

Love (Take a Walk With Him)

Song of Solomon 8

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Video and audio versions available online: <https://relentless-love.org/sermons/love-take-a-walk-with-him/>
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[Opening song: "Don't You Want Somebody to Love" by Jefferson Airplane]

Prayer

So Father, it seems that that's what you keep asking us: *Don't you want somebody to love? Wouldn't you love somebody to love? The garden flowers—look around; they're dead. Your mind is full of red. The tears are burning down your cheeks. Now...wouldn't you love somebody to love?*

Father, I pray that you would help us to ask that question, and to answer that question honestly. I pray that you would help us to preach. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Message

Song of Solomon 8:6b-7

**Love is strong as death,
jealousy [qin'ah: passion, ardor, zeal] is fierce as the grave [Sheol: hades, hell].
Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord [the shalhebethyah].
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.**

A lawyer once asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

"And Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'" (Matthew 22:37-40)

Jesus is quoting the Law in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. In Song of Solomon 8, Deuteronomy 6, and Leviticus 19, the word translated "Love" is the Hebrew word *ahab* (the verb) or *ahaba* (the noun). In New Testament Greek, that's translated as *agapeo* (verb) and *agape* (noun).

You shall Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind... that is, with all you've got. Which would obviously mean that you would never be tempted to love anything else... for you wouldn't have anything left to love it with. Which would obviously mean that you would never sin, and everything that you would ever do would be worship... right?

You know, it's really hard to get people to come to worship services without promises of endless bliss in heaven and threats of endless torture in hell. People want bliss and don't want torture, but to just love God... not so much.

So, to answer the question: "Don't you want somebody to love?" ...Well, I don't think we really want God to love, all that much.ⁱⁱ

Jesus says the second command is "like it," or somehow is "it."ⁱⁱⁱ That's the only way to make sense of these two commandments and Jesus's statements—if the second commandment is somehow the first commandment (*homoios*)

Think it through: If you love God with all you have, then you have no love left over with which to love your neighbor... right? Unless your neighbor and yourself contained God, as if you were a temple of God, or somehow channeled God as if you were a blood vessel in his Body. In which case, you could love God with God, in your neighbor, and yourself.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

That obviously means that if—all things being equal—you had a thousand dollars, and your neighbor had no dollars, you would want to give your neighbor at least... at least, five hundred dollars.

So, don't you want neighbors? "Don't you want somebody to love?" Well... maybe, obviously... "No... not so much."

Did you know that through groups like World Vision, you can sponsor a child that might otherwise starve in a developing nation for about a dollar a day? —Get pictures, letters, and keep them fed and educated too! If Americans sponsored kids at the rate that we fund our military, according to my calculations, provided charities could process all the money, we could sponsor two billion children every day of every year. And if we sponsored them at the rate at which we pay for all our pets, we could sponsor 2.7 billion children every day of every year.^{iv}

I realize there are complications, a country needs a military, and it's wonderful to have pets... but we could do that and still save the world from famine. I'm just saying: maybe we don't want somebody to love... all that much.



This is a picture of a leper—one of the more pleasant pictures I found on the internet. Leprosy is a pretty rare disease in the United States. Just a few years ago, the last leper colony in the U.S.—located in Carville, Louisiana—closed its doors.

You won't find much leprosy in Denver, Colorado, but you will find a lot of lepers, so to speak—people who are unattractive and in deep need, people with physical, emotional, and spiritual handicaps; people who could get you sick. Poor people, difficult people, lonely people, sad people, boring people, grumpy people—even sinful people; I think there are lepers all around you, right now, right here, in this very room.

“Don't you want somebody to love?”

Jesus touched lepers. If you touch lepers, you can contract their diseases. You might think, “Well, Jesus didn't contract their diseases.” But that's not true, is it? Isaiah writes, “His appearance (his face) was so marred beyond any human likeness...despised and rejected... one from whom men hide their faces... He has born our griefs and carried our sorrows... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...”^v

You know why he subjected himself to you and to our sorrow and suffered your iniquity? He didn't have to; he wanted to. He wanted somebody to love. He loves Love—God is Love^{vi}—he is Relentless Love (*Hesed* in Hebrew; *ahabah* that doesn't stop).

“This is what the Lord requires of you,” wrote Amos the prophet, “that you love Mercy,” that you *ahab Hesed*, that you desire Relentless Love, that you love Love. God is Love (*agape* in Greek, *ahabah* in Hebrew... the noun and verb).

