



## To The End

Song of Songs 8:1-14

Grace Church | 7.31.22

Three separate experiences shaped my life this last week. First, the funeral of my grandfather. It was the first funeral I have ever officiated, and as you can guess—it was personal, and therefore quite emotionally difficult. But I was honored. It was in the contemplation of death and the end of the Christian life that I understood the truth of Ecclesiasties, that the day of death is better than the day of birth, since it is a day of wisdom. The wisdom of death is it can prompt us to consider the point of our lives.

The second thing that happened to me is that I read a short but powerful book, by the famous Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, entitled *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The main thrust of the book is simple: Ilyich must come to grips with the reality of dying, when no one else seems to acknowledge it. He must learn to accept the fact that in the end, no one shows him true compassion, because he never showed it himself. Dying is not his ultimate suffering: it is dying without love.

The third thing that happened to me this week is I escaped with my family to the mountains. We rested, unplugged, and even got some alone time. It was in several solitary walks where I was able to wrestle with the reality of death in a new way. My mind full of several months of studying the Song of Songs, I saw the truth of our text in 8:6 come to life: “love is as strong as death”. The reason my grandfather's death was powerful is because many people loved him. The reason Ivan Ilyich's death was powerful is because no one loved him. Death's power fades in comparison to the power of love.

In seeing both of these deaths back to back: one real and personal, one fictional and distant, I saw there is an intimate connection between death and love. Everyone dies, not everyone loves. The point of contemplating the certainty of our own death is to point us to the possibility of love. To love and to be loved is the ultimate preparation for death, and that, as one author puts it: “those who have already been consumed by love can never be annihilated by death.”<sup>1</sup> Before creation, there was no death. But there was the God who is love. In other words: there is a love that can free you from the sting of death. But in order for it to do so, it cannot be momentary. It must be able to carry you not only into old age but past the grave. A love that frees us from the sting of death must be an everlasting love.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Davis, *The Song of Songs*



In the Song of Songs, we have considered great truths about the love of God in Christ. So as this song closes, let me take you one more time into a rich truth that we can wade and splash in: **the love of God in Christ is an everlasting love.**

## **The Love of Christ produces everlasting fruit (1-5)**

We pick up some interesting images in **verse 1**. The bride wishes her husband was a brother to her, for a simple reason: she would like to gently kiss him in public. We aren't as prudish about light PDA as the ancient world, but the idea can still apply: true love longs for its passion to have an outlet in everytime and in every place. The desire of the bride is strong, just as it has been in other places in the Song: see the sensual language of **verse 2-3**. The reason this passion is confirmed in chapter 8 is not because it is new, but rather because it is old.

Why would she mention her mothers house in **verse 2**? Doesn't that seem like a rather odd place to take her beloved, especially if she plans to spend some intimate time together? I don't think any of us married folks would consider the in-laws' house the perfect place for a romantic date. The poetry here, however, is not focusing on the house of the mother-in-law, but the character. She is the one who "used to teach me". What the bride is doing is harkening back to her past, in essence she is honoring her mother, bringing her husband to her for approval, showing him around her family and her past. Her mother is like the honorable women of Titus 2, teachers of the things of God. She is melding her life into his, helping him into the family.

This plays on the connotation of her desire that he was "like a brother" to him. Not only does she desire to be affectionate with him in public, she wants to share a bond that is deeper than just romance: the bond of family, the bond of friendship, the bond of the past. We turn away from this language because it upsets our sensibilities, but the bride is doing something here that is unique, she is struggling to put to words a love that matures past physical attraction or youthful vigor. A love that lasts requires history together.

Isn't this why wives take on their husband's names? Isn't this why love is meant to grow sweeter with age? Isn't this why it is natural and right for a husband and wife to begin to see their in-laws as their own parents and honor them as such? Isn't this why Jesus Christ is called both our beloved husband *and* our firstborn brother?

Let me give you some more evidence in **verse 5**. Here we see a repeat of the image in chapter 3:6, that of the bride coming up from the wilderness on the litter of the king. This is a callback to the Exodus of Israel, reminding us again that the love of God in Christ is like freedom from exile and slavery. But something is new in this context, she is "leaning" on her beloved. I am not sure exactly why that difference is noted, but I do know it is purposeful for poetic significance, and what it reminds me of is an elderly couple, leaning on one another for support. It's like God tells his people through Isaiah:



For I, the Lord your God,  
hold your right hand;  
it is I who say to you, “Fear not,  
I am the one who helps you.”

