

On Love and Beauty

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Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed

Song of Songs 1:1-2:4

I want to begin today a brief series from one of the least preached books in the Bible, the Song of Songs, sometimes also known as the Song of Solomon. Now, there are a number of reasons why the Song of Songs is rarely heard from Christian pulpits, except as we are going to see, in heavily disguised form as a picture of Jesus' love for the church. The Song of Songs is rarely preached because preachers are frankly embarrassed by the explicit sensuality contained in the book. We preachers definitely want to confine ourselves to G-rated sermons. Anything that begins to border on PG makes us a little nervous.

But there's a deeper issue at work in the reticence of the church to deal frankly with the issues raised by Song of Songs. The deeper issue, I think, is the issue of our sexual and relational brokenness, which makes discussions of love and sexuality extremely difficult and delicate matters. This is a book that you cannot present to 21st century sexually broken people without a good deal of tact and discretion.

The book challenges virtually every contemporary notion of sexuality that you hear from the larger culture and also the church. It challenges extreme prudishness and priggishness and discomfort with body and sexuality that you hear from strict legalistic churches. It challenges the easygoing promiscuity and permissiveness of the Playboy society. It challenges over spiritualized Christianity that isn't rooted in a healthy, sane, grounded view that we human beings are not just disembodied spirits, but always have to deal with our bodies.

The book speaks to very contemporary issues of the meaning of love, the meaning of commitment and covenant in marriage, the place of sex in life and the place of verbalized praise. And it speaks about all of these things in a realistic, very down to earth way that destroys all of our little fantasies and idolatries of what the ideal relationship between a man and a woman ought to be.

I would give you one warning regarding this series. If you have small children, it is certainly your parental prerogative to take your kids to children's ministry instead of having them here. I plan to be discreet and tactful in my handling of the material. However, some of you may feel, I think appropriately so, that this book and the message stemming from the book are just not appropriate for your kids. You won't be offending me if you take them out. I deeply respect parents' authority to make decisions regarding what they feel is in their children's best interest.

Well, with that as a backdrop, let's plunge in a bit to an introduction to Song of Songs. The first verse in the NIV reads: *Solomon's Song of Songs*. The Bible uses this kind of phraseology to express the superlative. The Bible calls God the King of Kings, Lord of Lords. It speaks of the inner sanctuary in the Temple as the Holy of Holies. The writer of Ecclesiastes describes certain things as vanity of vanities. When the Bible wants to use the superlative regarding something calling something the best, the most, the loftiest, the most unique, it uses a title like Song of Songs. The author is trying to communicate that this is the best collection of songs ever written.

Record companies put out collections of the best of the Beatles, the biggest hits of the 80's, the best of Louie Armstrong or Frank Sinatra or U2. Well, in the opinion of the author of this book, the collection of songs contained here ought to be on everyone's all-time hit list. This is a collection of the best of the best.

What makes the Song of Songs so great? It speaks to us about the best subject – love. Love songs have always been popular. Some of the songs contained in this book may go back to a thousand years before the time of Christ. Bible scholars have found examples of love songs going back even further than that. Archeologists have dug up love songs from ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, from Arabia and India. Thousands of years later, the majority of the most popular songs today are still love songs. This is a collection of the best of songs because it's about the best of subjects – sex and love.

This is the best of songs because love is put in the best of settings – commitment and covenant. This is not some contemporary collection about adulterous affairs or dumping your man or woman for someone more attractive. These are not songs sung by people who just caught each other's glance across a crowded room, or spotted someone hot in the mall. These are not songs about a rendezvous in a cheap motel. This is the best of songs because it is put in the best of settings – mutual commitment to the other person's eternal happiness.

And this is the best collection of songs because behind these songs, above these songs and through these songs you can hear the voice of the best of singers – God. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the goodness of love and sexuality and joy and creation and our senses and the enhancement of our senses. This is the best subject, placed in the best setting, sung by the best singer. It is the Song of Songs.

Now there's been a lot of scholarly debate over the last century regarding the author of the Song of Songs. I'm not going to make a very tedious point here. Solomon's name is written in the inscription. Suffice it to say that the connection between Solomon's name and Song of Songs in Hebrew permits a wide variety of possibilities for us. It could be that this is the Song of Songs by Solomon. It could be the Song of Songs is dedicated to Solomon or that the Song of Songs concerns Solomon.

