



First Dance

Song of Songs 1:1-4

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One of the most joyful parts of pastoring a young congregation is the number of weddings I get to be a part of—typically several a year. There are plenty of delightful things about weddings, but there is one wedding tradition that is quite celebrated. When the bride and groom first arrive at the reception, what is their first public display of love, apart from their kiss at the altar? The first dance.

The dance is an expression of the unity of the bride and groom, but what is a dance without music? In fact, dance is a *response* to the language of music. It has been said that music is the original language, even heavenly language—that God’s most natural words are obviously not English, Spanish, Arabic, or Mandarin, but more to us like melody, harmony, and beauty.¹ Song speaks to us in ways language cannot, moving us beyond what is earthly. Perhaps this is why it is fitting for love to be communicated through song. The Medieval philosopher Boethius said the truest thing about song is that it “works great wonders on the affections of bodies and minds.”² Why do we sing “happy birthday” and not just say it? Song does something to us—it conveys emotions, feelings, experience, that normal language cannot.

Allie and I’s first dance song was “Make You Feel My Love”. Written by Bob Dylan, but covered by hundreds of other artists. We liked the Adele version. Why did we choose that? No particular reason other than we both found it beautiful. We didn’t over-analyze the lyrical content—in fact looking back I think Dylan sounds a little needy—but there was something about the song that made us *feel* love. This, I believe, is God’s intention in song. And it’s why he placed Song of Songs in the Scripture. This book is one unified piece of poetry that is meant to sweep us up in emotion, in feeling, in desire. **Verse 1** gives us what we need to know. This is the *Song of Songs*, a repetition in the Hebrew that implies the greatest, the most “songy” of songs, the most sublime song. It’s the same language for describing God’s dwelling place as the “holy of holies”.

In the Song of Songs, we will encounter the greatest love song ever written. It celebrates love, desire, and sex, but never in a pandering, cheap, or pornographic way. Through the image of a

¹ “Music is not ornamented poetry, and poetry is not ornamented prose. Poetry is fallen music, and prose is fallen poetry. Prose is not the original language; it is poetry made practical. Even poetry is not the original language; it is music made speakable, it is the words of music separated from their music. In the beginning was music.” Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*

² Boethius, *De Institutione Musica*



marriage, it's a celebration of how love is meant to be, an idyllic picture of what true love looks like. This does not mean, however, that the Song is not realistic. It has images of pain and strife in love, as well as unfulfilled love. A full range of emotions are present here. But because it is also a kind of *wisdom* literature, it's meant not just to point us to this world but to the reality of what is beyond this world. A few years ago we preached in Ecclesiastes and we said that the point of the book was learning to see reality rightly. Song of Songs is similar: it's learning to see the reality of love rightly.

This is why it is so important to see the purpose of this song not simply as describing human love, but showing us a picture of divine love. **Any love and intimacy we experience in this life, especially the unified intimacy of marriage, is only a picture of true love. God is love, and no greater love in action has ever existed than his love for his people.** The Bible has all sorts of imagery relating sex and marriage, love and intimacy, as a picture of God and his people. It is Israel who "prostitutes" herself, committing "infidelity" with other gods in idolatry. In Psalm 45, we find a love song addressed to God where he is described as a husband and king. In Isaiah, God is called husband and bridegroom. We just studied Ephesians 5, where the mystery of the gospel is shown to be the real marriage that earthly marriage is pointing to, as we anticipate what Revelation calls the marriage supper of the lamb, where we will be finally wed to Jesus Christ. The Bible itself is one love story, and so we should see the Song of Songs as picturing that story in poetic, micro form.

There is real evidence in the text to point us to the fact that this song is not only describing human love, but divine love.³ The bride of Song of Songs is many times compared with Israel, the beloved of God, in her descriptions, such as having a "neck like a tower" and being called a "vineyard", just as Israel is in the book of Isaiah. We will also see how the bride in the Song comes out of the desert to enter into marriage led by a pillar of smoke, a harkening back to God's deliverance of Israel. Likewise, the two settings of the Song are garden and city, Eden and Jerusalem, draw us to consider the unbroken intimacy of God with his people in Eden past and the future intact to come in the new heavenly Jerusalem. One commentator says: "the closest we get to being back in the Garden of Eden in the rest of the Bible is in the poetry of the Song of Songs."⁴ In the garden, mankind walked naked and unashamed before God. In Song of Songs, two human lovers display that unashamed intimacy, a reversal of the fall of the garden. In the Song, we will see a poetic display of how God is restoring the relationships that were broken in the Garden: human-human, human-creation, and human-God. Keep an eye in the Song for reversal of this brokenness.

