

Living a Wise Life

Six sessions applying Old Testament Wisdom Literature to 21st Century Living

Week 4: Wisdom about Sex and Sexuality (*Song of Songs*)

ICEBREAKER: What is your favourite song – what you consider to be the song of all songs? Go round the pastorate to find out, and discuss what the main messages are of the songs you chose.

Introduction:

Read Song of Songs 1:1-17

Author:

People are uncertain from 1:1. Either:

- a) Solomon wrote it
- b) It was written about Solomon
- c) It is written in the Solomonic tradition, marking the book as a form of wisdom literature.

Whatever the reality, it is certainly wisdom literature – giving us wisdom about love, sex, relationships.

Interpretation:

There are various views of how to interpret the Song of Songs. If your pastorate would be interested in the options, these are printed in an appendix at the end of these notes. However, the view here is that the Song is a unified love poem investigating the nature of romantic relationships. It is a poem about two idealized individuals and their relationship. It is a poem, rather than a narrative story with a beginning, middle and end.

BUZZ GROUPS: One theological scholar writes: “the name of God does not appear in this Song, neither is the latter even mentioned in the New Testament. This book has no special religious significance”. Why do you think this love poem is in the Bible? Discuss in small groups and give feedback centrally.

1. Positive Affirmation and Wisdom about the Body

15 mins

The point: The body is seen as something worthy of great praise. The man describes the woman in his wedding speech. **Read 4:1-7.** “How beautiful you are” is his summary of her body. The woman says similar things about the man’s body. **Read 5:10-16.**

But the body is not without criticism. The woman has some nervousness about her body. **Read 1:5-6.** She talks about having darker skin, which would have indicated being from a lower class because she was working out in the fields and therefore in the sun.

It is worth remembering that our bodies matter to God. Jesus came to earth as an

embodied human. His resurrection was bodily. In the new creation, we will not be disembodied souls, but will have resurrected bodies (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 15:42-43).

The illustration: Give personal testimony about when you have felt self-conscious about your own body (e.g. my nose is too big, my boobs are too small).

The application: It is understandable that we are self-conscious, yet it is worth remembering that there is no standard type of beauty. Here the woman feels less beautiful because she is suntanned, whereas now people get fake tans to try and make themselves more beautiful. Similarly in chapter 7, the man talks about the woman having “a waist like a mound of wheat”, and “a nose like the tower of Lebanon” (7:2,4), which today would both sound more like a criticism. Yet, he means it as a compliment. There is no standard type of beauty.

The summary: Every body is Praiseworthy, Particular, yet not Perfect

BUZZ GROUPS: [Because of the nature of the discussions, it is best to have single-sex buzz groups throughout this evening]

Discuss the following in small buzz groups:

Do you have the right attitude to your body – and the body of others?

Is there an attitude you need to repent of?

Is there an attitude where you need God’s healing hand?

2. Positive Affirmation and Wisdom about Gender

The illustration: Give an amusing, but not offensive, example of the difference between men and women, or an illustration that highlights unhelpful views about gender. For example, my 4 year old son recently said: “Mummy didn’t go to university. Girls aren’t allowed to go to university” [Mummy did actually go to university – so he was wrong in both halves of his statement!]

The point: The Song demonstrates an amazing equality of gender, whilst recognising differences between genders.

First, there is an amazing degree of mutuality between the man and the woman. **Read 1:15-16.** The couple has almost complete reciprocity with the man speaking first, and the woman then replying with virtually identical words.

Second, the repeated refrain of **2:16, 6:3 and 7:10** - “My lover is mine and I am his” - speaks of mutual connection and possession.

Third, and most powerfully, in the concluding climax of the Song, it is the woman who is actually claiming possession over the man. **Read 8:6a.** She is saying, “I am claiming exclusive ownership of you”.

However, there are some differences between the two sexes. For example, she explores her emotions through imaginary stories about him (e.g chapter 3), whilst he just tells her about what he sees in reality (e.g. 4:1-7, 7:1-9 = “I like your hair and your boobs”). There is some truth, but certainly not complete truth, in “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus”. Men and women aren’t identical.