My own study would suggest to me that it is highly unlikely that King Solomon wrote the bulk of these songs. His own love life was anything but a reflection of exclusive love. And King Solomon comes off rather badly in this book. It may be that one or two of his love poems worked their way down through history and were contained in the book. Or it could be that Solomon communicates to us something of the royal nature of love. Whether he wrote it or not doesn't diminish from this collection being in the writer's view the best songs ever written.

The big issue that arises as we approach the Song of Songs is not its title and author but rather the whole way we approach the book, how we should interpret it, it's very clear that the dominant approach to Song of Songs by both Jewish interpreters as well as Christian interpreters until the 19th century was to allegorize the book. They wanted to suggest that the book was not about marital love or sex between a man and a woman, but that we needed to plunge below the surface and find the hidden or spiritual meaning. Its deeper meaning was a celebration of the great love affair between God and his nation Israel or among Christian interpreters, between Jesus Christ and his church.

Now there are places in the Bible in which the author intentionally uses allegory to communicate something deeper than the surface meaning of the text. If you are taking notes, Judges 9 is an excellent example of the use of allegory. This man tells a story that is obviously designed to communicate spiritual ideas that go below the surface of the story. Some of you are familiar with John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. It is one of the best Christian books I've ever read. The book is an allegory. The main character, Christian, is on a journey to the Celestial City. On the journey he encounters various obstacles like the slough of Despond, the delectable mountains, Vanity Fair. It is obvious to any reader that John Bunyan intended a below-the-surface meaning for his story.

But the problem with reading the Song of Songs as an allegory is there are no signals from the author that he wants us to allegorize the book. We always must read the Bible according to the author's intention. And there's nothing in this book that suggest to us that we shouldn't just read this in the most natural, plain and obvious way possible. That is, that this is a collection of love songs between a man and a woman.

Now the real problem with allegorizing is not only that it obscures the plain meaning of the text so that we miss the Bible's message about sexuality. There's also a problem that there're no controls on finding deeper meanings. For example, at a certain point in this book the husband celebrates the beauty of his wife's breasts. One medieval interpreter claimed that the woman, of course, was the church and that her two breasts were the Old and New Testaments from which we get nurturance. Other interpreters said that the two breasts were the two great commandments: To love God and to love your neighbor. The blood

and the water that flowed from the side of Jesus when he was pierced. The outer and the inner man. The church and Israel.

When the book speaks of the turtledove cooing, some interpreters have said that that is the preaching of the apostles. It speaks of the mountain of spices. One interpreter called that the hill of Calvary upon which our Lord Jesus Christ died. It wouldn't be too hard to make fun of the uncontrolled excesses and silly readings to which these best of songs have been subjected. The Medieval Mystic, Bernard of Clairvaux, preached 86 sermons in Song of Songs from just the first 2 chapters, 2 sermons per verse, all of it as an allegory of the believers mystical union with Christ.

But if we aren't going to read the Song of Songs allegorically and press every detail to find some hidden meaning, how should we read it? We should read the Song of Songs naturally, straightforwardly, as simply as possible. But we also ought to read the Song of Songs theologically – not allegorically, but theologically. What I mean by that is that the Song of Songs is not just a collection of songs that you pick up at your local CD store. These are a collection of songs found in the Bible.

One of the most important questions that anyone approaching a book in the Bible ought to ask themselves is why is this book in the canon of scripture? Why did the church decide that of all the books ever written, of the millions of books that exist, this book, the Song of Songs, ought to be part of the 66 books that we call the Bible?

One of the great blessings of having the Song of Songs in the Bible is that it tells us that God is interested in every area of life. That he's not just interested in spiritual things – our prayer and fasting, our church going, our tithing and our ministries. But that God is interested even in the areas that we tend to seal him out of – our sexuality, our bodies, our senses, our views of beauty and our passions. One of the most helpful and healthy things a person can do in life is to draw the connection between God and some circumstance in their life. I think the very best counselors are those who assist people to draw connections between God and their situations.