So, you *should* want somebody to love; you should love Love. But the problem is that we really can't “should” ourselves into love. The more we force love, the less we often do love. And the more we often fake love. I think that's called “religion.”

Love that is forced is like kissing your grandma when you're seven because your mom says you have to in order to get your allowance.

Love that's forced is like square dancing in gym class for a grade.

The Law (what you should do) reveals what you don't want to do—that's why it's a law; it reveals that you don't want to do what you're supposed to do.

The Law reveals that you don't love Love; so it is "knowledge of evil." But it can't make you Good. It can't make you love Love. And God is Love... and the Good.

But if we believed Song of Solomon 8:6-7, maybe we would love Love.

In 1978, I took a girl to a dance, and I kissed her, and it was an entirely different experience than that of kissing my grandma when I was seven because I had to.

Song of Solomon, chapter 8 is the last chapter of the Song of Solomon, and 8:6-7 is like the theological pinnacle of the Song of Solomon. The Song of Solomon is an erotic love poem, and it starts like this:

1:1 "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's." ("Song of Songs" is a Hebrew way of saying, "The very best song.")

"Which is Solomon's" could mean that it is written by Solomon, or commissioned or received by Solomon, and possibly about Solomon.

Solomon is a character in the Song, as well as "The daughters of Jerusalem," and a bunch of queens and concubines. But the main character is a peasant girl who yearns for a shepherd, who yearns for her and calls her his "bride."

Many have thought the shepherd is Solomon. But many scholars today think that the shepherd is someone else. That makes sense to me, since the shepherd and the peasant girl appear to have a monogamous relationship. And Solomon is said to have had 700 brides and 300 concubines.

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine," says the peasant girl about the Shepherd.

In this scenario, Solomon and the queens, concubines, and daughters of Jerusalem represent the idyllic relationship between God and all of Israel: a relationship that is a backdrop for this love affair between the Shepherd and this peasant girl.

Whatever the case, the Song is clearly a set of erotic love poems, in which these two lovers seem to keep yearning, seeking, and finding each other. It is filled with imagery that harkens back to the Garden of Eden, and even talks of a tree—literally a tree of breath, a breath tree, which is usually translated "apple tree."^{vii} *Tapuach* is translated "apple" or "apple tree." *Puwach* is translated "blow" or "puff,"^{viii} as in "puff on a flame to make a fire." *Naphach* is "blow" or "breathe," as in "God breathed into the dust and made Adam."

If the Song of Songs has a plot, it is about a young woman surrendering her virginity, her garden, to this shepherd under this tree, which is himself. That this book is in the cannon of Scripture at all is rather surprising! Religious Jews have seen it simply as an allegory referring to Yahweh and Israel, and so, downplayed the erotic element.

Religious Christians have seen it as an allegory referring to Christ and the church, and so, downplayed the erotic element. I think it is an allegory, but more than an allegory; it is what theologians would call “a sacrament”—a sign, but also the substance that the sign points to.

That Solomon wrote the song makes sense to me for three reasons:

#1. I don’t think it would have been included in the canon of Scripture if King Solomon hadn’t written it.

#2. Solomon (with all of his wisdom) would have discerned what so many fail to discern, and what should be so obvious to any serious student of the Bible: A love story is the theme of all Scripture.^{ix}

#3. Lastly, the Song of Songs just makes sense in the mouth of an old King Solomon, who has had relations with one thousand different women, written Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and now reflects on the very best thing, the best song, and so writes about faithful love between this peasant girl and this Shepherd.

This, I would imagine, is what Wisdom had taught him. In fact, it might be most fruitful to think of Solomon as the bride, and Wisdom as the Shepherd—the Bridegroom.

Let’s read a smattering:

**2:3 · As an apple tree (*tapuwach*;) among the trees of the forest,
so is my beloved among the young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
4 He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his banner over me was love.**

**V. 10 · My beloved lifts up his voice, he says to me:
‘Come then, my love, my lovely one, come.**

**For see, the winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
The season of glad songs has come,
the cooing of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree is forming its first figs,
and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance.
Come then, my love, my lovely one,
come.
My dove, hiding in the clefts of the rock,
in the coverts of the cliff,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is beautiful.’**

**16 My Beloved is mine, and I am his;
He pastures his flock among the lilies. [Jerusalem Bible]**

3:11 · Go out, O daughters of Zion,

**and look upon King Solomon,
with the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
on the day of the gladness of his heart.**

4:12 [The Shepherd sings]*

**A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a spring locked, a fountain sealed.
13 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits,
henna with nard,
14 nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes,
with all choice spices—
15 a garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon.**

**16 Awake, O north wind,
and come, O south wind!
Blow** [*puwach*: blow, puff] **upon my garden...**

Last week I shared with you that in a very miraculous way, Jesus once said to me, “Peter, I have never stopped kissing you. Sometimes my kisses are sweet. Sometimes they burn. But believe this, my kisses never stop. I love you.”

