

the
Song of Songs



G. I. WILLIAMSON

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P U B L I S H I N G
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Preface

The sermons that make up this study of the Song of Solomon were first preached to the Silverstream congregation of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. It was my privilege, for some eleven years, to serve as the pastor of this remarkable fellowship of believers. Many of the older members were people who had come to New Zealand from the Netherlands, after the second World War. Most of the rest were their “second generation” children.

One of the things that these immigrants brought with them was a strong desire to uphold and maintain their Reformed heritage. And central to this is the conviction that all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for the Lord’s people. There was, therefore, no hesitation at all on the part of the elders of this church when it was suggested that I present an entire series of sermons on this neglected book of the Bible. And in my half-century of experience in the ministry I still look back on that series of sermons as unique. Through the entire series, the eyes of the people were riveted on their preacher. You could hear a pin drop in the auditorium. And everyone—from eight to eighty—was there to hear these

Preface

sermons. I cannot adequately express the sense of wonder that I felt in preaching these messages. And the response was truly amazing. Right away it was suggested that these sermons be published. But how was this to be accomplished since I did not write these sermons out in full and didn't have time to do it.

The answer came when Yvonne van Maastricht—now Mrs. Yvonne Walraven—volunteered to transcribe these sermons. They read pretty much as they were spoken. And I am happy to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to her.

My one desire is that these sermons may also be a blessing to you as you read them.

1

Getting the Right Perspective

Song of Solomon 1:1

The text for this sermon is found in the Song of Songs in one short statement in verse 1: “The song of songs, which is Solomon’s.”

I can’t help but wonder how many of you have ever heard a series of sermons on the Song of Solomon. I know that I went to church all my life—from the time I can remember anything, I remember going to church on the Lord’s day—and I never heard any sermons on the Song of Solomon until I preached on the book myself. In my early ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in New England, I said one time that the whole Bible is the Word of God, and we should not be afraid to preach on any part of it, and I’m willing to do it. And what do you think happened then? Right away somebody said, “Okay, preach on the Song of Solomon.” I can understand why preachers tend to shy away from it—because it’s not easy to preach on a book about sex and marriage. It’s especially difficult when you face a whole congregation of people of different ages. But I had to keep my word, and I’m glad I did!

You know in ancient times they had a saying that a man shouldn't even read this book until he's thirty years of age. Well, you laugh, but I think that they probably had things better under control in that culture than they do today. Like it or not, we live in an age when everybody knows so much about sex that it's probably a wise thing to stop talking about it once in a while. We are living in a sex-saturated and sex-dominated culture. And you know the result of it hasn't been very good. When half of the marriages end in tragic ruin, you can see that there's something radically wrong. But that's a very good reason for preaching on this book of the Bible because it would be sheer folly and stupidity to withhold the light of God's holy Word on this sacred subject, if it would help us at all in our culture and day, and I believe that it most certainly will.

And so, God helping us, I want to take you on a journey through this wonderful book of the Bible as we seek to understand from it what God says about love, sex, and the relationship of the sexes, and marriage that has his divine approval. And so by way of introduction let me point out to you first of all that this book, the one book of the Bible that is devoted wholly to this subject, is poetry. It is a song; it's not a technical sex manual, which is so very popular in American culture today. No, it's poetry, and I think that is a very significant thing in itself. When I left New Zealand, they were just bringing sex education into the schools, and many Christian parents were very much concerned because they saw this as another threat to their children. And, I think, rightly so. The parents realized that the whole approach to sex in the sex education being proposed to the high schools would have been quite different from the way in which it is presented in the Bible. You can present all the facts of life, all the details of the mechanism of sex, in a very cold and clinical way, with disastrous results. But if you come to see it in the framework of

poetry, the way God puts it, and integrate it with all life, that is a very different thing.

Young people today know so much about sex anyway that I'd be the last person in the world to stand up here and try to tell them anything about it from the technical point of view. I was sitting one day in my study in New Zealand, and I was wishing I had a copy of the Encyclopedia Britannica, and I read in the local paper that there was one for sale, of all places, over at the high school. They had two, and they didn't need two—they wanted the money to buy something else—so I made a beeline over there, and I got that whole Encyclopedia Britannica for sixty dollars. And I took it home and began to use it with profit, but one day I noticed that in that encyclopedia there were some transparencies that showed the whole physiology of male and female, and they were the most worn-out pages in the Encyclopedia Britannica. The young people in that high school knew everything they could find out about the mechanism of the human body and sex. And that's what I'm talking about—we can't really have any doubt that the young people know it all from that standpoint, but do they understand the poetry of love?