God is the one whom we lean on, instead of, as Proverbs teaches us, “leaning on our own understanding”. Even in her apparent weakness, or perhaps her age, but no doubt her maturity, the beloved is still enthralled with her husband. She talks about “awakening” love under the apple tree, in past tense. This is not a reference to a literal tree where he was born, but the image is that of a family tree—the tree that brings life and fruit. What the bride is saying is: “remember our fruit?” The picture I see is that of an older couple examining their children and grandchildren, full of mature and strong love. Their passion has not faded, even with age.

All this familial language is pointing us to the love of God in Christ which far outlasts our bodies. It goes beyond our senses. The love of Christ is for generations, like we read in Deuteronomy 7:9,

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

How do we know the love of God is a lasting one? How do we face the long turns of life, even death? When we are dead and gone, the fruit remains. By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has grafted us into his family tree, and spiritual fruit is what is produced under that tree. Take this for example: the role of discipleship. When you spend time investing in relationships to help others follow Jesus, you are producing spiritual fruit, you are helping to birth and raise God’s own children. You can have spiritual sons and daughters, all the fruit of your union with Christ. To a thousand generations: God’s family tree is never cut off. One day, by God’s grace, you can be old in faith, still leaning on your beloved, still in love with Jesus, your husband and brother, surrounded by the fruit of your love, and you can enter into everlasting rest.

So, pursue the love of Christ now. Enjoy him now, don’t ignore him. His love is calling you into spiritual vitality and fruitfulness: not simply as working for a master, but as side-by-side with a lover. You will die and be forgotten: but the love of Christ will keep flowing until the end of time and beyond. You get to be a part of that, praise God.

### **The Love of Christ promises everlasting security (6-7)**

The imagery of **verse 6** is exceedingly vivid. In Jeremiah 22, God compares his people Israel to his “signet ring”, that has been torn off in exile. A signet ring is a sign of ownership, it was used to mark property, to set a royal seal. Often the signet ring would be pressed into wax or some other marking substance to leave behind its seal. The ring was worn on the hand, or even on a necklace for safe-keeping. Remember the Israelites are commanded to keep God’s law on their arms, their



foreheads, their doorposts, to seal it to themselves. So the bride is making a similar request: be with me always. Seal me not just on your arm, but on your very heart. I wish to be marked with your seal, to be always known in connection to you. Much like a wedding ring—she wants an outward sign of their union and love.

The proposition “for” in **verse 6** helps us see why. She wants a promise of security, because love is as strong as death. She knows the power of love—she has seen how death comes for all, but love only for some. She wants to make sure that when death does come, the love she has is so strong she can embrace death as a conquered enemy, not as a terror in the night. It is security she is after, which is why she calls upon jealousy. Except in places where it refers to the jealous love of God, jealousy in the Scripture is always negative. Here it is positive: the grip of the grave is strong, but so is a jealous and faithful love, the love of God. Christ is jealous for his bride, not allowing any other loves or commitments, because he is the only one who can hold her. His jealous love is as strong and secure as a tomb.

Here the Song speaks of the love of God in abstracts security, but it is the love of God we are speaking of. This is clear by the only mention to God in the entire book: the fierce jealous love being spoken of, the one that is like a fire—pure and hot and even dangerous—is the “flame of the Lord”. This brings to mind a parallel in the vision of Zechariah 2, a vision of the new city where God dwells with his people, a new Jerusalem without walls, where God says of himself: “I will be to [Jerusalem] a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.”

This kind of love is priceless. Some of us know people, or are people, who are naturally bent towards purchasing protection: insurance, foodstocks, weapons. Some of us are natural savers, we have worked hard to put away a nest egg for ourselves. But this kind of secure love, says **verse 7**, cannot be bought. It doesn’t cross the street every day—it certainly isn’t found in the empty promises of sexual satisfaction offered in porn or casual sex. Secure love is covenantal love, love that goes beyond the grave.

At a funeral of a married man or woman, the surviving spouse is the saddest. Not only have they lost their beloved, their marriage is also over. It is rightfully sad to lament the end of a marriage. When we covenant together, we say: “until death do us part”. This is why the text says that love is “as strong as the grave”, not “stronger”. But remember this picture of earthly love is meant to point us to divine love. It’s meant to help us ache for a marriage that never ends. And this is precisely why the death of a spouse is not ultimately bad news. It involves terrible pain and suffering—but it is not the end of the story.

You see, a funeral is very much like a baptism in reverse. In baptism, we welcome into the family of God. At a funeral, we say goodbye. Both involve resurrection, one a picture of the soul’s rising, the other of the coming bodily resurrection. Both involve a burial, a word striking similar to that of “flood” in our text: in baptism, we bury in water. At the graveside, we bury in earth. Resurrection, whether of soul or body, requires a flood. But what does **verse 7** say about love? Many waters, many floods, cannot quench it. Not the Noachic flood, not the Red Sea, not the Jordan, not the flood



of your sin, and not the flood of dirt on your casket. In the end, all of those who are in Christ experience a love that goes beyond earthly love. It transcends the strength of death, not just matches it. The tomb is very jealous: it tries to hold on. But the tomb is not as jealous as the love of God for his Son, the same love with which he loves you, his beloved church.