That’s what my wife Susan heard, twelve years ago, during worship, on the last night I felt this bizarre “puffing” or “blowing” on my face over and over again. I had felt it for months, at a time in which I desperately wanted to quit...everything.

**16 Awake, O north wind,
and come, O south wind!
[Puff] upon my garden.**

[Now the Bride sings]
**Let my beloved come to his garden,
and eat its choicest fruits.**

[Now the Shepherd sings]
Chapter 5 • **I came to my garden, my sister, my bride,
I gathered my myrrh with my spice,
I ate my honeycomb with my honey,
I drank my wine with my milk.**

[Now a chorus of people sing]
**Eat, friends, drink,
and be drunk with love!** [or possibly, “*by love*”]

Chapter 8.[The bride sings]

1 Oh that you were like a brother to me

**who nursed at my mother's breasts!
If I found you outside, I would kiss you,
and none would despise me.**

[It seems that they aren't yet married, and so people would despise open displays of affection if this young man were not her brother.]

**² I would lead you and bring you
into the house of my mother—**

[Scholars say that this is a euphemism for female anatomy.]

**² I would lead you and bring you
into the house of my mother—
she who used to teach me.**

**I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the juice of my pomegranate.**

**³ His left hand is under my head,
and his right hand embraces me!**

**⁴ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
that you not stir up or awaken love [*ahabah*]
until it pleases.**

She talks as if Love were sleeping in the Sanctuary of everyone's soul, until it is awakened and takes a person on a wild and wonderful, yet painful, adventure.^{xi}

**⁵ Who is that coming up from the wilderness,
leaning on her beloved?**

**Under the apple tree [*tapuwach*] I awakened you.
There your mother was in labor with you;
there she who bore you was in labor.**

**⁶ Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy [*passion*] is fierce as the grave [*sheol*].
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the Lord [*shalhebethyah*: very flame of Yahweh].**

**⁷ 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.**

In other words, if a man offered you to trade everything he owned for love, it still wouldn't be enough, and folks would think him to be a fool. Love is that desirable.

I think we see love as a duty—a painful, undesirable, duty. But if we saw Love truly, we would see that Love is desirable above all things. So, no one would have to command us to love Love.

The Song of Solomon reveals that:

#1 Love is desirable above all things.

"if a man offered all the wealth of his house..."

See, no one told me that I should try to desire Susan in those tight white polyester pants that she wore to Heritage High School in 1977, as she so gracefully walked up the stairs in front of me every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, between classes.^{xii}

Imagine if I stood up on our wedding day at the reception and said, "I am so proud of my accomplishment! I was told that I should love Susan. And so, I decided to love Susan. It's really tough to love Susan, but I endured. And now I look forward to some reward—like good cooking and a clean house."

Isn't that the substance of what we often say at church: "I'm proud to be a Christian! We should all love Jesus. And so, I have decided to follow Jesus. It's tough, but I love God and so I can't wait to get some reward from God—like golden streets and maybe a certificate stating that I have conquered... God and his kingdom."

If I really believed that love was as desirable as Solomon says, then for me, at that moment, Love would not be a duty. In fact, Love would be its own reward, and there could be no greater reward. I wouldn't be proud of love, but endlessly grateful that I could love Love. And I would have compassion for people that don't love Love—that is, sinners. Sinners are people who don't love Love, and so are already trapped by hell.

It's my experience, as a pastor and as a person, that "Christians" normally don't have compassion for sinners; instead, we're jealous of sinners, like they got away with something. Which reveals that not only do we not love Love—we actively despise Love. In fact, we'd crucify love if we got the chance.

Jesus said, "You shall love God and you shall love your neighbor." It's interesting that he doesn't use the imperative tense, but the indicative tense—he didn't say "you should," but literally "you will." That means that it's not just a command, but a prophecy and a promise.^{xiii}

I went to sixth grade with Susan, and I don't even remember her. Love had not yet been "awakened."

