

A Beautiful Celebration of Love and Intimacy

SCOTT HOEZEE

How many times have you heard a sermon from some part of, or the whole of the biblical book the Song of Songs? The odds are pretty good that your answer to that question would be never or not very often, or somewhere in between. In the *Revised Common Lectionary* that many churches use as a preaching guide, the Song of Songs comes up precisely one time across the entire three-year cycle; and on that Sunday, most preachers probably opt for one of the other three texts assigned for the day. Historically, this has been a difficult book to figure out, but today on *Groundwork*, we begin a series on the Song of Songs. So, stay tuned as we do so.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are doing as short a series as you can get on *Groundwork*, just two episodes on the Song of Songs; and in this first of the two, this program is going to give an overview of the whole book, and kind of its history of interpretation, and then we will look at the introduction; and the first of the love songs that comprise this book will be in Song of Songs Chapters 1 and 2 in this program.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, when I grew up and I was reading the Bible as a kid, I had been told back then that it was called the Song of *Solomon*; and sometimes I kind of slip back into that, saying this is the Song of Solomon, and everybody I know still refers to it as that book, but we are calling it the Song of Songs today...can you shed a little bit of light on that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, the very first verse of Chapter 1 says: Solomon's Song of Songs. So, it is in there, right? Solomon's name is in there, but I think most scholars have concluded that Solomon did not write this book; and so, his name being attached to it may be similar to all those times in the book of Psalms when we read that a given psalm is *of David*. In many of the psalms, that does not mean David wrote that particular poem, but rather, this was written in honor of David, or in the style of David. So, that may be true here. This book may be connected to the wisdom tradition in Israel, and Solomon was always associated with the wisdom tradition. So, maybe that is why his name got put at the beginning of this. We also know that in the Bible, Solomon had something like 700 wives. So, you know, he doesn't seem like a leading candidate to write a love song involving just one, and only one, man or woman.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it makes sense. I mean, if they would attribute it to Solomon, this is part of the wisdom literature tradition: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs are in that genre; and now, just a quick note about genre here. In the book *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth** by Gordon Fee, he talks about different genres and they are supposed to be interpreted in different ways. So, you have Old Testament narrative, you have Gospels, and you have apocalyptic literature, but then poetry is its own genre; and when you look into the scripture, you are not supposed to take it literally. It is more figurative language, isn't it,

Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Yes; you need to, as we say in hermeneutics, which is biblical interpretation, we have different tools in the toolbox for different types of literature; and you need the poetry tool if you are going to unlock the meaning of poetry. So, this is, we think, Darrell, a collection of a number of different love songs in the ancient Near East. Love poetry was a very common form of writing, and that was true in Israel, too. There is no plot...there is no consistent plot or forward movement in the Song of Songs. It is just a collection of different love songs and love poetry.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we've got the male lover, we've got the female lover, and we have the chorus of friends, and they are going back and forth in this; and so, you've got these people talking to each other, talking about each other, and then a refrain that continues to come back; and that reminds us of some ancient Greek literature.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you ever studied plays or Greek dramas, then you know that there was always a chorus, and the chorus sometimes explained things, move the plot forward, and that is sort of what happens with the friends here in the Song of Songs; and we will see that in the next segment when we get into Chapter 1. Two main themes here, Darrell, that we, through all this various love poetry: the first major theme is the intense desire of people who are in love; and so, the constant seeking and finding of one another. That is one major theme.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it is beautiful to have intimate connection between people who are married, and the desire that comes from them between each other is one that God has given. The second major theme that we see is the celebration of physical and sexual attraction; and that is something that comes up over and over in different ways in the eight chapters of this book.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and of course, those two themes are related. The fact of our physical attraction leads us to wanting to gratify it and fulfill it in the person we love. So, those two themes are there, but they are tightly connected; and one thing that we will see in this program and the next, Darrell, is that, like most poetry, and certainly love poetry...so, the poetry in the Song of Songs makes a lot of use of metaphors and similes, but to our modern ears, some of that ancient Near Eastern imagery sounds pretty funny or strange to us now.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, you will see your hair is like... your neck is like... your body is like... and so, there are comparisons to make the language more flowery, and it may sound strange to us, but that is exactly how they communicated to each other. That was the epitome of romantic language back then; and we have our own language today for different things, depending on the culture you come from as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, we wouldn't be surprised to hear a lover compared to a red, red rose; or there is that sonnet: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? That is language that we are used to; and of course, there are lots of love songs on the radio...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That uses it, but not quite like here. So, here a lover's hair is compared to a flock of goats; a neck is described like a tall brick tower; eyes are a pair of doves; breasts are a pair of fawns; teeth are compared to a flock of just-shorn sheep; the lovers themselves are compared to gazelles and other swift animals; and again, mostly I

think, if you tried that language on someone today, I don't think it is going to go, but that was the typical metaphor and simile of that day...very nature-related symbolism and metaphor.

