Set me up! I'd love to be in an arranged marriage." So there have been many successful arranged marriages over the centuries, and so not every marriage must begin with some kind of whirlwind, passionate romance. A couple may barely know each other at the start, and yet the flame of love will grow between them if they give it their all, if they both give a hundred percent of themselves to the relationship. So we need to hold these things in balance.

Last week I quoted Song of Songs 5:16, "This is my beloved and this is my friend." I mentioned that that's the verse that my wife, Ashley, and I have had inscribed on our wedding bands. "This is my beloved and this is my friend." And so what does that mean? Well, it means that on the one hand, your spouse should be, or at least have the potential to be, your best friend. And who is your best friend? Your best friend is the person that is the easiest person to spend time with, the easiest person to open up to, the easiest person to share your thoughts and feelings with. Your best friend is the person who knows you better than you know yourself, and who is committed to helping you become the best version of yourself.

Because as friends, you share a common vision. You're engaged in a secret quest. And for the Christian, that common vision, that secret quest is pursuing the kingdom of God. But on the other hand, the Bible never promotes platonic relationships within marriage. "This is my *beloved* and this is my friend." Quite the opposite. Even the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 affirms desire, passion, and attraction. He thinks that these things are so important, in fact, that it is worth reordering our whole lives around them. "This is my beloved and this is my friend." So how do these two come together?

I would recommend to you a book by C.S. Lewis entitled "The Four Loves." In this short little book, he examines four different forms of love based on four different Greek words: *storge*, which means affection; *philia*, which means friendship; *eros*, which means romantic love; and *agape*, God's self-giving love. In his chapter on friendship, he talks about the marriage relationship being one where the couple is both each other's beloved as well as each other's friend. He says,

When the two people who thus discover that they are on the same secret road are of different sexes, the friendship which arises between them will very easily pass – may pass in the first half hour – into erotic love. Indeed, unless they are physically repulsive to each other or unless one or both already loves elsewhere, it is almost certain to do so sooner or later. And conversely, erotic love may lead to Friendship between the lovers.

But this, so far from obliterating the distinction between the two loves, puts it in a clearer light. If one who was first, in the deep and full sense, your Friend, is then gradually or suddenly revealed as also your lover you will certainly not want to share the Beloved's erotic love with any third. But you will have no jealousy at all about sharing the Friendship. Nothing so enriches an erotic love as the discovery that the Beloved can deeply, truly and spontaneously enter into Friendship with the Friends you already had; to feel that not only are we two united by erotic love but we three or four or five are all travelers on the same quest, have all a common vision.

How then should we put all of this together? Well, rather than jumping from one relationship to another, just looking for another match to strike, another spark to create, what we should recognize is that the purpose of striking a match is not to enjoy that small little flame, but rather to use that flame to light an even greater fire whose embers burn deeper, longer, and hotter, and provide more heat.

See, romantic love is a fire, and like any fire, it needs to be tended to make sure that the flame continues to burn. Because as I said earlier, our feelings come and go, and sometimes when people are no longer feeling love, they stop acting loving. But of course, the fire will die if you stop acting in a loving manner. And so what we need to realize is that first and foremost, love is not a feeling; love is an action. Love is a commitment. And when we act loving, the feelings of love often follow. The way in which you keep the fire burning bright and strong is by relying on the actions of love: little words of affirmation, little notes of encouragement, little acts of service, a little romance, a little bit of spontaneity to mix things up.

But you see, if you stop taking the steps to act loving, it's no surprise if the feelings of love begin to run dry. So then rather than allowing those feelings to drive the relationship, act loving. And the more you act loving, it'll create a virtuous cycle. The acts of love lead to the feelings of love, and the feelings of love build upon the acts of love.

