

“To Love and to Cherish”: The Pure Sensual Love of the Shulammite Maiden and the Shepherd

SONG OF SONGS 2:14–5:1; 7:1–8:14

Far from denigrating sensual, physical love, the Bible exalts it in the right context—within the marriage covenant. One whole book of the Bible is devoted to the celebration of pure sensual love within this covenant. In the Song of Songs, a beautiful Shulammite woman (unnamed but known for her hometown) and an unnamed shepherd give us a show-and-tell account of private but holy love. Normally, only God should be witness to such intimacies, but God has allowed us to join him because we need to be converted to a holy (and healthy) view of sex—by being confronted with its beauty.

Song of Songs is (and historically has been) a difficult book to interpret. Points of controversy: Did Solomon write it? Who is the main character? Should it be taken literally (as the explicit description of physical love) or figuratively (as illustrating

God's love for the church) or both? Is it one poem or a collection of poems? Why is it included in the Bible?

We view this book as primarily a love poem. Although there could be other meanings, it seems to speak most obviously to the human capabilities for rich sexual love. From Song of Songs we know that God intended for sex to be a beautiful experience that more deeply bonds two people who are committed to each other.

1. Why do you think so many Christians feel uncomfortable talking about the sexual relationship within marriage?

What do you think is good about such reserve?

What are the dangers?

READ SONG OF SONGS 2:14-5:1 AND 7:1-8:14

2. Read this dialogue between the lover and the beloved in one sitting, noting especially in the *New International Version* the headings "lover" (the shepherd) and the "beloved" (the Shulammitte maiden).

What masculine characteristics are expressed by the shepherd lover in his relationship with his beloved?

Which of these characteristics shatter(s) the typical male stereotype?

3. What feminine characteristics are expressed by the Shulammitte in her relationship with her lover?

Which of these characteristics shatter(s) the typical female stereotype?

4. In what way(s) might these characteristics, both male and female, be expressed spiritually?

5. In what ways do the shepherd and the Shulammite delight differently in each other?

Why is speech as important as sight and touch in lovemaking?

6. What do you think would help couples enjoy such unashamed sensuality?
7. What would make such sensuality unholy or perverse?
8. The name of God is not even mentioned in this book. What hints are there that beauty and love like this are not mere human creations?

9. Why is the refrain "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) an appropriate statement to make to one's spouse under some circumstances?

10. What have you learned in this study that will help you say "I love you" more authentically to your spouse?