

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri says to Alyosha that  
“Beauty is the battlefield where God and Satan  
contend with each other for the hearts of men.” (quoted in O’Donnell, 109)

God wants you to see the beauty of what he has made,  
and glorify him – and enjoy him – because  
as Augustine put it,  
Jesus Christ is “the beauty of all things beautiful” (quoted in O’Donnell, 109)

Satan wants you to see the beauty of what God has made,  
but he wants you to desire that beauty for yourself –  
so that you might possess it and use it for your own selfish pleasure.  
Of course, such a misuse of beauty can only corrupt and destroy beauty.  
The world’s standard of beauty cannot endure.  
Everything sags and wrinkles and fades.  
The quest to maintain everything as it was  
misses the point of beauty!

Jesus Christ is “the beauty of all things beautiful.”  
It is only when Christ is our standard of beauty  
that we begin to see beauty aright.  
Christ – who had no beauty that we should desire him (Isaiah 53:2) –  
becomes our standard of beauty.

Our passage begins and ends with an emphasis on the Bride’s desire for her Beloved to come.  
And at the center of our passage tonight is the Song’s remarkable statement  
that Love is stronger than Death.

## **1. Longing for Love (7:11-8:4)**

### **a. The Spirit and the Bride Say, “Come” (7:11-13)**

<sup>11</sup> *Come, my beloved,  
let us go out into the fields  
and lodge in the villages,<sup>[d]</sup>*  
<sup>12</sup> *let us go out early to the vineyards  
and see whether the vines have budded,  
whether the grape blossoms have opened  
and the pomegranates are in bloom.  
There I will give you my love.*  
<sup>13</sup> *The mandrakes give forth fragrance,  
and beside our doors are all choice fruits,  
new as well as old,  
which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.*

We have seen throughout the Song how the Song uses lots of language

drawn from the rest of the scripture –  
and particularly, language that is used elsewhere  
to speak of Jerusalem’s relationship to her God.

The vineyard is a common image of God’s people –  
and the pomegranate was used in the tabernacle and the temple  
as a reminder of Eden.

This is Jerusalem as she should be – the people of God enraptured with her God.

In Joel 1:8, the virgin laments for the bridegroom of her youth –  
and the priests mourn because the grain, wine, and oil are cut off.  
And in Joel 1:12, the “vine withers, the fig tree languishes, pomegranate, palm and apple,  
all the trees of the field are withered; and gladness fails for the sons of men.”

Marriage and worship alike are times of joy and celebration.  
But not when God is absent.  
When the Beloved is missing – then the Bride weeps.

At the end of chapter 7, the Bride calls for her Beloved to come and go with her out to the fields.  
Because, while the Bride is passionately in love with her Beloved,  
he is not with her.

This is a common problem in the Song.  
Indeed, it is at the heart of the Song.  
The Bride longs for her Beloved –  
but he is not there.

The Spirit and the Bride say “Come” – (Rev 22:17)  
who is supposed to come?  
“Come, Lord Jesus!”  
The Spirit and the Bride long for the coming of the Lamb.

**b. “I Would Kiss You” – By Faith, Not by Sight (8:1-4)**

*8 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.*

From what we know of ancient Hebrew culture,  
public displays of affection were discouraged – even between husband and wife.  
Brother and sister could frolic more freely, because there were no sexual overtones.  
But the Bride wishes that she could overstep social norms!

She wants to frolic publicly with her Beloved!

Notice how she is speaking directly to him!

No longer is she speaking to her friends *about him* –  
now she says:

<sup>2</sup> *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.*

At the end of the Song, there are lots of connections made between sex and babies –  
motherhood and children –

and here the Bride once again takes a rather aggressive stance:  
she wants to lead him and bring him into the house of her mother!

Notice also, that she refers to her mother as her teacher.

What did her mother teach?

Many things, no doubt!

But in this context, it is plain that the mother taught the Bride how to make love.