DARRELL DELANEY

I wouldn't recommend that you do this with your partner...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DARRELL DELANEY

Because it might not go over well; but it is really interesting, too, that...I mean, when we think about this book in general, it is called the Song of Songs for a reason. It is very interesting that this book would be called that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in the Old Testament, you know, Darrell, we have the Holy of Holies, we have the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. Well, what that means...when we say the Holy of Holies, that means that is the most holy place; when it is the King of Kings, that is the most true king over all others; and so, here the Song of Songs says this is the greatest love song, or collection of love songs, ever written or compiled. So, it is making a pretty grand claim for itself in this book.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it is beautiful for us to know that if they believed that this is the greatest song ever written, or compilation of songs, that they would put them in a place where we could find them all, instead of going in different places and trying to piece them together ourselves. We are just over-viewing in this segment the history of the book and how it should be interpreted. Now, of course, there are very graphic views and graphic words of sexual desire and descriptions in the book; and let's just say this, too, Scott: This book makes a lot of people uncomfortable. I mean, it is stuff that we normally keep behind our chamber door, so to speak...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

We don't want to talk about it in public. Even though the world has different ways to talk about sex and culture, the Church has ways that God has put in the Bible that we should be talking about, but for some reason, it is uncomfortable to talk about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why, in the Jewish tradition, people say: Well now, this isn't really about sex; this is a metaphor of God's covenant love for Israel; okay? It is all symbolic. And in the Christian tradition, we did something similar. We were uncomfortable with the graphic descriptions of body parts and stuff here, and so, the Christian tradition says: No, no; that is not what this is about. This whole book is a symbol of Christ's love for his Bride, the Church. The whole thing is an allegory. It is not some literal celebration of literal physical body parts and sex and love desire; but actually, Darrell, most scholars today have concluded that the book is pretty much what it looks like when you first look at it. It is a celebration of intimacy; it is a celebration of beautiful bodies; it is a celebration of sexuality. The book is exactly what it appears to be, and that is how most people interpret it. In fact, in the next episode, I think we are going to do more with the garden imagery, but that comes up a lot here. That could be a throwback to the Garden of Eden, to that time before the fall into sin, where the man and the woman were naked and unashamed and open to one another on every level; and that is a big part of this book, too.

That is the big picture, but now we need to dig into the text, so stay tuned as we go into Song of Songs Chapter 1 in just a moment.

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have looked at the broad outline and overview of the biblical book the Song of Songs. Now, let's listen, Darrell, to the opening chapter...and again, the dialogue here alternates primarily between a woman and a man, and then the voice of the friends gets sprinkled throughout. So, let's begin with the words of the female lover: ²Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine. ³Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the young women love you! ⁴Take me away with you—let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers. (And then the voice of the friends) We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine.