Imagine if God appeared to me on the playground in sixth grade and said, "You better love that awkward, toe-headed, freckle-faced girl over there... with all your heart, mind, and soul for all your life... or I'll fry you forever in Hell."

Well, ya see? I might have had a hard time feeling it... and I probably would've become an axe murderer.

But imagine if God appeared to me on the playground in sixth grade and said, "Peter, you will love that little girl over there. You don't feel it now, but you will feel it then. She will be the delight of your eyes, the joy of your heart, and awaken in you wonders that you cannot comprehend right now."

I would've thought, "How weird." But it might have given me some hope... and I might have been nicer to the awkward, toe-headed, freckle-faced girl over there.

Imagine if he said, "One day you will love everyone like that... and even love Love—love me—like that."

I used to play the piano—or I should say "practiced the piano" because my mom made me—and as soon as she stopped requiring piano, I quit piano. But if I had met Michael Hannah, or just listened to the piano solo in "Call Me the Breeze" by Lynyrd Skynyrd, I don't think I would've quit.

Practice would've still been painful, hard, and even undesirable, but I would've kept practicing because I so desired to one day play along.

If we really saw Love and trusted Love—if we had faith in Love—I think we'd practice love in the hope of, one day, playing along. If we were to see the face of Love, perhaps we'd touch lepers every chance we got, all in the hope of one day playing along.

"Is life just one great school of love?" asks Richard Rohr. Then he answers, "I believe it is. Love is the lesson."

Well, the Song of Solomon reveals that:

#1. Love is desirable above all things.

And #2. Love is more powerful than anything.

[Image on screens continues words of above list.]

But we don't believe that, and that is why people hate it when I preach on this topic—I think they long for Love, but believe that love has failed.

So let me remind you that the sexual love depicted in the Song of Solomon is sacramental—that means it is a sign that contains the substance of the very thing it's pointing to. So, if you don't experience the sign, or don't experience it in the same way as me, it doesn't mean that the substance is not literally all around you.

If you are gluten intolerant and allergic to wine, Jesus still gives you his body and blood, and constantly surrounds you with Grace.

Don't confuse the sign for the substance. But at the same time, don't be tricked into thinking that there is no substance in the sign—there is! And that is why God cares about your sex life. And that is why the Song of Solomon isn't just an allegory. And that is why I want you all to have hope.

People hate this topic because they've tasted a bit of love, but then given up on love—and listened to the liar who tells them that their hope is in vain... and probably even evil.

Think about Solomon: If anyone, in all of Scripture, had a messed-up sex life, it was Solomon—700 wives, 300 concubines, ...and no Viagra. You can bet that Solomon had some “issues.”

1 Kings chapter 11 makes it clear that all of Solomon's sexual dalliances really messed up his relationship with the Lord. And yet, Solomon could still recognize the substance in the sign and write: “Love is strong as death.” He knew that even if he had given up on love; Love would not give up on him.

- Maybe you've given up on love... and “disappointment haunts all of your dreams.”
- Maybe you loved a lover and lost that lover; perhaps your lover recently died—listen closely: “love is strong as death.”
- Maybe you think, “Love is only true in fairy tales, meant for someone else but not for me.” Listen closely: You cannot escape love; nothing is more powerful than Love.

Maybe you had love, and lost love... and you think, “love escaped me.” In the Song, the young bride seems to keep losing her lover; she yearns and seeks and finds several times... and yearns again.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus can seem so real at times and so far away at others?

- Perhaps he wants you to seek him...
- Perhaps he wants you to see that he's not a thing that you can control, or some sort of divine harlot that you can purchase to use as you desire...
- Perhaps he's playing “hard to get,” so that when he gives himself to you, you will be ever more grateful that you've gotten—him and all things with him, in an infinite communion of free and extravagant love, that is Love, who is God.

Maybe you loved, and your love was unrequited, and so you think to yourself, “All my love was wasted.” Well, you need to know, love is never wasted. So...

Love your neighbor, whether or not they love you back.
Love your enemies. Love those who revile you and persecute you.
Love your dog; love your pets.

It turns out that there isn't a shortage of food or dog food in this world, so much as a shortage of love—and you're being trained to love Love, and love is never wasted.

“Love is strong as death” and “fierce as hell.”

Remember that the first death was experienced when Adam took the life from the tree in the middle of the garden, and hid himself in fig leaves and self-justification; he imprisoned himself in his own psyche, his ego.