## **The Power of Love**

So we've seen here that the Song praises the promise of love as well as the fiery passion of love. But now let's turn and consider the power of love. When we promise our love and when we fuel the passion of our love — not by relying solely on our feelings, but on our actions of love — then we discover the power of love. The fire burns so bright and strong that our lovers sing in verse 7, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

Raging waters throughout the Bible are often used to represent the chaotic forces of evil that threaten God's world and seek to prevent us from experiencing our full flourishing as human beings, and ultimately they seek to destroy us. But how could this be? "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it." We all know that even just a tiny little drop of water can put out a flame. All we have to do is lick our fingers and we can put out a match. We can snuff out a candle. If there's a fire in the fireplace, all you do is pour a bucket of water on it, and all you will have left is smoke and ashes. So how can our singers actually say, "many waters cannot quench love"? Is that really true?

One of my favorite commentators on this song is a man named Tom Gledhill. He writes this:

For though water can quench any flame, there are no hostile forces which can quench the flame of love. It is inevitable that love will always be tested and tried, will always encounter forces that threaten to undermine and destroy it. These may be the outward circumstances that may erode love's power: the pain of separation, the uncertainty of the present or future, the loss of health or means of livelihood. But the love which is fueled by the energy of God will triumph and overcome all these adversities and will emerge purer and stronger and more precious through the testing.

But how can he get away with saying that when we know that so many relationships flame out over time? Well, listen again very carefully. He's not just talking about any form of love. No, he's talking about the love that is fueled by the energy of God. What I would suggest to you is that the only way to really love another person is to first be loved. The only way to love is to be loved. The only way to experience an unquenchable, indestructible love is to first experience God's unquenchable and indestructible love for you.

So as we wrap up this entire series on the Song of Songs, let's consider what this song tells us about God's divine love for us. Love, like light, as the song goes, "is a many-splendored thing." If you run a beam of white light through a prism, the light bends and it refracts. It reflects the full spectrum of color — all the colors of the

rainbow. And in a similar way, there are different forms of love — a whole spectrum of love. We see all these various forms of love in the Bible, and all of them are used to describe God's love for us in various ways.

There's the parental love that a father or a mother has for their child. There's the familial love between siblings, brothers and sisters. There's the affectionate love among friends. And then there's the romantic love between a husband and a wife. One color is not the whole spectrum; each draws out different aspects of God's love for us. And so I'd like to say something here that is perhaps not said clearly or often enough. Throughout this series, you've heard me say repeatedly that we should never cast God's love in sexual terms. That would be a category mistake. But there is something about the passion, the zeal, the single-minded devotion of romantic love that tells us something about God's love for us.

In the Song of Songs, the word that is used for love is the Hebrew word *ahave*. It's a multipurpose word. It's a word that captures the full spectrum of love. It's a word used throughout the Old Testament to describe the love of a parent, the love of a sibling, the love of a friend, but also the love of a romantic partner.

The problem is that when this Hebrew word *ahave* was translated into the Greek, it was translated in a uniform way, almost always translated as *agape*, and never as *eros*. And you see, I think something might have been lost in the translation there. *Agape*, of course, is the love that is used over and over and over again throughout the New Testament to describe God's love for us — his self-giving love for us. It's a love that seeks the good of the other regardless of the worthiness of the recipient, expecting nothing in return. It is God's love for us par excellence.

But the problem is that if we lift up *agape* as the supreme form of love — if we overemphasize it — then I fear that we inadvertently devalue romantic love. If we pit *agape* and *eros* against one another, *agape* wins every time, because *agape* sounds as if it is only self-giving, and *eros* only self-seeking. *Eros* comes off seeming like nothing more than an animal instinct. It's our appetite to get our needs met. But you see, that would throw us right back into a dualistic view of the world that devalues the human body, human desire, human attraction, human love, human sexuality. The fact of the matter is that romantic love, in its purest form, like *agape*, is not self-seeking; rather, it is seeking what is best for the beloved. It's not focused on itself; it's focused on the beloved.

So the point is that romantic love is a good thing. It is a good gift of God to be cherished by us, but as we've seen, it's not an ultimate thing. It's good, but it's not ultimate, and therefore it's meant to point beyond itself to something greater. There is a sense in which even the best romantic love in this world will not ultimately satisfy us, because it's not supposed to. There are ways in which romantic love in this life will let us down. The passion, the zeal, the single-minded devotion that we long for can ultimately only be found in God. He alone can fulfill the dream of the promise, the passion, and the power of love.