You can never find more healing, more wisdom, and more insight than when you learn to tell the story of your life with God weaving in and out. God just didn't check into your life when you responded to God's grace in drawing you to Christ. God was in your life before you were conceived. God was in your life in the hospital when you were born. God has been with you, friend, and every step along the way, in all of your failings, your fallings, your brokenness and your successes. The fact that Song of Songs is in the Bible should tell you that God is interested in all of you. Song of Songs is the great biblical example that we may not compartmentalize life: this is sacred, this is secular; this is God's business, this is my business.

Without this book in the Bible, we'd have to honestly say that the basic message regarding sex we would get from the Bible would be negative. There's a focus on the brokenness of sexuality and the need for limits. When people stop reading the Song of Songs, the basic message that the church hears regarding sex is "Just don't do it." Or if you're going to do it, get it over with quickly because it is carnal, it's low, it's base, it's not spiritual and it ought to be for the purpose of bearing children.

In the Song of Songs you have the goodness of sexuality celebrated not just for begetting children, but also for intimacy, for romance, for union and as a source of joy and happiness. The Song of Songs provides us with a place for frank discussion about sexuality.

Not only do we find from the Song of Songs that God is involved in every area of life, but we also find that the fall of men and women affected every area of life. Listen; if you go back to Gen. 3, back to the sin of our original parents, Adam and Eve in the garden, the very first area that is affected by the fall is our sexuality. What is the very first thing that our first parents did after they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? The very first thing they did was they cover up their nakedness. They felt themselves naked and they were ashamed and so they covered up their sexuality.

From that point to this moment, every human being who has been born into the world except Jesus Christ has lived with broken sexuality. Every one of us is broken sexually. We swing from prudishness to promiscuity. Many of you have been victims of sexual abuse or incest. Many of you are addicted to pornography. Some of you are addicted to prostitution or homosexual sex. You've used your bodies in ways that God has not designed them to be used.

One of the things I love about the Song of Songs is that it is realistic about the effects of the fall on relationships. This book is not some rose-colored ideal that is unattainable by fallen men and women. I love this book because it shatters fantasies. In the midst of these wonderful love songs we have songs about loss and insecurity, fears, breeches of intimacy, pain. There is pain in our love relationships. And this song frankly acknowledges them.

And finally in this song we find that salvation touches every area of life. Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful book called "Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work" reminds us that the Song of Songs in Jewish tradition is always read during the Passover Feast. Now the Passover is the great historical incident of salvation for the Jews. It is the story of God's deliverance of the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt. Passover is the story of God doing for people what they couldn't do for themselves.

It is interesting that in the midst of this huge discussion of God's salvation, the

spiritual discussion about God's deliverance, the rabbis insisted that in the Synagogue they read the Song of Songs. And in doing this they were so right because they made people realize that salvation affects the whole of life. Salvation is not just about saving your soul for heaven. Salvation affects sex and marriage and romance and intimacy, the way you feel about your body, and the way you feel about love. In this world we are always going to experience less than our ideal, less than the perfect fantasy. We are not yet in the kingdom of God. The setting of this book is the already and the not yet of the kingdom.

But even though we experience less than our ideals, we who know Jesus can have so much more than other people in the world. We can experience more joy, more celebration, more love, and more intimacy. The Song of Songs holds out for us who are saved the hope of something better in our lives and in our sexuality.

Let's plunge into the text for today. We read:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you! Take me away with you—let us hurry! The king has brought me into his chambers.

The setting for this first song that we find in chapter 1 is a woman who is apparently betrothed or engaged to a man. As a love song, this woman stands for all women. What is particularly striking as you go through the Song of Songs is the lack of fixed gender stereotype or fixed gender roles. The first voice we hear in the song is of the girl. And it is the woman's voice that is predominant in the Song of Songs. Her voice takes up over half of the verses. The man speaks only a third of the time. Some of you would say that that is stereotypical in my house, Rich.

It's not just that the woman is more verbal than the man. She is the initiator of intimacy. She invites. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. She initiates praise. What you find in Song of Songs is the undermining of traditional male/female roles. There's nothing of dominance or submission here. There's nothing of the man being active and the woman being passive. Or the man being the initiator and the woman being the responder. There's nothing of leader and follower.

Instead, in the Song of Songs, this collection of love poems, we have mutuality of love. Give and take; boy towards girl; girl towards boy. There's nothing of the confining stereotypes of what's appropriate for an engaged or married woman to express towards her man and what's appropriate for an engaged or married man to express towards his beloved.