Mothers, teach your daughters!

At the proper time, teach them about love-making!

They will learn – either from you or from someone else!

Teach them about spiced wine and the juice of your pomegranate!

Read through the Song of Songs with your daughters, and talk it through.

Tell them about the beauty and glory of love-making –

teach them how to handle a young stag at the start of spring!

But for heaven's sake, don't make it a clinical discussion of "technique"!

It should be clear – but it should be beautiful!

And I say "mothers" – but remember that "mother" is not just a biological term.

There are lots of young ladies out there who need mothers.

The Bride, after all, is giving lots of advice to her friends.

You need to have wise friends – you need to *be* a wise friend –

to teach the young ladies the glories and mysteries of love!

And notice that in verse 3, once she is giving him spiced wine – the juice of her pomegranate,  
she turns back to the daughters of Jerusalem and says to them:

<sup>3</sup> *His left hand is under my head,  
and his right hand embraces me!*  
<sup>4</sup> *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
that you not stir up or awaken love  
until it pleases.*

The Bride now embraces her role as “teacher” of the virgins.  
She told *him* that she longs for the day when she can draw him to herself.  
She tells her friends that now he has drawn her to himself!

Now we walk by faith – not by sight.  
And you can see both parts of this in these verses.  
In verses 1-2, the Bride longs for the day when she can bring her Beloved  
into the house of her mother – and give him spiced wine,  
the juice of her pomegranate!

But then in verse 3, the Bride shifts from the second person address (“I would give you”)  
to the third person, “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me.”

By faith, she sees – and feels – his embrace.  
By faith, not by sight.

## 2. “Love Is as Strong as Death” – the Incarnation (8:5-7)

Verses 5-7 are absolutely essential for understanding the Song of Songs –  
not least because this is the *one* usage of the name of the LORD.

Others

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

Verse 5 draws on two previous references in the Song:

3:6 – “Who is this coming up from the wilderness?”  
As we saw in chapter 3, the translation “what” is mistaken.  
She – the Bride – comes up from the wilderness  
in her Beloved’s litter – the carriage of Solomon.  
And 6:10 – “Who is this who looks down like the dawn,  
beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun”  
The Bride – the heavenly Jerusalem – in all her glory

But here the Bride comes up from the wilderness –  
language that must remind us of the Exodus – as Israel came to the promised land,  
leaning on her Beloved –  
language that the prophets often used of Israel’s return from Exile.

The Song calls us to see the Church *leaning* on her LORD –  
the strong, beautiful, confident Bride,  
drawing strength from her Beloved.

And just as we lean on Christ,  
drawing strength from him –  
so also a wife should lean on her husband,

drawing strength from him.

Depending on someone else is *a good thing!*

As we have seen, the Bride is not *pathetically* dependent.

She is a beautiful, confident, assertive woman.

She will grab her beloved and lead him into the bedroom – or out into the garden.

But as she comes up out of the wilderness she *leans* on her Beloved.

She draws strength from him.

His presence fills her with confidence and power.

Husband, does your love for your wife empower her?

The husband *is* head of the wife.

You sometimes hear someone say that the husband has “abdicated”

and so the wife has become the head of the family.

But there is no way for a husband to abdicate his place as head of his wife.

You will either be a good head – or a bad head.

But you *are* the head of your wife.

And when you are a good head, the end of verse 5 is the result:

She

*Under the apple tree I awakened you.*

The refrain of the Song is:

“Do not awaken love” –

but here, “under the apple tree I awakened you!”

The Bride has been calling the virgin daughters of Zion to be patient and wait.

But she will not be slow to awaken her Beloved!

The word translated “awaken” is frequently translated “stir up” –

and is used in places like Psalm 80 to call on God

to “stir up your might” and save us.

The picture is of the Beloved sleeping under an apple tree –

and his Bride comes and rouses him.

