

God's Design for Sex and Relationships

DARRELL DELANEY

Imagine a garden overgrown and neglected and filled with weeds. It was meant to be a place of beauty where love, intimacy, and connection can flourish; but instead, it has become a tangle of thorns reflecting the brokenness of a culture that turns love into self-serving lust, cheapened sex, and treats relationships as transactions. What would it take to restore that garden to its original beauty? In today's episode of *Groundwork*, we turn again to the Song of Songs, a stunning biblical picture of redeemed love, sex, and relationships. We will explore how God invites us to uproot the weeds of distortion, plant seeds of his design, and watch as his flourishing intimacy transforms not just our personal lives, but the world around us, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in part two of our short, two-part series on the Song of Songs, and in the first episode, we just gave an overview of the whole book, helping people understand that poetry is understood and interpreted in a different way than different genres of scripture; and that sometimes it can be quite uncomfortable to talk about the images and the graphic nature of this book, but yet, it is part of the full counsel of God, and so, we talk about it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And today, we are going to look at various chapters. There are eight chapters in the Song of Songs. We looked at the first two in the first program, and we will pick up parts of the other six in this one; but as we do it, Darrell, we are going to kind of read this book kind of through the lens of the way our culture treats intimacy and relationships and sexuality. We want to contrast the *good* images that we find in the Song of Songs with what we see today; because, you know, Darrell, when we think about love in today's culture, what kind of things come to mind?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, movies, social media, entertainment, different explanations of what love is are defined by fleeting emotions or selfish pursuits. They are often romanticized ideals and they are not real. I hate that they call them "reality shows", because they are not real at all. There is a constructed place that you look at and there are cameras and people and all these things happening to give you a distorted picture of what love and intimacy is; and unfortunately, that is not the truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; I mean, our culture has distorted love into something that you chase for personal gratification; and it is not usually presented as a gift that you sacrificially give in a selfless way; but that is the vision that the Bible, and particularly the Song of Songs, wants to give us. You know, our culture celebrates love as fleeting, it can change with a circumstance, you can fall in love, you can fall out of love, and so forth; but you know, that makes relationships disposable, and that is not at all God's intention, as we see reflected in scripture.

DARRELL DELANEY

We know that what we see in scripture is a God who is self-sacrificial and not self-satisfactory. We see that all over scripture; and in the Song of Songs, we are called to look at a love that is marked by commitment, mutuality, and delight, because that is rooted in God's character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here from Song of Songs 8:6: Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Love is stronger than death...that captures something of the Bible's portrait and picture of true love, doesn't it?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it is powerful. So, as strong as death—permanent. This is intense, and it sharply contrasts with the fleeting desires of the world, where I am in it, I am out of it. We are divorced because we have "irreconcilable differences". We were married for five minutes. We do a shotgun wedding. We come back; we are not compatible. So, the Bible is showing us that we look to God as our source because, I mean, of course we know God is love. He is the one who defines what it means. We want to know what love is, we look at God as our example, and we see Christ's example.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and that was the theme of 1 John; in fact, 1 John 4:8; you just said it: God is love. I mean, that is...or how does God show his love? Romans 5:8: But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. That is sort of the ultimate picture of love: *agape*, as we talk about it. A love that sacrifices for the good of the other without demanding anything in return; and in the Song of Songs, we see that reflected in the mutuality between the two lovers.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, let's look at that right now from Chapter 6 of Song of Songs. It says: Where has your beloved gone, most beautiful of women? Which way did your beloved turn, that we may look for him with you? (She says) ²My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to browse in the gardens and to gather lilies. ³I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine; he browses among the lilies.

So, it is a mutuality: I am his, he is mine. And that is not self-seeking, it is the opposite of self-seeking: Other pleasing and mutual.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, this book is what it appears to be, Darrell. It is a celebration of love; it is a bunch of love poetry; but we did say in the previous program that people have also seen echoes of God's covenant love in this as well, and that is true. I mean: I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine reminds you of Exodus 6:7, where God says: I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God; that kind of mutuality that we see in Song of Songs, we see reflected in the wider scriptures with God and his relationship with Israel, and now Christ and his relationship to his Bride, the Church.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, you know, in contrast...we are going to continue to do this throughout the episode, where we contrast with the world and what popular culture is doing and what scripture is teaching us, because popular culture teaches us that love is transactional: What have you done for me lately? In order to quote another pop song, you know: How have you fulfilled me? What are you doing for me, and how do you make me feel? That mindset often leads to brokenness and unmet expectations. That is a problem, Scott, but it is not what we hear when Paul talks about it in 1 Corinthians 13, when he talks about love. He says: ^{13:4}Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