The Song of Songs is very reminiscent of Gen. 2 and the Garden experience of Adam and Eve. We find there equality, mutuality, a lack of stereotype roles. And in these first few verses we encounter a yearning, a passion for union that appeals to every sense.

The woman begins with an invitation to kiss. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. There's this erotic touch of the kiss. She likens his love to the intoxicating taste of wine. For your love is more delightful than wine. His love makes her lightheaded. In fact, his love for her tastes better than wine. It is sweeter, more richer, more sensuous than wine.

Not only are the senses of touch and taste acknowledged, but also so is his scent. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfume. It wasn't just women that wore perfume back then. Men put aromatic oils on their bodies. Later we'll discuss the effect upon this woman of hearing the man's voice and seeing his body.

We need to underline as a first importance the goodness of our senses that speaks to us about the goodness of creation. So much of Christianity devalues the sense of taste and good food, or the value of having you and your home smell beautifully. Or the value of touch. All these things are a part of God's plan for a good life.

So our discussion about the fragrance of perfumes leads her to discuss the man's reputation. Verse 3: *Your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you.* Right at the front end we find out about the love-enhancing effect of other people's opinions on the desired object of our affection. This girl is not a girl that is sort of carried away on some emotional high, so that her love is blind to all of the man's faults. She is not swept away on a wave of lust or infatuation. This woman cares about what her circle of friends think.

There is no more wonderful aphrodisiac than being supported in your attraction to a man or a woman by the community that you respect. How foolish is the person who doesn't take into account the opinions of other people. I've seen so many lovers make the mistake of refusing to listen to the counsel of more mature people, or more levelheaded people as they pursue love. "I don't need to listen to my Christian friends, my small group leader, my pastors or my parents. I know what's right for me. God spoke to me and that's all I need." I'll tell you there is nothing more strengthening to you and to your love than hearing from other people that you respect that the object of your love is worthy. *All of the other maidens love you too.* They all think that you're a great guy.

When I sit down with a young man or young woman who is planning to marry, one of my first questions is tell me what other people around you are saying about your man. Tell me what other people are saying about your woman. Are they raising any red flags? And I love hearing someone say, "You know, that's

one of the best things of all. Everyone that I know deeply respects him. They think he's such a good man."

I remember when Marlene and I were planning to get married. We were very young. But by the grace of God we had the wisdom at least to check with our leaders and those we respected in the body of Christ regarding their opinion of our future potential. It was so strengthening to us in the early years of our marriage to be able to look back and say, "You know, every person we talked to said, 'You guys make a great couple.'"

I remember us sitting down with a 50-year old man under whose ministry I was brought to Christ. We shared with him our thoughts about getting married. He literally leaped out of his chair and he said, "Rich and Marlene, I have the witness of the Holy Spirit all over about this. Your being together is from the Lord. This is, indeed, God's plan for your life."

The woman calls the man her king. *Take me away with you. Let us hurry. Let the king bring me into his chambers.* Not because I think she is literally talking about King Solomon, but royal language, regal language, language of respect permeates the Song of Songs. In the best of songs, couples do not use demeaning terms, condescending terms, and put-downs when they are referring to their lovers. She doesn't call him "Mr. Big Shot; Mr. Dreamer. Mr. Sloppy. Mr. Lazy." She calls him her King.

And the man likewise, as he refers to his beloved, he doesn't call her "Fatty, Hey You." He doesn't mock her emotions, her yearnings and her expressiveness. He uses regal language regarding the woman. He calls her later, "The Prince's daughter." He uses a play on Solomon's name to describe her as regal. He says she is beautiful as the ancient capitol of the Northern Kingdom. She is lovely as Jerusalem. This is a couple that treats each other royally with deep respect and with great dignity.

I relate to him, she says, as if he is king. And the man in turn says, I relate to her as if she were queen. Have you ever seen an older couple that has learned the secret of relating to each other regally, royally conducting their marriage? The respect of watching the husband hold the door for his wife. The respectful words going back and forth? The care taken to preserve each other's dignity. This is not a stiff couple. This is not a couple who is afraid of teasing each other. But the teasing never turns into mocking. She says, "You are my king." And he says, "You are my queen." There's no sarcasm. You are my king.

Now in verse 5-7 we run squarely into the issue of beauty and self-image. We read this: *How right they are to adore you! Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother's*

sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected.