So far, so good –

there are references in the Psalms and in Isaiah to God “awakening”

and coming to rescue his people.

But then she says,

*There your mother was in labor with you;*

*there she who bore you was in labor.*

This is where talking about the Song as a Song of God and his people becomes difficult.  
Because, certainly in the OT, God has no mother.  
When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,  
then Mary became the God-bearer.  
But that is still hundreds of years in the future when the Song of Songs was written.

Some people argue that the Song of Songs is so fragmented  
that we cannot really understand what is going on here.

But this is the text that God gave us –  
so God plainly wants us to understand something of *this text*.

And it's actually not that difficult to understand.  
Throughout the Song, the Beloved is portrayed as a *man*.  
A man with legs, arms, a face – a *body*.

How does a man get a body?  
Unless he is Adam, he needs a mother to give birth to him!  
After all, in the Song of Songs we are constantly dealing with *allegory* and symbolism.  
I've been arguing that the allegory is intentional.  
It is not something that later scholars have *read into* the text.  
The pictures of God and his people – Christ and his bride –  
are not “added” later.  
They are put there by the author (and by the author I mean *both* the human author,  
and the Holy Spirit who inspired her –  
and again, I'm saying “her” because that's the voice of the Song).

I'm not going to try to figure out whether the human author  
understood the implications of what she was saying!  
But the Holy Spirit plainly did!  
And we, who sing this Song now in Christ can see exactly what it means!

Because we say to Jesus –  
“Arise, stir yourself up!  
Awake – come to help us!  
Under the apple tree I awakened you.  
There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor.”

As we recall the blessed virgin – as we remember the mother of our Lord –  
we long to be fruitful in the kingdom of Jesus – like her!  
We long to make babies with Jesus –  
to make disciples, so that the family of our Beloved continues to grow.

And why do we call upon Jesus like this?

Look at what she says to him:

<sup>6</sup> *Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy<sup>[e]</sup> is fierce as the grave.<sup>[f]</sup>*

The language of verses 6-7 is drawn from all sorts of places in the prophets where Israel wonders if God has forsaken them (Isaiah 49, etc).

Just to give one example – a seal was the king’s stamp guaranteeing authenticity. If a document comes with the king’s seal on it – then you know it is from the king. If it doesn’t have the king’s seal – then it is a forgery, a fake. In Jeremiah 22:24, God says that even if Jeconiah (grandson of Josiah) was his seal (his signet ring) – God would tear him off and give him over to Babylon. But then in Haggai 2:23, God says that Zerubbabel (the son of David) is the signet ring (the seal) whom he has chosen.

The Bride longs to be a seal on his heart (inwardly connected to him), and as a seal on his arm (outwardly displayed to all).

Why?

“for love is as strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave.”

Jealousy is the same word that God used with Moses –  
“I the LORD your God am a *jealous* God.”  
Just as you cannot negotiate with death,  
so also you cannot negotiate with love.

The LORD’s love for his people is a *jealous* love.  
Jealousy is a *good thing* – when it is properly oriented!

Notice what these verse do:

they set up a contest between love and death –  
between jealousy and the grave.

Which is stronger?

Love or death?

Which is fiercer?

Jealousy or the grave?

Every marriage has to deal with this!

And so far, in all of human history,  
death always wins.

As Carl Trueman said – at its best,  
every human marriage begins with joy and celebration,

and ends with death and tragedy.

My love for Ginger will last until death.

But death is too strong for me.

One day, death will tear her from my side –

and one of us will stand alone, inconsolable before the grave.

So, either the Song of Songs is a lie –

love is *not* as strong as death! –

or else the contest between love and death is not just about human marriage.

I cannot believe that the Song of Songs is a jumble of human love poetry –

because it just so happens that *right here* is the one time

when the name of God appears in the book:

*Its flashes are flashes of fire,*

*the very flame of the LORD.*

The “flash” of love is “the very flame of the LORD.”