DARRELL DELANEY

And then he chimes in and he says: ⁹I liken you, my darling, to a mare among the Pharaoh's chariot horses. ¹⁰Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels. ¹¹We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver. (And she replies) ¹²While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. ¹³My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts. ¹⁴My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then, the man comes back: ¹⁵How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves. (Now the woman) ¹⁶How handsome you are, my beloved! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant. (The man again) ¹⁷The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs. And Darrell, this is how the book begins.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; the two lovers are together in this situation. Later in this book, we will see that they are separate for some reason, and they are trying to find each other, but in this early passage, we see that they are together, and they are connected in intimate love and so focused into each other, and that is beautiful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that is exactly right; and again, as we said, there really isn't an unfolding story in this book. The book is very repetitive. We get love song after love song after love song, but this is where we begin. The two lovers are together; they are singing of how lovely the other is; how much they want to be together. Again, the language is highly sensual. I mean, Darrell, these two people, whoever they are, they are besotted with one another. They cannot get enough of each other.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that is the beauty of the covenant love that relationships can have when the Holy Spirit is in and God is in it. They are totally into each other. I mean, anybody who has been madly in love understands this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, of course; yes; I mean, you sit; you talk; you share your life story. Maybe you kiss a little bit, and you know, the next thing you know, six hours go by and it seems like six minutes, right? I mean, where does the time go, we say, you know; and that is where these two are. When they are together, time stands still. They are just completely delighting in one another's company; and Darrell, according to the Song of Songs, all of that is the gift of God. This is a profoundly good thing, and I think the Song of Songs says it is also a profoundly divine thing.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it is beautiful; so, the relationship aspect...the intimacy that they have...I love intimacy. I kind of break this down, that is: into-me-see. And this is the only exclusive place that my partner, my wife, has where she can see me as I am, where we can be naked and have no shame, quite figuratively and quite literally, in our covenant relationship; and this is being displayed in this book in a very beautiful way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The writer Lewis B. Smedes many years ago had a book called *Sex For Christians*, and in that book he says there should be no mystery to us as people formed in the image of God to figure out where sexual desire and intimacy came from. The Bible tells us as plain as day it is all God's idea. It is God's design for us...God's design for this creation; which is why, you know, in history there is a line that has been attributed...I heard it said that Martin Luther said this; then I heard somebody else said it. We don't know if any one person *actually* said it, but there has been this line that sometimes we have even heard in the church that, you know, when even a Christian couple makes love, the Holy Spirit leaves the room. Well, no. The Bible from Genesis forward, and certainly here in the Song of Songs says no; that is not the case. Sex is not something shameful...not something dirty...not something to shy away from. This really is a gift of God.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing; and even in the New Testament it says of the marriage bed: May it be undefiled, which means that it is holy, it is righteous, it is good, and it is done in the presence of God. So, it doesn't need to be dirty or shameful. Those are like cultural images that come in and try to superimpose what scripture teaches us; and this book is redeeming the fact that no, this is beautiful between one man and one woman, and beautiful in God's sight.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we said in the first segment, Darrell, that in the history of interpretation, people have been embarrassed enough by this book and made uncomfortable enough with this book that they have turned the whole thing into a metaphor for something else. God's covenant love for Israel in the Jewish tradition; Christ's new covenant love for his Bride in Christ in the New Testament and in the Christian setting. We just don't...we are not comfortable letting the book be exactly what it is, which is a celebration of intimacy...a celebration of love and relationship; and yes, also of sexuality. That is what this book is, and that is part of the Bible's larger message, that this is a good thing; that this is a creation gift of God. But, you know, of course, Darrell, when something is that much of a divine gift, you also enter, in a fallen world, into dangerous territory, don't we?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, Satan would love to corrupt something that is beautiful and good and holy; and so, you know, relationships that are supposed to be mutually gratifying and holy become self-centered, competitive, and power mongering; and so, you know, people are hurt; people are broken; people are taken advantage of when they follow the world's way of doing these things; but if they follow the way God has given us, then we will see: 1) It is a gift. 2) We are supposed to share it with the one who we have an exclusive relationship with; and I think that is one of the reasons why the Church has made this the exclusive relationship between Christ and his Church; not only to move away from the things that we feel are kind of taboo to talk about, but also to show the exclusive relationship that is one of the themes of this book.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and because it is a wonderful gift of God, you know, Darrell, it is always the case, right? The greater the good, the greater the gift, the more the powers of evil are going to work to corrupt it; and probably no one area of human nature has been more wrongly wielded, more corrupted than sexuality; and precisely because that has all the power, the Song of Songs says, you have to handle it carefully; and unfortunately, we know that it isn't always handled carefully; and unfortunately, not even in the Church. Sexual abuse scandals that have been in all denominations leave a lot of human wreckage behind. So, I don't know if we usually think

of the word *stewardship* in relation to sexuality. We usually of it in terms of gifts and money; but stewardship applies here, too. We have to steward carefully this gift, because it is a great gift of God, and it is powerful; and therefore, it can also be dangerous if used wrongly.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we need to be responsible with this gift. Just like every gift that God has given us, we need to be good stewards, reminding ourselves that he is the one who gives us the gift, and we honor him by taking care of it; and intimacy in this way is a very powerful gift if wielded wrongly can hurt us; and we can realize that, if we do it the way God has called us to, then we can honor him with it. So, we are talking a lot about that and physical desire being a great gift, but in just a moment, we are going to continue in the Song of Songs in Chapter 2. So, stay with us.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, we noted earlier that although the first love song or poem in the Song of Songs presents the lovers are physically present to one another, we said also that most of this book is about lovers who, for whatever the reason, are separate; and so, they are desperately seeking a reunion; and we start to see that now already here in Chapter 2.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; reading in Chapter 2, we start with her talking. She says: I am a rose of Sharon; a lily of the valleys. (He replies) ²Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women. (She replies) ³Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. ⁴Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love.

So, they are not together, but they are still having this conversation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know, I think what we see in these verses of Song of Songs 2, is a portrait...you know, a lot of us...most of us maybe...know about. Of course, we know that when you are in love, the person you are in love with is not the only man in the world, is not the only woman in the world. Lots of fish in the sea. We know that—lots of folks out there; but as we see here, Darrell, and to quote a well-known song, what they are saying to each other is: I only have eyes for you. It is a very popular song. Whether or not it is literally true and one-hundred-percent true when we are in love, there is *no one* else out there who could ever be as good as the one we love, and that is what they are saying to each other here in Chapter 2.