The second death is experienced when Adam (humanity), who is the *eschatos* Eve, returns to the tree—the tree that now looks like a cross—and surrenders “the life,”^{xiv} which is the death of our psyche, our ego. The second death is the death of death, and the presence of eternal life. The second death is losing your lonely, old, arrogant self, and finding your new self, lost in the Love that is God, your bridegroom.

The second death is literally the destruction of hell (*sheol*) in the fiery love of God... a lake of Fire.

Love is strong as death, fierce as *sheol*, and “love does not fail.”^{xv}

So, life is “a school of love.” Love is your teacher who does not fail—even when you fail—that’s when Love teaches the greatest lesson. Love is your teacher. Love does not fail. And loving Love is the lesson.

So, life is not just a school, not even just an internship; life is a romance.

You are being romanced by the Almighty. He has the “hots” for you, and he does not fail. Love does not fail. And yet, Love does wait, until “it pleases.”

“I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, do not awaken love *before it pleases*.”

If you experience the unmitigated Love of God too soon, you will perceive that love as rape, and refuse to surrender your garden. In other words: Love will utterly obliterate the arrogant, little self-centered prison of a psyche that you think is your life. And if this happens too soon, before it pleases, you will experience this liberation as burning pain, rather than the burning love it truly is. And so, you won’t freely, joyfully, ecstatically, surrender your garden, which is the temple, destined to be filled with the eternal fire, that now sleeps in the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary of your soul, behind the veil.

The Song of Solomon reveals that:

- #1. Love is desirable, above all things.
- #2. Love is more powerful than anything.
- #3. Love desires you and cannot be stopped; it is the very flame of the Lord.

[Image on screen continues the words in list above.]

It’s not just “the way it seems;” Love really is “out to get you.”

God is Love. God is a Consuming Fire. And Love is “the very flame of the Lord.” That’s not simply a metaphorical statement, but an ontological assertion.

If I say, “The lips of my beloved are roses,” I mean that her lips are red and beautiful *like* roses, but they don’t consist of roses.

But when I say, “God is Love and Love is Fire,” I mean that one day you will look into the face of the Lord shining like the sun, and I suspect that you will think: “Every fire I’ve ever seen is but a shadow of this, and every flame I’ve ever touched was but a sacramental expression of this, and every love I’ve ever felt, and then sought, and then mourned, was but a longing for him who is the Light that shines brighter than the sun.”

Well, if you want to fall in love with the sun, don’t go stare into the face of the sun at noon—you will go blind and won’t be able to see anything at all. And yet, if you stare at a single flame burning in the darkness, you will come to know the Glory of the sun and fall in love with the sun... and the Son—the Light of the world.

Hopefully, you remember that before the fall, something was terribly wrong with the Adam: He was in the presence of God, but didn't recognize God, who is his Helper; he couldn't see Love, who was right there, standing next to him—can you imagine?

And then, we find that something was terribly wrong with the Eve: She didn't trust the Word of Love, who is the Wisdom of God, the Logic of Love—can you imagine?

The Lord told Adam and Eve, "The day you eat of it, dying you will die." That was the beginning of the Sixth Day, long before the Seventh Day when "It is finished."