The flashes of fire appear also in Habakkuk 3:4 –

the fire that went out from the LORD at Sinai.

It’s a word that is used regularly to speak of God’s judgment against his foes.

Love’s flashes – jealousy’s flashes – are the “flame of the LORD” –

an unquenchable fire that burns forever.

<sup>7</sup> *Many waters cannot quench love,*

*neither can floods drown it.*

Again, we are hearing the language of Eden –

the language of the waters above and the waters beneath –

the language of the rivers (or floods) that flowed out of the Garden.

The flame of the LORD cannot be quenched – even by the primeval waters.

As Hebrews says, “Our God is a consuming fire.”

And:

*If a man offered for love*

*all the wealth of his house,*

*he<sup>[g]</sup> would be utterly despised.*

Love cannot be bought or sold.

Death, the Grave, the Waters of Chaos, Wealth – none of these things can quench Love.

Long before the disciple whom Jesus loved said it –

long before the disciple who leaned upon Jesus’ bosom said it –



the Song had made it clear:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God,  
and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.  
Anyone who does not love does not know God,  
because God is love.  
In this the love of God was made manifest among us,  
that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.  
In this is love, not that we have loved God  
but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.  
Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.  
No one has ever seen God; if we love one another,  
God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:7-11)

Love came in the flesh –  
born of a woman, born under the law –

Love was made manifest among us in the incarnation of the Son of God.  
Love was demonstrated to us in that he became the propitiation for our sins.

The incarnation reveals *who* Love is.  
The atonement demonstrates *what* Love does.

And because of the incarnation of Love – because he became the propitiation for our sins –  
therefore I declare before all the powers of this age  
that LOVE is greater than Death!

As Bernard of Clairvaux points out,  
“He loved us before we existed; and went beyond that to love us when we resisted him...  
Indeed, had he not loved his enemies he would have no friends.” (Jenson, 93)

Hence, Christ is Love incarnate – but he is also Jealousy incarnate –  
because he will not share us with any other god!

And he has sealed us with that most glorious of all seals – the Holy Spirit –  
as the guarantee of his love – a love that even death cannot destroy!

### **3. Waiting Patiently for That Day (8:8-14)** **a. The Little Sister (v8-10)**

Verses 8-9 come in the voice of the virgin daughters of Jerusalem –  
or perhaps the Bride’s brothers (whom we heard of in chapter 1).  
But any older sibling could say this!

Others

<sup>8</sup> *We have a little sister,  
and she has no breasts.  
What shall we do for our sister  
on the day when she is spoken for?*  
<sup>9</sup> *If she is a wall,  
we will build on her a battlement of silver,  
but if she is a door,  
we will enclose her with boards of cedar.*

The imagery is obvious enough.

She should be a wall – impervious to improper male advances!  
But if she is a door – and she shows a tendency toward looseness –  
then they build her a chastity belt of cedar!

If she successfully makes it to her wedding day – “when she is spoken for” –  
then they will build on her a battlement of silver –  
they will honor, celebrate, and adorn her triumph!

Now, let me point out what is only implicit here.

The father of the Bride is not the one who speaks.  
In *our* culture fathers often emphasize their role in this.  
But here, it is the older siblings who take center stage.

Brothers, sisters, (and I include the extended family of the church here!)  
you are called to take responsibility for encouraging and watching out for the virginity  
of the children of this congregation!

When we went through Proverbs, I pointed out that the admonitions to “my son”  
could also be applied to daughters.  
Here in the Song of Songs – which is addressed to daughters –  
I will point out that these admonitions apply to sons as well!

And now the Bride replies:

She  
<sup>10</sup> *I was a wall,  
and my breasts were like towers;  
then I was in his eyes  
as one who finds<sup>[h]</sup> peace.*

In our culture, it’s easy to be a swinging door.  
We need the family, the church, and our friends to reinforce the importance of being a wall.  
At the end of verse 10,  
the “one who finds peace” is feminine.  
*She* is the one who finds *Shalom*.