In **Verse 1**, we also see the Song of Songs is "of Solomon". Now, this may mean he wrote the book. But later Solomon shows up in the story in a negative light, and we all know in reality Solomon's romantic life was less than ideal. I think it's more likely that this was written in the style of Solomon. But whether he writes it or not, the author invokes Solomon's name because this is a *royal* love song. Solomon is the ideal, and it is in his style, not because he was the perfect husband but because he was the king who pointed to the perfect husband. The hero of the Song is like the

³ I owe credit to Tim Chester, who compiled a great and short defense of divine love in Song of Songs for his own congregation's benefit. <https://cdn.filestackcontent.com/z2jz44EwS66lvnu7xxRv>

⁴ James Hamilton, *Song of Songs*, 22.



son of David, who stands in the Garden like Adam, and who is the loving bridegroom and king over God's city. We are meant already to be drawn to the idyllic man of the story and see in him a type of Jesus Christ, son of David and new Adam, the king who is bringing us to dwell in the New Jerusalem because of his great love. This is a Song showing us what it is like to be the bride called, adored, and wed to the king of kings.

Not only that, but the Song may be invoking Solomon's name to draw us towards Solomon's actions, primarily the construction of the temple. The temple, like the Garden of Eden, is where God dwelt, a beautiful picture of Eden on Earth. The Song of Songs is likening itself, as it were, to a temple of God, the lovers themselves building a garden-temple with their love. To enter into divine love, is to enter the presence of God. This is why Jewish history suggests that some ancient Jews turned to the Song of Songs as a means to commune with God when the temple itself was destroyed. To enter into the romance of marriage is a picture of what it is like to be enter into the romance of God, which is the way we are ushered into the presence of God, akin to entering Solomon's temple into the very holy of holies.⁵

The church has interpreted the Song of Songs as portraying divine love for thousands of years. The Song of Songs, said Gregory the Great, a 6th century Bishop, is meant to "warm us to the love that is above by the language of the love that is below".⁶ But just because I believe the Song is meant to point us towards the Love of God for his people, does not mean that we can interpret it however we want. We will not be searching for hidden or subjective meaning, but rather examining how the images and evidence of the text shapes our ideas, thoughts, and feelings of love and draw us to consider divine love. Neither does it mean we will ignore the importance of physical and sexual human love depicted in the Song. It may get a little awkward, but there is real wisdom here for us in how the Song displays marital intimacy. It is meant to draw us out of our prudish and pornographic extremes into the fact that God created sexuality for a purpose: to showcase the pleasure of unity and intimacy that leads to life. So in our interpretation of the Song, we will not ignore the physical. Rather, we will use the physical and human expressions of love and desire to point us to the greater realities they represent.

Interpretation of the Song of Songs, being a song and a love poem, is different from many other Biblical texts. Instead of our first inclination to "unlock" the Song for application, we should first appreciate it for its beauty, pay attention to how it shapes us. We should use it prayerfully, meditatively, ready for it to give us a picture of Eden and intimacy with God in Christ.

That being said, let me give you one more caveat before we jump in. I want to acknowledge that this is a difficult text. For men and some women, it feels strange to identify as the Bride of Christ. If you are single, it may feel difficult to engage with the imagery because you long for marriage in a way that at times consumes you. Perhaps you have painful sexual experiences or sin in the past,

⁵ Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*. James Hamilton argues something similar.

⁶ Gregory the Great, *On The Song of Songs*



and it feels strange to be okay with erotic language here. Perhaps you experience same-sex attraction or sinful homosexual desire, and the language expressed feels foreign and unattainable to you as it describes the marriage of man and woman. But this is still God's word for you. And I would encourage you, regardless of where you are: its value is found in pulling you out of any shallow imitation of love you may have experienced into the sublime beauty of God's love. All the brokenness and pain related to sex, intimacy, and relationship you feel: here are God's words to help draw you into intimacy with him. Not a sexual manual, not a philosophical musing on love, but a captivating song of songs. It's the first dance. Let the song of songs push you past your inhibition towards a greater intimacy with Jesus Christ, the lover of your soul.