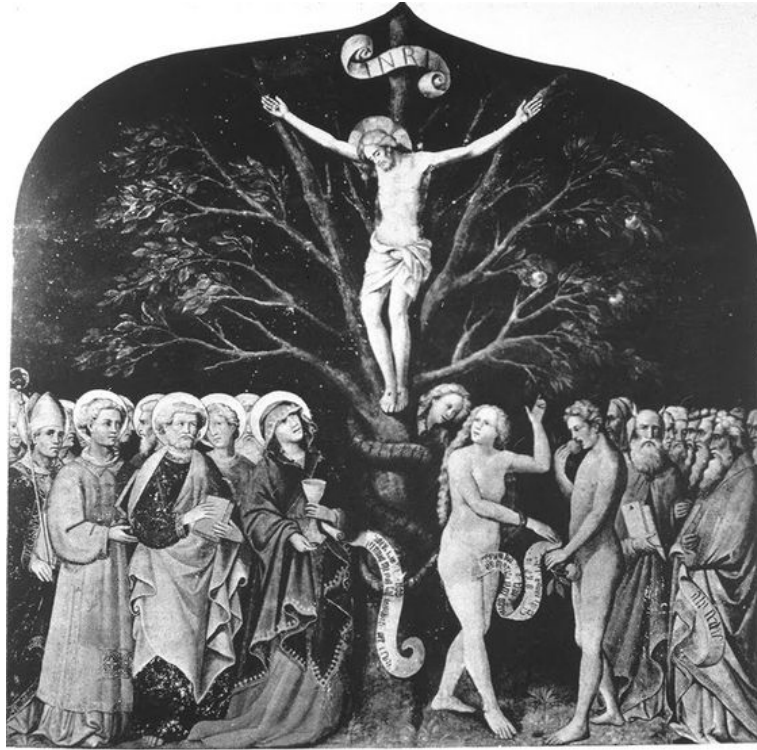
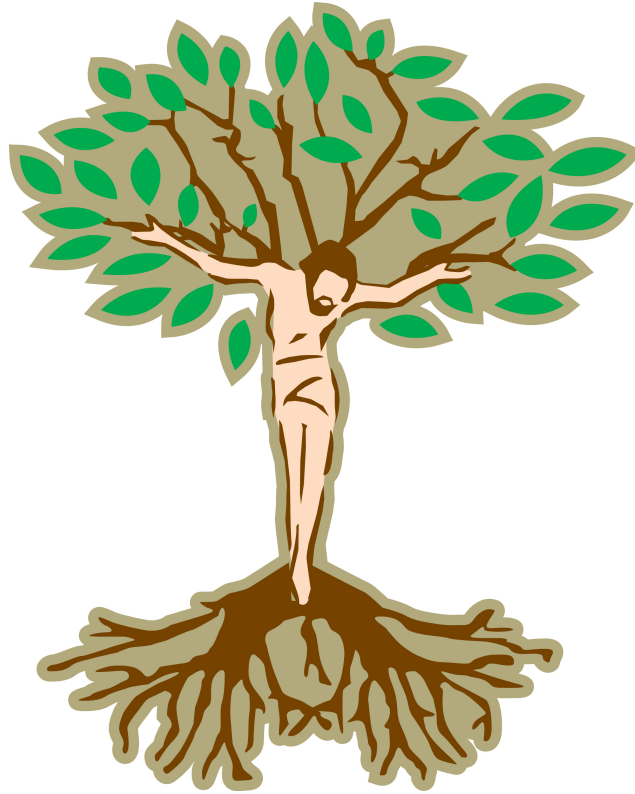


Figure 1 "Mystery of the Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena (1420)

But on the Sixth Day, they didn't trust Love. So what does Love do?

- He doesn't simply teach a class on Good and Evil; Love and not love.
- He doesn't simply grant them an internship in the School of Life.
- He romances them with everything he has and everything he is.



He hangs himself, his heart, the Good in flesh, and the life—he hangs his heart on a tree in the middle of the garden. Then he appears to leave humanity alone with the liar, the snake.

He allows them (even arranges for them) to take his life and abuse his love, that is himself. He kicks them out of the garden, but then, leaves the garden with them—he is taking them on a journey, on a walk-about that we’ve been talking about for the last four messages.

He is romancing them.^{xvi}

He takes them on a journey. For in the far country, in the valley of the shadow of death, he will reveal the Glory of his love in a dry garden on a tree—a tree that we now call “the cross.”

[Image: On screen shows still image of Jesus on the cross from the movie “The Passion of the Christ.”]

There, he entered our hell and confessed our deepest fear, crying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

According to an old friend, Pierre Benoit, the French theologian, spent 35 years studying and praying through that statement, and was finally convinced that at that moment, Jesus heard his father say:

“Come my love, my lovely one, come... winter is past...the season of glad songs has come... let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your face is beautiful... come my love, my lovely one, come”

And at that, Jesus delivered up his breath on the tree of breath—the breath that he now gives to you.

There on the tree, he reveals that what we have taken—the life we have taken—has always been given, fore-given. That's the glory of Love. That's the light shining in the darkness—the Light that is the glory of God: The light that shines in the face of Christ crucified and the Light that shines in the face of Christ risen from the dead and ruling the nations.^{xvii}

And now he asks you, “Don’t you want somebody to love?”

Do you see: You have literally been forgiven God and all things? The one forgiven little, loves little; you have been forgiven much. And loving much is the image and likeness of God.