She finds *shalom* with her Beloved – because she was a wall.  
Her breasts were like towers –  
    guarded – protected – not open to invasion.

But when her Beloved comes –  
    when they get married –  
        the wall is breached – like the walls of Jericho  
            [for “It Happened One Night” fans]  
    and when the walls come tumbling down,  
        the result is joy and peace – well-being and contentment.

I have never heard anyone express regret for maintaining their virginity until marriage.  
I have heard plenty of people express regret over losing their virginity before marriage.  
    Your friends may say, “Oh, but it’s so much fun!”  
    Yes, it is!  
    And as those who waited until marriage,  
        Ginger and I can say it was so worth it!  
    It’s entirely possible that Ginger and I are both utterly ridiculous and pathetic in bed.  
    But we don’t know any better!  
    And as far as we can tell, it’s wonderful! Glorious!  
        And it keeps getting better!

People sometimes ask, “How far can we go?”  
    That’s the wrong question.  
    The real question is “How should two single people love each other?”  
    If you are not married to each other,  
        then you should not be doing anything  
            that is only proper for married people to do.

I don’t really like the line “if you wouldn’t do it with your brother,  
    then don’t do it with your boyfriend,”  
        because you will *never* marry your brother,  
    so you can do all sorts of things with him that you would never do with anyone else!

It’s better to say, “if you wouldn’t do it with someone else’s boyfriend,  
    then don’t do it with your boyfriend.”

If you want to kiss her, ask her to marry you!  
    “Oh, but she might be a lousy kisser.”  
    Yeah, you better believe that she’s a lousy kisser –  
        she’s never practiced!  
    She’ll be a lousy kisser for years!  
    It takes years of practice to become a good kisser!

You may say, “It’s hard to keep myself pure”!  
    Yes, it is.

But that doesn't change after marriage!  
If you are a swinging door before marriage,  
you are just building up patterns and habits  
that will be hard to change after marriage!

Indeed, that is probably what is at stake in verses 11-14:

**b. Solomon's Vineyard and Mine (8:11-14)**

<sup>11</sup> *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.*  
<sup>12</sup> *My vineyard, my very own, is before me;  
you, O Solomon, may have the thousand,  
and the keepers of the fruit two hundred.*

Solomon's vineyard refers to his harem.  
Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines.  
And verses 11-12 makes it clear that the Bride is not impressed!

Solomon has a thousand wives –  
but does the man of peace have peace?  
No, Solomon's pursuit of sexual pleasure (and power)  
results in chaos and destruction and even the division of the Kingdom.

In Douglas O'Donnell's paraphrase,  
"O Solomon, you might have power and money and a seemingly incredible love-life,  
but you know nothing of 'my beloved is mine and I am his,'  
of one man/one woman/one marriage." (130)

The Song concludes with the Beloved singing to his Bride:

He  
<sup>13</sup> *O you who dwell in the gardens,  
with companions listening for your voice;  
let me hear it.*

He knows that her friends are listening –  
and he rejoices, because he wants them to delight in their love!

And he longs to hear her voice!

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

How long have they been married?

We're not sure.

They've been at it pretty hot and heavy since the beginning of the book!

And once again she calls him to come, "make haste" and make love to her.

Solomon is imprisoned in his harem –

with all its expense and complications –

but the Beloved and his Bride are delighting and freely rejoicing in one another.

But it's also important to see how the book ends.

The Beloved calls "let me hear your voice" –

and the Bride responds, "Come quickly."

The Song ends with the same longing that we have seen so often throughout –

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." (1:2)

The Song leaves us longing for more.

The Song ends abruptly – because the Song is not over!

Douglas O'Donnell speaks of this as "virginity and eschatology" –

because both virginity and eschatology have "waiting" as their basic theme.

Waiting for marriage.

Waiting for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.