That is the love that we are seeing in this book, and the love that we are called to display.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and that 1 Corinthians 13 passage aligns very well with the Song of Songs. Both lovers are seeking the good of the other, and both are, as we have said in the previous episode, they are just gobsmacked with each other; I mean, they are just besotted with one another, and they cannot wait to give of themselves. So, in Song of Songs 5:10: My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand. (And then, in turn, in another part in Chapter 4) ⁷You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you.

So, this isn't about competition, about control, about self-fulfillment; it is about fulfilling the other that you love; and again, how biblical is that? In the gospel: A new command I give you, Jesus says in John 13: ³⁴A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Darrell, that...you know, we are going to talk later in this episode about various types of situations where we have love. Yes, there is the romantic love that is the most prominent feature of the Song of Songs, but there is also, you know...there is love in marriage but there is also love in friendships and there is love in relationships, including in family relationships...and this kind of, you know, *not* self-seeking but self-giving love is what needs to characterize us as Christians in all those areas.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is true, Scott; and when Jesus says what he says about the new commandment, he is washing the disciples' feet. He is showing them the example of what it means to put the other before you; and this relationship you see in the Song of Songs is about them putting one another ahead of themselves; and we are called to rediscover that love that God has intended for it to be selfless, for it to be enduring, and for it to be lifegiving.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the only way we can do that, Darrell, is by grace...by being transformed through our baptisms into the image of Christ. Because on our own, as sinful people, we are not going to make it. So, we want to always have love and rediscover love as God intended it: selfless and enduring and lifegiving. In a culture where this is very, very misunderstood, we want all of the love in our life to be deeply rooted in God. Well, in just a minute, we are going to talk about how God intends us to understand this relationship and sexuality as a gift. So, stay tuned for that.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening 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, in a culture that has turned sex and sexuality into a commodity, something that gets marketed...consumed...often separated from intimacy and love and marriage, it is easy to see, you know, why so many relationships around us are fractured and unfulfilling, isn't it?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; you know, sex has been distorted into something that is selfish, exploitive, and disconnected from the original purpose. So, this is how I explain it to young people in youth group: Sex is like a fire, and the fire has places that you put it where it can be safe...in the fireplace, in the firepit; but if you take the fire out of the fireplace or the firepit, and you put it on your living room floor, it is dangerous, and it can burn up everything. So, sex, when you remove it from the context of intimate marriage relationship in covenant, it can be dangerous; it can be deadly; it can be painful for many people; and in the Song of Songs it is showing us that this is what it looks like when the relationship of intimacy is put into its healthy context and healthy relationships.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the fact that we don't do that well in our culture is why we see addictions to pornography; we see casual hookups; we see relationships that are not at all tender; they can even be abusive and manipulative; but scripture presents a radically different perspective on that. The Song of Songs, as we said in the previous program, presents sexuality as a gift of God, and therefore, it is something that is holy—something that is supposed to be holy; and we as Christians need to look at it that way.

Love is the place where, you know, we really do express our deepest selves. We looked at this verse in the previous program from Chapter 1:2:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine.

They are celebrating each other all throughout this book.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and that vision of delightful and intimate relationship that is not cheapened nor exploited, reminds us of the boundaries that God has given in his idea for sex. Sex is God's idea. It was good; it happened before the Fall of humanity, and he didn't give us these limits that we have to exploit us or to keep us limited, but he gave them to us so that we can be protected. Just think about what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6. It says: ¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.

When we treat sex as sacred, we honor God, ourselves, and our partners. That is what happens when you use it the way God has called us to use it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and when it is in that context it is such a good thing. Here are some lines from the Song of Songs 4:9, 10: You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. ¹⁰How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine...