And so, in this way, we return home and know the place for the first time—we see the Glory of God in everything that’s anything; we see Love. For we’ve come to know the Good, who is the Life—constantly given to us on a tree in the middle of the garden city: the New Jerusalem. We see Love, and we hear singing—everyone singing—the song of all songs, “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is within them,” singing, “Worthy is the lamb who was slain,” our Shepherd.^{xviii}

- And that’s why you ought to come to worship each week, hear the Word, taste the bread, drink the wine, and try to sing the songs—that you might one day sing along.
- And that’s why you ought to join a community group in the fall, confess your sins to one another, and listen as your neighbor says, “In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven”—that you might one day love along, play along.
- And that’s why you need to touch lepers—not even so much because they need to be touched, but because you need to touch them, in the hope that you might see the Glory of God shining in the face of Christ, the Light that “shines in the darkness.”

Preparing this message, I couldn’t help but remember a story that my old friend Brennan Manning (who studied Pierre Benoit) used to tell:

In the 1980’s, he volunteered at Carville Leper Colony in Louisiana.

One dark and dreary day, just after he had arrived, a nurse grabbed him and said, “You must see Yolanda. She doesn’t have much longer...” Yolanda was 37 years old. She had contracted leprosy five years earlier. Brennan would share that anyone could tell that she had once been a stunning beauty—large brown eyes, high cheek bones, and a lovely figure. But now her nose was sunken in, her mouth was deformed, her ears were distended, and all her fingers had been eaten away.

Two years earlier, her husband had left her, and now, wouldn’t allow her two sons (14 and 16) to come visit.

Brennan prayed with her, and had turned to put the lid back on his anointing oil, when all at once the room filled with a brilliant light. At first, he thought, “Oh, the sun came out.” But then, turning, he realized... the light was coming from Yolanda’s face.

Not knowing what to say, he said, “Yolanda you appear to be happy...”

She said, “Oh Father, I am so happy.”

He said “why?”

She said, “The Father of Jesus just told me that he would take me home today.”

After a long silence and some tears, Brennan said, “Yolanda, what did he say to you?”

She answered, “This is what he said, Brennan, ‘Come now my love, my lovely one, come. For you, the winter is past... the snow is over and gone... the flowers appear in the land... the season of joyful song has come... the cooing of the turtle dove is heard in our land. Come now, my love, my lovely one, come. Let me see your face. Let me hear your voice. Your voice is sweet, and your face is beautiful. Come now my love, my lovely one, come.’”

Six hours later, Yolanda expired this age and inspired the age to come, that truly is. Brennan then discovered that Yolanda was illiterate—she had never read the Bible, and Brennan hadn’t read it to her. But the Word of God was not dead to Yolanda... He rose from the dead, passed through her lips, and carried her home.

Love is strong as death. He is fierce as the grave. His flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.

Communion

And so on that night, he took bread and broke it saying: “This is my body given to you. Take and eat and do it in remembrance of me.” And in the same way, he took the cup saying, “This is the covenant—it’s a marriage covenant. This is the covenant in my blood. Drink of it all of you, and do it in remembrance of me.”

And now, Daughters of Jerusalem, may you now present yourself. Now, is the time. May you present your bodies, yourselves, your flesh, as a living sacrifice to our God who is Love... and Fire. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

The Song of Solomon ends the way the Bible ends.

Song of Solomon 8:11 [The peasant bride sings:]

**¹¹ Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon;
he let out the vineyard to keepers;
each [one] was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver.
¹² My vineyard, my very own, is before me;
you, O Solomon, may have the thousand,
and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.**

(I think she’s saying, *King Solomon you can keep your Vineyard, your harem of a thousand women. My garden is my own, and I surrender it to another.*)

[A man—I believe it’s the Shepherd—sings:]

**¹³ O you who dwell in the gardens,
with companions listening for your voice;
(I think that must be us)
let me hear it.**

[Then the Bride answers, singing:]

**¹⁴ Make haste, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or a young stag
on the mountains of spices.**

That’s how the Song of Solomon ends. And that’s also how the Bible ends.

Revelation 22:17 · “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’”

“Surely I am coming soon,” he answers. Amen. Come Lord Jesus! Come.

That’s how this world ends, and everything begins.

So believe the Gospel. In Jesus’s name, Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Matthew 22:35-40

ⁱⁱ Oh God, I don't love you, I don't even want to love you, but I want to want to love you!
-Teresa of Avila

ⁱⁱⁱ Homoios (like) from homos (same).