So consider each of these again as we close. The young woman sings, "Set me as a seal upon your heart." She wants all the world to know that she belongs to her lover, body

and soul, now and forever. She wants to be his treasure, his prized possession. She wants her name to be stamped upon his heart.

Do you realize that when God entered into a covenant with us as a people at Mount Sinai, he said, you are my treasured possession. And then through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 49, he says, even if it were somehow possible that a mother could forget her nursing child, I will never forget you. “I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” Now, when you engrave something like those cylinder seals, you’re cutting into hard stone. You can only make a mark by using a hammer and a chisel, and you leave a permanent, distinctive mark. God is saying, I’m going to engrave you on the palms of my hands.

Now if God wants to remember us, the palms are a good place to do it, because our palms are always in front of us. Our eyes can always see our palms. The only problem is that our palms are very vulnerable. All of our nerve endings come together there. The skin is so thin. This is one of the most vulnerable parts of our body, so if we’re going to engrave anything, this might be the most painful place of all.

Not only does God talk to us about the promise of love — that he’ll never forget us, that he’ll always be there for us — but he also is passionate about his love for us. The young woman sings of this single-minded passion of love. Love is as strong as death. Jealousy is as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire. And when God entered into that covenant with us, his people, at Mount Sinai, the whole mountain was engulfed in flames. Deuteronomy 4 tells us that our God is a consuming fire. He’s so passionate for us. He’s a jealous God. He is single-minded in his zeal, his passion, and his devotion to us. God will stop at nothing to protect his permanent and exclusive relationship with us, his bride, the Church.

And that is backed up by the power of love. The woman sings of its power. “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” Earlier in the service, as our call to worship, we read from Isaiah 54 where God says, even if it’s somehow possible that the mountain should be shaken and the hills could be removed, I will never remove my covenant, steadfast love from you. It is fixed forever. Nothing can ever separate us from God’s love — not even death.

But how do we know? What’s the proof of this love? Well, out of his passionate, zealous, single-minded devotion to you, Jesus was so determined, he would stop at nothing to protect that permanent and exclusive relationship with his people — so much so that Jesus willingly opened up his palms and allowed Roman soldiers to drive nine-inch iron spikes through his tender, fragile, vulnerable palms, and then they hoisted him up on the cross. And all the powers of evil and sin and death crashed upon him like a tidal wave. But “many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”

Even though all that evil was focused on him in that one particular spot, not even death could hold him down. Therefore, Jesus rose again from the grave, defeating the ultimate enemies of sin, death, and evil, so that nothing might ever stand in the way of his love for us. So that nothing might ever separate us from him. No one, no thing, can ever snatch us out of his hand.

And the wonder of it all is that he continues to bear his scars. When he rises from the dead, he shows the marks in his hands to his disciples. This is the proof that it really is him. But that's not all. This is how he engraved you on the palm of his hand. And now Jesus, forever, in his physical resurrected body, bears the marks in his palm. And whenever he looks at them, whenever he sees that mark, you can be assured that he thinks of you and what he was willing to do for you so that nothing might ever separate you from his love. It is the very proof of his love.

And so here we celebrate the promise, the passion, and the power of love. If you want a love that is stamped upon your heart, if you want to be one's treasured possession, if you want to experience a fiery love that is unquenchable and indestructible, if you want a love that is stronger than death and fiercer than the grave, then here it is. "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" because of the love that he demonstrated for us on the cross.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Lord Jesus, we pray that you would set us as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your hand. Lord, we pray that you would help us to know that we belong to you always and forever, and that no one, no thing can ever snatch us from your hand. We thank you that your love is stronger than death, that your jealousy for us is fiercer than the grave, that your love is flashes of fire — the very flame of the Lord — and that many waters cannot quench love, nor could floods ever drown it. Help us to receive this love, and may it be the fuel that energizes every other love in our life. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*