So, he even calls her like a sister. That reminds you of being a brother and sister in Christ, even.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this actual chapter...they just keep going on and on. They just keep piling on the compliments and piling on the simile and metaphor of descriptions to one another, just to show how much they love each other. It is not a lustful objectification of body or body parts or any of that, it is a celebration of the bride's beauty; it is her dignity, her personhood that fulfills this husband in a very special way; and it is a mutual intimacy that God has given to his people; which reminds us of Ephesians 5, where it says: ³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. ³²This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Because marital intimacy reflects the self-giving, sacrificial love that Christ has for his people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, as we said in the previous program, we don't want to turn the Song of Songs only into a metaphor for, you know, Christ and his Bride, the Church. We don't want to reduce it to only that, but it is also that. It can be both, right? We see the one reflected in the other; and you know, we need this vision. People all around us need this vision, you know. The more hypersexualized our culture has become, the more people have been wounded. We want to act like sexuality is no big deal, you know. Don't get so uptight about it. You Christians, you've got all your rules; don't get so uptight about it. And then you look at all the brokenness around, it is like, there is a reason to be a little uptight about it. People get hurt; and a lot of people are carrying the wounds of shame and regret and feelings of unworthiness; and so, we need to get back to the biblical vision for our relationships; and we also need to know that healing and redemption are possible in Christ.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, if that is you out there and you have been in situations where you felt broken by this; you have been hurt; you are still trying to get over some of the things that have happened to you, we want you to take heart that: 1) God understands. 2) He is in the business of restoring things that are broken. If you just look at the verse that comes from Chapter 1, where she says: ⁵Dark am I, yet lovely; it talks about that because if you think historically, she is out in the field and she is working, getting herself a tan. Now, we tan for recreation, but her tan was because she worked hard in the field, and she saw it as, well, he might look down on me because I am out here and I am dark; but because she says: I am dark, yet lovely; it means that it is redeemed there. So, that means that even when people have relationships...I set my eyes are only for you, as you have said before...we will be exclusively connected and fall in love with the people that sometimes think that those things are flaws. God can use those things to redeem the relationship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Psalm 103 is very well known in churches. We sometimes say it after we take the Lord's Supper: ⁴(He) redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, ⁵(He) satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

That is our hope in all of our life, but also particularly for those who have been wounded by sexuality; wounded by abusive relationships; who carry around some shame; there is the hope. It may not come quickly; we don't want to, you know, just paste a yellow smiley face over a horrible thing like sexual abuse; so, healing may not come quickly, but it is possible through God; and we can also reclaim sexuality as a sacred gift that brings joy, intimacy, and yes, glory to God. I think if the Song of Songs tells us anything, it is that it is not weird to think that through our intimacy...through our sexual intimacy even...we can glorify God when we use our bodies in those relationships as God intended.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and speaking as a person who has been through sexual brokenness and seeing and feeling and experiencing God's healing grace there, is really something that I know he can do, and he is looking to redeem a vision of sex in this broken world. But as we conclude this episode, we want to talk about how God can use the Song of Songs to help us redeem our relationships. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program, Darrell, of a very short, two-part series on the biblical book in the Old Testament, the Song of Songs. We have covered a lot of ground. We have talked about how our culture looks at things like love and sex, but how the Song of Songs is one place in the Bible that can recalibrate and give us a new perspective on our relationships and also on our sexuality.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, you know, we have been contrasting the way the world looks at these things, and we also were looking at how God can redeem them using books like the Song of Songs; and unfortunately, the relationships in the world...some of them are viewed as self-centered, and what can you get out of this? You know, you pull the lever and you get what you get because you put a coin in and you get what you get. Unfortunately, relationships are much more complicated than that, and I am trying to explain that to young people; I am trying to explain it to myself in the mirror when I walk out and have relationships with people. It is not just about marital relationships. It is about my friendships; it is about my environment; it is about my community as well. God offers a better way, doesn't he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; God wants us to adopt a vision of all of our relationships. Relationships that are mutual, that are reciprocal, that are deeply rooted in love and in respect, where the main question you ask is not: What can I get out of this; but rather, what is in it for you? What can I give to you? How can I make you better?

You know, Darrell, that really ties in with the biblical vision of shalom. Shalom is not just peace in the sense of no conflict—no warfare. Shalom is where everybody is webbed together in mutually reciprocal relationships of thriving and flourishing. Everybody is concerned that everybody else thrive. I don't have to worry about my flourishing because you are going to worry about that. So, I worry about your flourishing and not mine; and that kind of shalom...that interdependence of all creatures...that is what the Bible aims at; and that is something I think that we do see in the Song of Songs, and in scripture just generally.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; nothing missing and nothing broken, right? Everybody has what they need. That is the shalom that God wants to bring when he talks about it in Revelation, when he comes back and he brings the city down. Everybody has what they need.