The very encyclopedia that I just mentioned in its article on man had this to say: "The fragmentation of knowledge as it touches the subject of man appears to have gone very far. We have discarded eternal man"—and by "eternal man" the encyclopedia means the old integrated, Christian view of what man is in the cosmos—that has been discarded and we've cut him into pieces. Now that's true. No generation knows any more about the human "I" than today's, but the modern generation doesn't know where the "I" came from. No generation knows as much about the fine details of the God's creation, but it doesn't know where that creation came from. It doesn't understand the reality of man as a divinely

created image-bearer of God. And that, also, is largely our problem when it comes to sex. And that is why the Bible uses poetry, not prose, to teach us about this holy subject, because true love and sex and marriage are poetry more than they are prose. It's more like a symphony than a factory—a factory is a production line; a symphony is something altogether different. And you know somehow I think all of us welcome that fact because down deep in our hearts we are the image of God, and God is the greatest artist and the greatest poet that there is. And he wants us to learn to think about love and sex and marriage in the context of something beautiful and poetic.

Now, the second thing that we learn from this opening statement is that the author of this book is Solomon. That's given a lot of people a lot of trouble. That's why a lot of commentators, and even a lot of conservative commentators, try to get out of it and find a way to say that somebody else, pretending to be Solomon, wrote this book. After all, they say, how could a man who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines write God's book about sex and marriage when he himself was such a terrible model? Talk about mechanized sex, that guy had it! Could he be the author of this book of the Bible? Come on, they say. And if he was the author when did he write it? Was it when he was a young man, just starting out, before everything went bad?

Well, there's an old proverb that says young men write poetry, and middle-aged men write proverbs, and old men write about vanity. While I haven't started writing proverbs yet, when I was a young man I used to write a little bit of poetry. That's a fact. I don't write it anymore and maybe that's a bad sign, but it is, I think, true that generally speaking this is the rhythm of life. Probably some of you men here might have written a little love poetry long ago, but it's also possible, it seems to me, that Solomon wrote this in his old age when he

had learned what a fool he had been. You know the Bible says that this man was greatly loved of God even though foolish and outlandish women led him into sin—and it says that in a book of the Bible written much, much later by the inspired Nehemiah. And Nehemiah speaks about Solomon in such a way that I have no doubt that the man was, in spite of his failures and sin, a child of God. I don't believe that he would be the writer of a book of the Bible if that wasn't true.

And when you look at it that way, it doesn't really surprise you so much that God would use this man because, after all, who did God use to show us his own heart? The Bible says David was a man after God's own heart. The one who really shows us the heart of God more than anyone else in the Bible as a poet was David, and David was an adulterer and a murderer. Now that's a fact. And yet God chose that man's heart—of course, after he repented and got right with God again—to show us the depth of the emotions of a sanctified human heart. Well, why then should God not use a man who had seen it all, even from the wrong side, who when he was chastened of the Lord, repentant, and sanctified, could then write the greatest song in the world? There's not a reason on earth why that could not be. God took the greatest enemy of the church—Saul of Tarsus—and made him the greatest missionary of the cross. Why couldn't he then take the greatest sinner in the realm of sex that ever lived, if you like—Solomon, who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines—to write the greatest song that was ever written about love. Well, there's no way that we can be sure which view is true, but we do know that this was written by Solomon because it says so in the Bible, and I believe that also is something of great importance to us because it reminds us of the fact that the holiest part of God's holy Word is for sinners, and actually was written through sinners because there

never was anyone that took up pen to write part of the Bible that was not like you and me—a sinner saved by grace. That’s a wonderful thing. And if God could turn this man’s heart right, and through his Spirit breathing through him write a poem like this, then God can take everyone one of us—whatever we may have done, and however great our sin may have been in the realm of sex and marriage—and he can make us to sing this song, also, to the praise and glory of his name.

One of the great marriages that I’ve read about in the history of the Christian church was the marriage of John Newton. Do you know anything about John Newton? Well, in his earlier life he was a slave trader—he went down to Africa to get slaves and took them all over the Western world, delivering them—and wherever he stopped he went to the prostitutes. Whatever city it was, off he went to the prostitutes and lived it up. And then God got hold of that man, and he was great in his repentance, truly renewed in his life, wholly converted in his heart, and then he got married. And they say one of the beautiful Christian marriages of that time was the marriage of John Newton, and his faithfulness and fidelity and devotion to his wife was a model for all the people that he served for many years as a faithful pastor in the church of God. Why not? Because God’s kingdom has only converted, justified, adopted, and sanctified sinners—that’s all there is in the Kingdom of God. And so it’s a wonderful thing to me to know that this book was written by a sinner like Solomon who did everything wrong until he got right with God and then wrote this wonderful book of the Bible. So that’s the second thing.

The third thing is that this is the greatest song in existence because the Hebrew phrase—“song of songs”—means that for sure. You know yourself whenever the Hebrew uses a phrase like that it’s talking about the ultimate. What was

the “holy of holies”? You know that the whole tabernacle was holy; everything in it was holy. But the holiest of the holy was that place where God’s presence was manifested—that’s why it was called the holy of holies. It was the supremely holy place in the tabernacle. Why is Jesus called the King of Kings? Well, it is because there is none like him. He is the ruler of all of the rulers of the earth. All the great and mighty and powerful of the earth are under the dominion of one, and only one, supreme King, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s why he’s called the King of Kings. And that’s also why he’s called the Servant of Servants, because no one ever stooped down and humbled himself in the way Jesus did. We can try to imitate him, but we will never equal him because Christ is the Servant of Servants. He is the one without equal.