Longing For The King

We enter into the language of the song suddenly, forcefully, and we are immediately confronted with the voice of the beloved bride's longing for her beloved in **verse 2**. She desires her beloved with intense longings. It's important in the Song not to place too much emphasis on timeline. While I believe it to be one cohesive song, it is not necessarily linear. So there are several ways to imagine the woman here speaking. She could be speaking from a place where she is betrothed to her beloved, but, as typical in Jewish tradition, he is away getting ready for their house and life before returning to marry her. So she is engaged and anticipating what it will be like when he returns, dreaming about it to her bridesmaids, as it were. We could also picture her as already married, and speaking from experience—she knows how lovely it is to be loved and kissed by her beloved, so she is longing for that again.

The language here may feel striking to us. She longs for kisses, for "love", which is typically used as to refer to a kind of sexual embrace, a carress. She longs to smell her beloved, to touch and taste. It's not just sexual, as we will see she also honors his name, his character. The desire she feels is a holistic one. But already many of us are uncomfortable with this. We all know those people who we describe as "touchy-feely", but some of us have trouble ever remembering a time where we felt longing like this for someone else! If we so rarely feel this in an earthly relationship, how would we even begin to feel this spiritually? Perhaps you are taken aback that I may be suggesting that God in Christ intends that you feel the same level of intensity in your desire for him as a lover with her beloved. But that is exactly what I believe God intends. Remember in Eden he walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, he talked with them unashamedly. All around them in the garden they smelt his unadulterated fragrance, intoxicated by his love shown to them in perfect creation and in their love for each other. God's intention is that in Christ you can feel an intense longing and desire for his love.

But don't worry if that doesn't resonate with you yet. Notice here the relationship already being shown. It's not radical feminism—the woman is not hiding her inhibition to appear stronger, nor is she expressing herself sexually to gain power of the man. She expects the man to take the lead in coming to her and inviting her in. But neither is the relationship depicted a misogynistic one—the woman is not waiting prudishly and existing only to please the man. She is inviting him to invite her,



she says “draw me after you, let us run”. There is a give and take equality here, but the focus of the desire in these verses is not on the woman’s sexual drive but rather her beloved’s desirability. The question for us then is not: “could I ever drum up this level of desire” but rather “what kind of beloved could be worthy of this desire”? What kind of man causes this desire?

If the feelings of desire evoked in these verses feel foreign to your relationship with Christ, the issue is perhaps that you have not yet given yourself to explore the desirability of Jesus. Here is an invitation. For the rest of our time, we will briefly consider three traits of the beloved described here. On a human level, we should desire these things to be true of us: we long to be desired, and it is good to be desired this way in the context of marriage. But on a deeper level, we will see how these traits are exemplified in Jesus Christ and his gospel. The traits are 1) his exhilarating embrace; 2) his attractive anointing; and 3) his celebratory character.

His Exhilarating Embrace

Don’t place too much emphasis on the change of pronouns in **1-4**. First, she says let “him” kiss me, then it changes to “your” love. Remember, this is a Song. The importance is not the scene itself. Perhaps she is in a room with her beloved and her bridesmaids and is speaking to both, or perhaps she is so enraptured by the thought of his love that she sings as if he is right there beside her, a song written for him whether he is there or not. Either way, her language is strikingly sensual from the get-go. “Kisses of the mouth” feels redundant, aren’t all kisses kisses of the mouth? What she has in view here though are intimate kisses, not those for greeting or given by family, but those reserved for a lover. The reference to the “mouth” also gives us the sense that her desire is for her beloved to speak to her. In Numbers 12, God tells us that he has a special relationship with his servant Moses, because he speaks to him “mouth to mouth”. That’s a strange phrasing no doubt, it reminds us of either CPR or kissing! But what God means is simple: I am so close to Moses, so intimate with him, that he hears my words directly and clearly. This is what the bride longs for, like two lovers lying close and speaking plainly to each other.