Already in the Song we have heard that Christ will never cast us out from his presence, but always continues to lavishes love on us who are in him. But the truth here is further: not only will Christ never cast us out when we turn back, he will never let any enemy in to take us away. You are safe, leaning on your beloved. You are secure, forever. For those in Christ, death is simply the way we give over the beloved of Christ into the secure arms of God. The ground is the safest place—because it is from there they will rise. Where is the sting of death then? Where is the power of the grave? All that is left for us in the face of death itself is love. To be loved by Christ is to be loved forever.

### **The Love of Christ provides everlasting purity (8-14)**

At the end of this song, the bride gets surprisingly philosophic on us. Now she puts on her Lady Wisdom hat, and offers advice. This is another reason to see her speaking in chapter 8 as an older, mature woman. She has overcome her insecurity, has been lavishly loved by her husband and has loved back, but now she has application for us.

Her application comes first through a question. There is a young sister, close to the age for love. How can we protect her? The speakers are perhaps the bridesmaids, but I think it most likely the ones speaking her are a new group: the brothers. Remember them, back in chapter 1? They were the ones who put her to work in a way that made her ashamed of her appearance. But traditionally, it was the brothers who were in charge of protecting the purity of the bride. So they speak up here, and they see two ways a young woman can act: she can be a wall—strong, secure, and not letting any lover in. If so, they will honor her and beautify her. Or she can be a door, porous and open. If so, they will close her and protect her. Their goal, as is right and natural, is to close her off, like the “locked garden” earlier in the book.

But notice the confidence of the bride. Previously, she may have responded to her brothers advice by maintaining her closed off posture. But she does not. Instead, she launches into a lesson of her own. She is a wall, not a door. She has been pure. She is not a door like Solomon, who she critiques here for his many wives. He was forced to “hire hands” for his vineyard. Remember a vineyard is a symbol of sexuality: so Solomon here is hiring “harem guards” to keep watch over all his wives. He shares his vineyard—but here vineyard, she says, is her own. She is a wall, but she is open to one: her beloved. So she calls to him again: make haste. The Song ends not in “happily ever after” but in “further up and further in”. There is more love to be had, not less, as time goes onward.

Notice though the importance of the advice of the bride. She has reached maturity and is teaching us just as her mother taught her. She shows us the importance of purity without prudery. She is



chaste and protected, but not so much that she misses the call of her beloved. In fact, it is his love that makes her pure, **verse 10**. She was a wall, because in his eyes she was one who finds peace. Her vineyard is pure and fruit-bearing because she invites him to come and keep it!

I find no better place to end this song than this. Love is powerful, strong. It is furious, passionate. But it is exclusive. We must take care to give ourselves only to the love of Christ. All other loves find their end in him, all loves. But it is his love that makes us pure, his love that strengthens us like a tower, his love that provides for us everlasting purity. Such was the nature of the love of God on the cross: it wiped away our stains and clothed us in white. Jesus is the provider of the wedding gown of his own bride, a gown of his own righteousness.

So think of all the ways we have seen the love of God in Christ. Think of how we have seen just how beautiful our beloved is, and how good it is to desire to be with him. We have seen how his superlative affection outweighs all our insecurities. We have seen how he powerfully desires us to come away with him, and even if he feels distant we can pursue him and he will open himself up to us. Think how even when we aren't in the mood, he continues to love us. How even when we have to repent and turn back from denying him, he continues to love us. Think that there is therefore no need for any hindrance towards us boldly pursuing intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Now think about all the things that may take you away from that love: old age, frailty, sinfulness, death, despair, impurity, cold-heartedness, suffering. Consider every single piece of doubt that would ever cause you to doubt the love of God in Christ, to consider how it may be taken from you. Now put yourself in the shoes of Israel, outcast and exiled because of their sin. And take home this word from Isaiah 49, a word which the Song of Songs screams in poetic form.

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me;  
my Lord has forgotten me."  
"Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.  
Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

Would a nursing mother forget the child on her own breast? Unlikely, but perhaps. But God is closer still than that. You are engraved on his hands, a seal upon his heart. The work of Jesus Christ set that seal with blood, stained forever. Nothing, not even death, can remove you from the everlasting love of God. When he loves, he loves until the end—and with God, there is no end.