Now, what that means is that Jesus Christ is our supreme and only Lord, and I believe that this opening statement proves beyond any question of a doubt that this song has to be about him in some way. You may know that back in the ancient synagogue and also in the early church and then again in the Puritan era, they took the Song of Solomon and made the whole thing into an allegory. Everything in it was taken to be a symbol of something entirely different from the symbol itself. We’ll mention that as we go on through the book. But there was a tendency to try to interpret the book by making everything in it symbolic. The only trouble with that was that no two interpreters had the same idea about the meaning of that book because all of the symbols were differently interpreted by different people.

Now, in the modern era in which we’re living, the tendency has been rather to take all the different parts of this book and see them only in a literal way, to look upon each and every one of these things only as something on the human level having to do with the relationship of man and woman.

My own view is that neither of these does justice to this book of the Bible because God himself—and we know this from the New Testament—made human marriage an image of the relationship of Christ to the church. Read Ephesians 5 where Paul says, “You’ve got to be subject to one another in the Lord.” He says, “Wives, you have to be in subjection to your husbands.” He says, “Husbands, love your wives,” and he goes on speaking like that through the whole passage. And it’s quite plain that he’s talking very plainly and bluntly to husbands and wives and about their relationship with each other, and then all of a sudden he says, “This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Was he speaking about Christ and the church? Well, not directly, no. But indirectly, yes, because of this analogy that God himself has established between the relationship of Christ and the church and the relationship of marriage. The one is an analogy to the other.

After all, the Bible says all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, and when Christ rose from the dead, he took his disciples right through the Bible and showed them that every book of the Bible, in one way or another, was about him. How, then, is this book about Jesus? Well, it’s about Jesus because the ideal marriage is the marriage of Christ and the church, and the only way that you can ever get a hold of the ideal for your marriage is to understand the relationship between Christ and the church. Sometimes people say, “Do I really need all this doctrine in my daily life?” Well, friends, you certainly do. Nothing is more basic than understanding the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of Christ, and the doctrine of the union between Christ and the church in order to understand your own marriage, and what it ought to be, and what it can be. Of course, the two go together because the whole system of biblical truth is interrelated. And that’s

where so many go wrong when it comes to love and to sex and to marriage. So many people today try to deal with marriage without God, without Christ, without the church, and they are doomed to failure because there is no way that you and I will ever begin to know anything about the beauty of love and marriage without that great and only perfect model that is Jesus in his love for the church.

You might put it this way: The Song of Songs can only be sung by those who know the love of loves. And what is the love of loves? Here was a king, the greatest of all kings, sitting in his heavenly glory, and he looked down here on earth and he saw one that he would have as his bride. She wasn't very beautiful, but he set his heart upon her, and he would have her and none other. And once he had fixed his love upon her, nothing could ever distract him. And when you stop and think, you will see how many things there are that might have discouraged him, and yet he was willing to go down, to suffer, to descend into hell—all because of his love for his bride, the church. And the reciprocal love, the response love, of the church for Christ brings us to the other side of the matter. You see deep down in her heart the true church of Christ has a burning love for the Savior; nothing on earth, nothing in heaven or hell, will ever frustrate it or defeat it. And this, too, is the way it ought to be in our human love and marriage.

Now, where are you going to learn that? Have you got any other models that are that good? I've seen a lot of marriages—good, bad, and indifferent—but I've never seen any that are perfect. But that's our model, and that really is (and you'll see it as we go through this book) the model that comes to us through this great poem written by Solomon about his love for Shulamite maiden and her love for him. And you can't learn it anywhere else but the Bible. You know, beloved in the Lord, there is no such thing among sinful men as the

perfect or ideal marriage. It doesn't exist, but there is such a thing in God's holy Word. It is the marriage of Christ and the church as it was imaged in this great idealization of Solomon and the Shulamite maiden. Whether that actually happened in his early life or was a reminiscence of his old age doesn't matter—it images the great love of Christ for the church, and what a wonderful thing it is to see what that image can do in the lives of people.

I remember years ago in our mission work I was going through a housing project talking to those who were willing to talk about the Lord, and I came across a young woman with four children, two from each of her previous husbands from whom she was now divorced. She wondered if there could be a future for her. You would have wondered too if you'd seen her. And yet, for about the last twenty-five years, she has been happily and faithfully married to a Christian husband. The marriage has endured. The children have grown up and have gone to a Christian college. And you have seen in that life what a glimpse of that model can do in somebody's life because she became one of the people of God, and God gave her a new beginning. And she came to see from the model of Christ's love for the church, and the church's love for Christ, what her life ought to be. And I believe God can do that for all of us, however far we may be from that standard of perfection, our God through this part of his Word can lift us up again and enable us to strive for the great goal of likeness to Jesus who loved the church and gave himself for it.

May God grant this to us as we study this book together.
Amen.