The reason the bride wants this kind of “mouth to mouth” intimacy is because she believes the “caress” or “love” of her beloved to be better than wine. Wine is a Biblical symbol of feasting, of richness, and of pleasurable intoxication. By intoxication I do not mean drunkenness, but a kind of enraptured feeling. It leaves you wanting more. Again, not drunk and senseless, but full of sense, exhilarating.

We know this to be true humanly. To be embraced by another, or to be kissed and spoken to intimately, releases good feelings. This even happens hormonally. Why do you think we love snuggling? It’s exhilarating, intoxicating. Sex and sexual intimacy, as well, is intended by God to be pleasurable, intoxicating, and exhilarating. The covenant of marriage is the secure fence within God intended the garden of sex to flourish not just for procreation, but for the flourishing of love between husband and wife. Love is exciting, better than wine. A dull marriage is a sign of an unhealthy one.



So too the great love of Christ and his church should exhilarate us. We should consider his love as better than wine. Why do you think we use wine in the Lord's supper? As it stands for Christ's blood, we recognize that his love is rich, exhilarating, a feast of good news. His blood poured out for us is not just a gruesome act, it's an act of love that should cause our heart to race. This is why the Supper is called "communion". It's where we commune with God, through our senses of taste and touch and smell, where we feel the embrace of his sacrificial love. The supper is also a place where we commune with God "mouth to mouth" by receiving Jesus Christ, the incarnate word of God. We can also feel Christ's embrace anytime in prayer, in Scripture reading, when we encounter his love. Simeon the Prophet waited for the "consolation of Israel" and was not content to rest in death until he touched, held that consolation. In Christ coming to Earth, dying, rising, and sending his Spirit, we can touch and hold the consolation of God. And one day, seeing Christ face to face, his embrace of us will be complete.

His Attractive Anointing

The second attractive trait of the beloved is his scent. Now, I don't use cologne, but it can be very powerful, and I know some of us use cologne or perfume for specific occasions. We all wear deodorant I hope. But more than any other sense, smell has a way of drawing us out of the current moment, connecting with memory and with deeper emotions. Perhaps you can even imagine a "scent" associated with your childhood. Perhaps it's the scent your parents used in the laundry detergent, or the scents of the plants that grew on your street. Seasons have scents too: what does summer smell like in Waco? Sunscreen and chlorine? What is the attractive scent of the beloved in **verse 2**? It's his *anointing oil*.

This oil has several images attached to it. At a rich banquet or even wedding celebration, small pieces of congealed ointment would be placed on guests heads, which would slowly dissolve and fill the air with a pleasing scent. But I also think the author has in mind here the connotation of the anointing of kings. The word for anointing oil here is the same one used in the text to speak of both David and Solomon's anointing as kings of Israel. More than simply being attracted to his cologne, the bride is attracted to her beloved's royal commission.

It's hard to tell if Song of Songs is meant to be written describing an *actual* king and his love, or simply how love makes someone *feel* royal. Either way, again and again the ideal man in the Song is described as a king. He is not just any king either, but his love makes his beloved feel like she has been chosen by the king of kings, the Davidic king, anointed like Solomon and David. At the human level, for those of us who are husbands or desire to be so, we can ask: "do I live my life in such a way, or love my wife in such a way, that she would see me as a noble king"? On a deeper level, I believe this text is drawing us to consider the anointing of Christ.

"Christ" literally means "anointed one". It's perhaps the title we use most for the second person of the Trinity, because it's a title that draws us to consider the fittingness of Jesus. No one could have



come and done what he did. He was the chosen, anointed Messiah. He fulfilled all the types before him perfectly, the perfect completion of every hope and dream of God's people. And he is the anointed king—not just over Israel, but all of the nations forever.

The aroma of his anointing should attract us to Jesus. In Psalm 45, we find another song celebrating the beauty of the perfect Davidic king. He is described as “handsome” and “blessed”. But most of all, he is “anointed with the oil of gladness”. This oil is said to be “beyond his companions.” In other words, there is an anointing oil reserved for the best of the best, the king of kings. No one outmatches Jesus, there is none like him. And he has chosen, in his kindness, to pursue you, to love you. How does that smell to you?