She is referring to her skin color in verse 5. It does not seem to me in the context of Song of Songs that she is referring to her race. This would have been a Semitic woman, someone who would look like an Arab, someone from the Near East today. It appears that she is not happy with her dark skin. Her skin is darkened as a result of her working out in the fields. In her culture, that would have assigned her low status. She was a field hand, not a refined woman who could stay out of the sun all day.

Of course, different cultures assign different status to skin color. For much of American history, the darker a person's skin was, the lower their status. Dark skinned people had all kinds of make-up routines to lighten their skin color. Today with so many people living in doors, many Caucasians go to tanning salons believing that having dark skin communicates higher status.

But the short of it is that this woman's remarks are self-deprecating. She is self-conscious of her skin color and the shortcomings of her beauty. If we look down to ch. 2:1, a passage that I think is often misunderstood the woman says, *I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley*. She's not suddenly become confident about her looks. The flowers by which she calls herself are really quite common flowers. She is saying in ch. 2:1, "Mine is a rather ordinary beauty. I may have some attractiveness, but there's nothing particularly outstanding about me; nothing out of the ordinary." In her mind she is rather common looking. And like many women, she is painfully aware of her shortcomings.

It is impossible to be a woman in America and not struggle with the issue of beauty. Christian women are sent mixed messages by the church all the time about the issue of looks and beauty. On the one hand, Christian women are told that your looks don't matter at all. 1 Peter 3 is quoted, *Your beauty shouldn't come from outward adornments, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth to God.*

Don't worry about your looks, a lot of church people say. Just focus on your inner beauty. But then every Christian woman's magazine has a beautiful woman on its cover with perfect makeup on. And there's a multi-billion dollar Christian weight loss industry. And the Christian women on the covers of CDs are positioned just perfectly to catch the angles of their faces. Mary Kay and a lot of the other purveyors of makeup hold themselves out as Christians. And the Bible itself refers to many women as beautiful. All of the patriarchs' wives – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel were beautiful. Esther won a beauty contest. Abigail, Abishag, Bathsheba – all beautiful.

What's the message? Is it important to be beautiful or unimportant? Should a woman care about her looks? Should she not care about her looks? Of course, we live in a culture that is obsessed with how women look. We Christians are affected by the world in which we live.

I remember during the OJ Simpson trial, there was a month of the trial occupied to what hairstyle and clothing was worn of the chief prosecutor, Marsha Clark. And when Marsha Clark got her haircut, 30 reporters descended upon her hairdresser and interviewed him regarding the particular approach he took to Marsha Clark's hair. When Marsha Clark walked into the courtroom, she got a standing ovation from the people in the courtroom because of her new outfit and her hair. This was during a murder trial in which there were two dead young victims.

One of the things most talked about regarding Hilary Clinton during her years as First Lady were not her politics, but her new haircuts and clothing styles. Even admirers would often point out how much better she looked at age 50 than she did at age 30.

It is impossible to be a woman in America and not be constantly confronted by the way you look.

Look at the whole Barbie industry and the dolls we introduce to our daughters. You know, before 1959 little girls played with baby dolls. And Barbie has become the ideal of what ought to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated Swim Suit issues. You know, Barbie's stats, don't you? If she were a real woman, she'd be 6'2"; 108 pounds; her measurements would be 36-18-33. That's a standard that a lot of women can live up to!

Years ago women simply had to compete with the women in their village or their community regarding how they looked. Envy would be rather localized to a couple of nice-looking women in the village. But now women have to compete with a global beauty industry generated by the media so that you aren't just competing with the lovely women on your street, or the lovely women in your village, but you are competing with the most beautiful women in the entire world.

And you aren't even competing with the women in the entire world as they are in reality. You are competing with the airbrushed, computer-enhanced, cosmetic surgery version of the most beautiful women in the world. A magazine reporter followed around a professional model for a week. She discovered that for a photo shoot on a hair-coloring product this woman had four days of treatment by professional colorists for her hair to have that healthy shine. Of course, you women are supposed to be able to get the same look in 20 minutes in the shower. For her cover shot, they took 360 photographs for one picture. And this is a professional model who really knows how to make her looks work for her.

Her entire day from 4:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. is spent on her looks. Several professionals took an hour and a half to style her hair and paint her face. She has a personal trainer. Her entire diet is focused on her body. She's had breast surgery. She's photographed through frosted filters.