^{iv} According to the American Pet Products Association, Americans spend about One Trillion dollars a year on pets (95.7 billion in 2019). [<https://www.ksat.com/news/local/2020/02/28/appa-americans-spent-957-billion-on-their-pets-in-2019/>]. According to Wikipedia, the budget for US military spending in 2021 is 753.5 billion. This figure divided by 365

(the cost of sponsoring a child for one year at one dollar a day) gives the number of children that could be sponsored per year at the same rate.

v Isaiah 52 and 53

vi Sometimes our hearts wonder, "Does God love me?
And if so, under what conditions might He stop?"
Scripture claims that "God is Love."
It never says, "God is Wrath" or even, "God is Justice."
"Just" is an adjective describing God, Who "is Love."
God works justice. But "God IS Love."
That means that Love must be as unconditional as God.
That means that Love determines all conditions.
That means that Love creates and sustains everything that's anything.
If God stopped loving you, God would stop being God, and never would've been God, and nothing would exist or ever have existed . . . and you sure wouldn't be reading this little blurb right now wondering if God might stop loving you.
God is unconditionally God, so you are unconditionally Loved.

vii It seems very likely that the *tapuwach* was actually an apricot tree, since apples did not normally grow in Palestine and Scripture speaks of the fruit as orange or golden.

viii **1390c תַּפְּוּחַ (*tappûah*) apple.**

The concept of blowing forcefully is the most natural sense of this root, commonly used of force ventilation for a fire, hence indicative of a seething or boiling hot caldron in Job 41:20 [H 12] and Jer 1:13.
Perhaps the most significant use (of fifteen occurrences) is the giving of life—creation of man (Gen 2:7) and revitalization of dry bones (Ezk 37:9).

- Theological Word Book of the Old Testament

ix In connexion with both passages we may well ask where the authors found the courage—or perhaps we should ask how the redactors of the Canon came to choose these passages whose authors, ignoring the well-known disturbance and corruption in the relationship of the sexes, obviously had the courage—to treat the matter in this way, speaking so bluntly of *eros* and not being content merely with the restrained and in its own way central reference to marriage and posterity. Did they not realise what was involved? Did they not see with what almost hopeless problems the amatory relationship between man and woman is actually burdened?... But the author of Gen 2 knew well enough of the ruin of that relationship ... And we can hardly complain that the rest of the Solomonic literature suffers from illusions regarding the true state of affairs as between man and woman; that it has not seen the abysses and morasses by which the relationship is crisscrossed.... [T]he only explanation is that the authors of the creation saga and these love songs had in mind another covenant, stained and spotted, almost unrecognisable in historical reality, and yet concluded, sealed, persisting, and valid.
– Karl Barth (quoted in Introduction for the NAC commentary on the Song of Solomon)

x At times it's difficult to discern who's speaking. But this is especially true in English for our 1st and 2nd personal pronouns are gender neutral.

xi As Origen so sweetly put it centuries ago, 'Christ sleeps in the soul of every man as he slept in the boat on the Lake of Galilee, and he wakes at the cry of penitence to still the storm of sinful passion in our lives.'" (Campbell, *The Song of Ages*, 152)

--Timothy Carroll, *Christ The Original Matrix*, p.5

xii Now, for whatever reason, you may not feel attracted to members of the opposite sex—and people have made you think you could simply decide to be attracted... Well, this is exactly my point. I didn't decide... And so, I didn't feel proud as if that attraction were my own creation.

xiii "The final secret, I think, is this: that the words "You shall love the Lord your God" become in the end less a command than a promise." - Frederick Buechner

xiv Remember "his life" is really "the Life" of Christ... and so is yours... you thief!

xv "Love never fails." – 1 Corinthians 13:8 NKJV

^{xvi} And isn't this what every good parent does with each of their children—allow their children to abuse their love, then suffer that abuse, then forgive that abuse, waiting for the day that each of their children sees that love, becomes grateful for that love, and returns with a new heart—just like the prodigal son (and hopefully, his older brother)?

^{xvii} I understood that we are now, as our Lord intends it, dying with him on his cross in our pain and our passion; and if we willingly remain on the same cross with his help and his grace until the final moment, the countenance he turns on us will suddenly change, and we shall be with him in heaven. There will be no time between one moment and the next, and everything will be turned to joy; and this is what he meant in this showing: 'Where is there now one jot of your pain or your sorrow?' And we shall be entirely blessed.

- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 69-70

^{xviii} Revelation 5