His Celebratory Character

The last aspect of the beloved in our text is similar to his anointing, because we find it is like “oil poured out” in **verse 2**. But this time it is not his anointing oil, but rather the oil is compared to his “name”. Remember back in Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that he would make his “name” great? That is the idea here: the woman is drawn to the fact that her beloved has a great, respected, well-known name. She is more than willing to take on his name, as most still do in marriage, because with it comes honor. This idea of a “great name” is reinforced by the chorus in **verse 4**, the bridesmaids of the bride echoing, speaking of the man that “rightly do they love you”. Everyone knows he is a man of honor, kingly, with a great name.

We all know where respect comes from ultimately. It comes from character. We can gain a great name through our exploits, but ultimately, if our character is lacking, it always catches up to us. We may remember the great names of history for what they did, but if they were tyrants or wicked, we remember them for that also. Proverbs 22:1 tells it to us straight: “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.”

In the Song of Songs, we will see over and over again that the beloved king is a man of character. It's his character, not just his desire, that causes this marriage to flourish and echo the intimacy of Eden. It's why we see in **verse 3** that “the virgins” love you. This is not just referring to those who have never had sex, it's a word used to describe young women who are of marrying age. All the women of the city recognize that this man is worthy to be their husband—he is loved and honored by all.

Of course we can take away from this the application that good character is always to be celebrated above anything else. It should be the most desirable trait in romantic love, and we should work to develop good character in our romantic relationships more than we do anything else. But the reason good character is attractive is because it points us to the one who ultimately fulfilled the promise of Abraham⁷ by God to make his name great. At the name of Jesus, the promised son of Abraham, all the earth will bow. This song of songs is pointing us to the one with

⁷ Again, credit to James Hamilton for this connection.



the name above all names. His character alone is perfect, and so he alone is worthy above all else for you to take his name, to be called Christian, and “in Christ”.

The Dance of Christ

It’s all of these traits together of the beloved: his exhilarating embrace, his attractive anointing, and his celebratory character, that bring us to the conclusion of longing in **verse 4**. Let me point you to three things as we close.

First, the longing is **eager**, almost commanding. “Draw me after you, let us run” has the language of desiring to be “swept away”, or gives us the picture of a newly wed bride and groom running down the aisle to celebrate and then escape, run away, on their honeymoon. Second, the longing is **intimate**. In her longing, she anticipates being brought into the bed chamber of the king. The idea here is that here in the chamber, no one can disturb them. They are perfectly alone, focused on one another. She doesn’t want anyone else there. Third, the longing is **communal**. The chorus of bridesmaids in verse 4 sounds to us like a call to worship. “Exult and rejoice” is quite high language and even worshipful. When was the last time you “exalted” a newly married couple at a wedding. But the point here is that when this king of longing is pure and right, others take notice. There is no jealousy here, there is communal rejoicing.

Church, our desire for Christ should be **eager**. We should long to run, to be swept away by his love for us. Our desire for Christ should be **intimate**. He can bring us into his chamber, where no one can harm us or interrupt our spiritual communion. We should make space for times where we are alone with God, to stretch our understanding of intimacy with him. Finally, our desire should be **communal**, even evangelistic. In 2 Corinthians 15, one of my favorite passages, Paul tells us we are “the aroma of God”. As we walk into intimacy with Jesus, the beauty of his aroma and anointing rubs off on us. People notice, and are drawn to worship him. The church, loving and being loved by Jesus, is on the great apologetics of the gospel in the world.

In the Song of Songs, Jesus is inviting you to observe the first dance of his wedding. He paints a picture of a bride and a groom, who by their love seem to defy the fall of man and model Edenic paradise. It’s a beautiful song, a mesmerizing dance. But we are not only observers. Christ is the best husband. The song he plays for his first dance is the song of his great love, from beginning to end, from creation to fall to incarnation to cross to resurrection to consummation and restoration of all that is broken. God showed his great love for us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, pouring his blood like wine and becoming to us an attractive aroma of life even as his cross smelt of death. You don’t have to be a lovely bride to be loved by Jesus. You can be a sinner—and he can love you, sing over you, and invite you into his song of eternity, a song of a divine intimacy coming that is undisturbed by sin. That is the invitation of today, and the invitation of the Song of Songs: learn to see Jesus Christ as more desirable than anything else, and step onto the floor with him.