I think the African term *ubuntu* is about this as well. *I am because we are*. If I am okay, we are okay. It is a group...a mutual connection and it is not an individuality that, unfortunately, our world has fallen into, where things have become, okay, this is what I can gain out of it, this is what I can use out of it; and social media and things like that often thrive on performances like this, but scripture calls us to continue to have a give-and-take, a service focused love and relationship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Greater love has no one that this, to lay down one's life for one's friends, John 15:13, words of Jesus there. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, Paul says in Ephesians 5:21. Submission isn't about power dynamics, it is about humility; it is about mutuality...mutual care; and again, that can be certainly in marriage, but it can also be in friendship and in community, including, I think, in our church communities.

DARRELL DELANEY

That reminds me, Scott...so, when my wife and I were engaged, she had come up in churches that continued to emphasize the importance of submission to your husband; submission...submit...submit...submit; and so, she was like, okay, this is the understanding of what this is. As a wife, I need to submit; but when I came to her, I said to her: You know, I am supposed to submit to you as well; and it kind of took her by surprise. She was like: What; really?! So, we went to this verse you just read: Submit to one another; and I said, actually it is a *mutual* submission. I am working for your benefit; you are working for my benefit. We are trading in the I's and the me's for an us and a we; so that we can work together as a relationship; and I think that is the picture of what is being shown in the Song of Songs.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is interesting in the Song of Songs...so, this is an ancient, ancient book from the ancient Near East. It is in the Old Testament. It came out of a very patriarchal, male-dominated, male-centered culture; but what is interesting about the Song of Songs is, you know, I think you could read this whole book and you don't get the sense that either one is inferior to the other...that the woman is inferior to the man. They are both in love with each other, and they are both giving of themselves for the other. So, even in the Song of Songs you see that mutuality.

As we wrap up this episode, let's ask this question: How do we redeem our relationships in the light of God's design? We have four areas: Marriage, friendships, community, and also when we are faced with conflict. In marriage, embrace mutual love and respect, right? Submit to one another: ^{Eph 5:25}Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. So, agape love is sacrificial. You put the other person first, and that is, as you just said, Darrell, that is for both husband and wife. We both put each other first.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is true; and in friendships, investing in relationships where we both give and receive, Proverbs 27:17 says: As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. So, healthy relationships...we know this, Scott...they involve mutual encouragement, accountability, and growth; and I have relationships with friends who I have been friends with for over fifteen years, and they hold me accountable in my way that I raise my kids, in the way that I am a husband, in the way that I work. I hold them accountable; and we work together

so that we can all work toward the same goal of honoring God in our lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you know, C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Four Loves*, and in that book, one of the four loves is friendship; and Lewis says: We often undervalue the importance of friendships. We need friends to hold us accountable. I think I mentioned this before on *Groundwork*, but one of the biographers of Richard Nixon, who fell from the presidency in Watergate, said that, you know, Nixon didn't have any friends; and one person said: You know, if Nixon had just had a best friend, it could have saved him. So, we need our friends. We also need community. We serve each other without seeking personal gain in the church.

Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

DARRELL DELANEY

And finally, we are seeking reconciliation and restoration, even in conflict. Conflict is inevitable in relationships; and this is the way that we do it. We look to Colossians 3:13. It says: Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Because forgiveness paves the way for healed relationships; and the standard is not what you did to me or I did to you. The standard is Christ forgave us, so we freely receive and we freely give it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the Song of Songs...it offers a vision of relationships that are in stark contrast to the self-serving models that we see all around us in the culture. It reminds us that God designed us for relationships, and that means he designed us for relationships in a very certain way, which is to be mutual—reciprocal—rooted in love and respect; and when we embrace that vision, then we reflect the love of God and the love of Christ to the whole world, as God intended.

DARRELL DELANEY

And if you find yourself in broken relationships today, we just want you to be encouraged, because God is a redeemer. He specializes in restoring what is broken, healing what is wounded, and teaches us how to love like he does. As we lean into the Word and into his Spirit, we can be in relationships that bring him glory and lasting joy to our lives. So, let us live that out. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Tell us what you think of *Groundwork*, make some suggestions for future programs.

DARRELL DELANEY

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Printed on March 26, 2025