DARRELL DELANEY

When I was sure that my wife was to be my wife, and we became very exclusive, everyone pretty much paled in comparison to her, to me; and therefore, there was no opportunity for any other relationship of that level. It is only going to be me and her; and it is only going to be us for the rest of our lives. That is the plan; and so, when you get into that place, and you know that God has given you a person, then everyone else seems to pale in comparison. No matter how beautiful they are to other folks, you only pay attention to the exclusive love that you have given that one person.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The male figure in what you just read, Darrell, in Chapter 2 here, he basically says that out of all the women in the world, only his beloved is a lovely lily, and then he basically says: All the other young women are

thorns. You are the lily, they are the thorns. A little over the top, but that is kind of how these things go. But then, next comes that theme of being separated. So, let's continue to listen. This is Song of Songs 2:14: My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely. ¹⁵Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom. (She replies) ¹⁶My beloved is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies. ¹⁷Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.

So again, there are eight chapters in here, and this theme of being separated, and oh, how we want to come back together, comes up again and again. You kind of wonder why is that such a big part of this book? Why aren't all the poems like Chapter 1, where they are together?

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, it could harken back...no one really knows... I mean, to be honest, but it really could harken back to the Garden of Eden when they were expelled from the Garden and the relationships were broken; and you know, their relationship with God and their relationship with one another—being able to be naked and have no shame—being transparent with one another was lost when they disobeyed God. And so, forever we have been trying to get back to the sweet spot of being in a relationship with one another where there is understanding and not competition, and then a relationship with God, where we submit to him and honor him. So, some of that could be a motif that harkens back to the Garden.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, once the forbidden fruit was eaten, the first thing that happened: a whole lot of hiding. People started to hide. Suddenly, it didn't feel right to have your body parts on naked display. So, they covered up; literally, but also figuratively and spiritually. Suddenly, hearing God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day wasn't a welcome thing; and so, they hide, and God has to call out for them: Where are you? That was probably the first time in human history, Darrell, where that question actually had to be asked: Where are you? Because before the shame of sin came onto the scene, we never had to wonder where the other person was; and then, after sin we did; and we still do. That is certainly in the wind here, I think, in this book.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and I was thinking about, when you said that, Scott, that they covered themselves up with fig leaves. It is a feeble attempt of them trying to cover up the shame of their nakedness, and figuratively speaking, we still cover up with fig leaves to this day when we try to hide behind different things, and make sure that no one sees who we really are. That is a problem that went all the way back to the Fall; and in this situation with this book, you see that they are not together, and they are trying to get back to each other. That deep longing to get back together is the theme.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Like every other aspect of our human nature, so in this area, things are not the way they are supposed to be. And you know, we mentioned earlier that this book sometimes has been seen as a symbol for God's covenant with Israel or Christ's new covenant for the new Israel that is the Church; and there is something to that; and that means that on this front, as in all others, we need salvation; we need redemption; we need healing in this part of our lives, as in every other part.

DARRELL DELANEY

We need intervention...divine intervention from our God, because if left to our own devices, we would never get back to him; we would never get back to restored relationships with one another; and so, because Jesus Christ has redeemed us and given us the way to redeem and repair those relationships, we have an opportunity to be reconnected and redeemed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is why in the Reformed confession the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the opening question is: What is your only comfort in life and in death? Right off the bat, it says by way of an answer that we belong to God; but

the Catechism was very careful to spell this out: We belong to God...
Scott Hoezee/

DARRELL DELANEY

Body and soul.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not just our souls...not just our hearts. It involves our bodies as well. That, too, is redeemed. And even though we don't really have any real clear ideas about what sexuality or marriage will be in the kingdom of God, Jesus said some things to indicate that it is going to at least be different. One thing we do know is that when God raises us back to life, we will be raised with a renewed physical body. It will be like Jesus' resurrected body. A body that Jesus still has. Sometimes people forget that. Once Jesus became incarnate, it was for all time. He still has a body as he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and he will have that forever. So, we will get our bodies back someday as well. So, redemption is very much in the wind here in the Song of Songs, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is; and the fact that Jesus has resurrected gives us a down payment on that promise, that the intimacy and the love that is going to be part of ours won't be something we have to chase God around for. We will actually be redeemed by the gospel. The Song of Songs seems to be an odd place to find this kind of redemption, but you can count it as the Bible's one of many surprises.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a very surprise, but we know that we are redeemed body and soul, thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. Join us again next time as we explore more of the Song of Songs and how it contributes to a biblical picture of redeemed love, sex, and relationships. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or make suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

DARRELL DELANEY

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***Note:** The audio of this program paraphrases the title of Gordon Fee's book. The correct title is *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth*.

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