Who can possibly compete with that? We live in a culture that pushes pre-adolescent girls to be sexy. We live in a culture in which every one is thinness obsessed so that a significant percentage of teenage and young women have eating disorders – anorexia and bulimia. There's a multi-billion dollar anti-aging industry that will not permit women to look their age. The NY Times recently reported that one of the most popular gifts given by husbands this year to wives in their Christmas stockings was certificates for botox treatments – you know, the injection of botulism into your wrinkles to relax your wrinkles and cosmetic surgery – liposuction, breast enhancements, etc. The cosmetic surgery industry of course has been growing exponentially in the last decade. It's a multi-multi-billion dollar industry.

There is simply no escape in this culture from the pressure that a woman feels to be beautiful, to be young, to be thin, to be sexy. And the thin veneer of the Christian beauty industry certainly is not going to bring about the kind of redemptive and freeing word that many of you women need to hear. It's just more of the same cultural message with a few Bible verses thrown in.

What are you to do? Let me suggest very quickly some places for you as women to start in bringing about a measure of healing regarding the self-condemning thoughts that you have about your own appearance, your own looks, your own beauty. Let me suggest a few places to start from the larger context of scripture and then we are going to focus specifically on the counsel of Song of Songs.

From the larger context of scripture, we start with honesty with God regarding any issue in our life that we struggle with. We have to begin by being honest with God. We start with where we're at. Here's the message, God that I've gotten in my life. Here's the message that was communicated to me by my mother about my weight or by my boyfriend about my face. Here's the way that I've used my beauty to manipulate others; here's how I've used my looks to control others. I've hidden myself because I've felt unlovely. Here's the message that I got about femininity.

We start by dealing with anything in our lives with honesty towards God. While we live in denial: "this is not an issue" and while we live in fear: "I can't acknowledge this," there can be no healing. So, it's here where I put myself down. Here are the vulnerable places in my life. Often honesty will lead to a sense of grief and sorrow. It is okay to grieve. Indeed, those who are able to grieve show themselves to be courageous. Women who are too afraid to grieve the loss of their youthfulness, or the loss of a breast to a mastectomy, or the pain of cruel remarks said to you when you were younger, or the pain of the invasion

of your body through abuse – women who are unable to grieve are unable to be healed.

And I praise God that the Holy Spirit reveals himself to us as a comforter. In our grief he comes to comfort.

But you know, if beauty is the issue for women, the Bible says that love is the answer. There's a story back in Gen. 29 about the patriarch Jacob. He took two wives. One was named Leah, the other was named Rachel. We read in Gen. 29:17, *Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful.* Rachel, to put it in current terms, had a great body and a great face.

In Gen. 29:18 it says, *Jacob was in love with Rachel.* In Gen. 29:30 it says, *Jacob lay with Rachel also and he loved Rachel more than Leah.* And Leah makes this desperate attempt to gain her husband's love by bearing children. One child after another she brings forth for her husband thinking, "This time he will love me." We read in verse 34, *Now at last my husband will become attached to me because I have borne him three sons.* After giving birth to her fourth child, Leah says this: *She conceived again and when she gave birth to a son she said, "This time I will praise the Lord."* Only when Leah got her focus off her heart and onto God did she experience joy.

If beauty is the issue, love is the answer. And ladies I say this without any kind of super-spiritual overlay. But truly there is no more important thing that you can do but look at yourself square on in the mirror and ask yourself, "Is the woman that I'm looking at a loved woman?" Not looking at the flaws in my face: my crooked nose, my misshaped mouth, my weight, my hair...my knees, but is the woman that is staring back at me in the mirror a loved woman? We all know objectively beautiful women who think of themselves ugly because of negative messages and ordinary looking women who radiate beauty because they are liked.

Women, you can spend your life trying to get love from your man or from various men, trying to get the approval of your mother. In your heart of hearts, you Christian women need to believe that you are deeply loved, deeply respected, completely delighted over by your Father in heaven. That's something you can get from God alone. Only when Leah got her focus off of her husband and onto God was she able to experience joy.

There is a role that people have in communicating this love. If beauty is the issue, love is the answer. And God mediates his love to us through people. Parents, especially moms, you have a huge role in communicating to your daughter that she is beautiful. One of the things, moms, that you can do with your daughter is to have an honest discussion with your own struggles with your looks and the pressure the culture has placed upon you. Discuss some of the mistakes you've made, some of the traps you've fallen into and some of the ways you've used and misused your beauty. Moms you can have a heart to heart

discussion with your daughters that can be so healing for them: “Mom, you struggle with that? I thought I was the only person who did. I didn’t know that other girls felt this way.”

Love can also be communicated by other women in true Christian community. We have an opportunity here today ladies, and I’m speaking to women today because the issue is beauty, we have an opportunity in this church to build the kind of supportive, loving community that the world knows nothing about. In the world a woman is constantly undercut by other women and judged based on appearance, clothing and weight. In the world everything is cutthroat and competitive. Women struggle with envy...jealously. It doesn’t have to be that way in the Christian church when the Spirit of God is present.

You women in women’s groups and as you form community in the church, have the capacity to be life-givers to other women. You can strive to be bearers of each other’s sorrows, to be listeners of confessions about how beauty has been used and misused. You can help each other through the grief of various losses and affirm one another. Ladies, I really want to charge you in this church to develop a culture in which we treat other women as sisters and as beloved friends rather than as rivals. Bring out the best in each other.

But here’s my last point from the Song of Songs. If beauty is the issue, love is the answer. In engagement, and in particularly in marriage, the chief human mediator of God’s love to a woman is her husband. Look at verse 8: *If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the sheep...* Verse 15: *How beautiful you are, my darling. O, how beautiful.* 14 times in Song of Songs the man says to the woman, “You are the most beautiful of all women.” Women, you can never hear too often that you are beautiful to the person who matters most in your life. You can never hear that too often.

And husbands, you can never say it too often. When the woman puts herself down and says, “I’m just a common flower, a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley,” her betrothed counters that immediately and says, “Oh no, like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens. To me you are extraordinary.”

Some of you husbands say, “Well, what if I don’t feel that way? What if I’m discouraged by my wife’s looks?”

May I suggest something to you, husbands, and I’m going to wrap this up. I believe that many of us husbands live with a great deal of idolatry in our hearts regarding some unreal fantasy of beauty. The apostle Paul in Rom. 1 says that in our idolatry we exchange the Creator for the creature and worship images...images—fantasies in the mind, rather than tangible reality of God’s gift. Whatever your ideal that is different from the wife God gave you, that ideal is an idol; it needs to be repented of. Wherever you have a fantasy woman or are cultivating this fantasy woman in your mind - that needs to be repented of. Our

job as husbands is to so communicate love to our wives that even those who are ordinary looking radiate beauty.

Can we ever escape the beauty trap of our culture? The double bind that the Christian church puts us in: beauty is not important; beauty is important? Not fully in this world. Our bodies will not be what they are meant to be until we arrive in the Kingdom of God. But we who know Christ can live better, freer, happier and healthier than the world around us. The Song of Songs is in the Bible to tell us that sexuality, body and love can be redeemed. That salvation touches every area of our lives. Let's pray.

On Love and Beauty

Rich Nathan

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Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed

Song of Songs 1:1-2:4

- I. Introduction to “Song of Songs”
 - A. Why Is The Book Titled “Song of Songs?” (S.S. 1:1)
 - B. How Should We Interpret “Song of Songs?”
 1. Allegory
 2. Natural, Plain Meaning
 - C. Why Is “Song of Songs” In The Bible?
 1. God Is Involved In Every Area Of Life
 2. The Fall Affected Every Area Of Life (Gen. 3:7)
 3. Salvation Redeems Every Area Of Life
- II. Issues In The “Song of Songs”
 - A. Gender Roles And Stereotypes (S.S. 1:2)
 - B. Senses And Sensuality (S.S. 1:2-4)
 - C. Reputation And Affection (S.S. 1:3)
 - D. Beauty And Healing (S.S. 1:5, 6; 2:1)
 1. The Message Of The Church
 2. The Message Of The Culture
 3. The Message Of The Bible
 - a. Honesty With God
 - b. Grief Before God
 - c. The Love Of God
 - Directly (Gen. 29:16, 17, 30-35)
 - Through Parents
 - Through Christian Community
 - Through Our Husbands (S.S. 1:8, 15; 2:2, 4)