But above all the dominant theme is mutuality rather than domination, and interdependence rather than repression. After all he is the Solomonic figure (4:7), and she is known as the Shulammite (6:13) – they are different names, but both are used for what the root word means – “peace”. Men and women are to be at peace together.

The Summary: We are to be Equal, at Peace, and yet Different.

30 mins

BUZZ GROUPS:

Discuss the following in small buzz groups:

Do you have the right attitude to the opposite sex?

Is there an attitude you need to repent of?

Is there an attitude where you need God’s healing hand?

3. Positive Affirmation and Wisdom about Sex

The illustration: Give an example of the way popular culture demonstrates the view that “Sex is God”. Then say that Sex is certainly not God, but neither is it Gross.

The point: Sex is not God or Gross, but Good according to the Song of Songs. Sex is for procreation – for making children (e.g. 3:4). Yet, lovemaking for the sake of love, not procreation, is the main message of the Song regarding sex. Sex isn’t seen to just be something to produce babies, but it is an act of pleasure and celebration.

However, it is not a song of free love. Sex is for pleasure, but it is also for a particular setting.

The sexual union that is promoted is monogamous and heterosexual and exclusive. This is best illustrated by the refrain in 2:16, 6:3 and 7:10 – “my lover is mine and I am his”.

Also, running through the text of the Song is the idea that sexual activity is to be enjoyed only after considerable forethought (2:7,3:5,8:4) – “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires”.

Most crucially, sex is connected to marriage.

Where are the couple married? The central section of the Song (3:6-5:1) is their wedding day. Either side – the couple are not married. The Song is not chronological, but as with much Old Testament literature, the climax of the narrative is at the very centre of the book. She is called bride six times in 4:8,9,10,11,12 and 5:1, and the word ‘bride’ appears nowhere else in the Song. The couple are going out/betrothed in 1:1-3:5 and 5:2-8:14.

When are the couple having sex? Even in the most erotic bits of the Song – sexual intercourse is all anticipated, rather than actual. So the most erotic bit of the Song is 7:7-8. Read 7:7-8. Sex is anticipated. The only time sexual intercourse is actually described is in 4:16-5:1. Read 4:16-5:1.

We know this for three reasons. First, in 4:12, the man declares that his bride is “a garden locked, a fountain sealed” which is a direct reference to the fact that she

entered marriage as a virgin. Second, in 4:16, the verb “**awake**” is used, which is the same word that is used in the refrain “**do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires**” (2:7,3:5,8:4). Here, she awakens the winds to blow on her garden. The time is now right on her wedding night for her to have sex. Third, it is hardly accidental that these two verses are situated at the exact physical midpoint of the book: there are 111 lines on either side.

The application: Sex is to be in the context of marriage. Just as the rest of the Bible tells us.

The summary: Sex is for Procreation and Pleasure, within Marriage

45 mins

BUZZ GROUPS and MINISTRY TIME:

Discuss the following in small buzz groups:

Do you have the right attitude to sex?

Is there an attitude you need to repent of?

Is there an attitude where you need God’s healing hand?

Then, remaining in your small buzz group, pray for each other in response to what you have discussed during the session.

Appendix: Interpretation of the book of Song of Songs

The four main options are:

1. Allegorical

The book is one giant allegory. It is not about a man and a woman at all, but actually about the relationship between Jesus (the man) and the church (the woman). Despite the fact that until the last 100 years this is by far the most common way that the book has been interpreted, there is nothing in the text that suggests this is how it should be read.

2. Dramatic

The book is a love story about a known man and a woman – probably Solomon and his bride. There is a narrative. They are “going out” at the start of the book, then they “get married” in chapter 4, and then they are a married couple for the rest of the book. The problem with this is that there are places in the latter half of the book, where the couple don’t seem to be married (e.g. 8:1-2).

3. Anthology of poems

If it is not a specific story about two people, then some go to the other extreme, and suggest the book is just an anthology of love poems. Yet, there’s no agreement about how many poems there are, and there seems to be total unity in the character portrayal. Throughout the Song, one never gets the impression that there is any change in the identity of either the man or the woman – it’s always the same two people.

4. A unified love poem

This seems to be the correct interpretation. It is one poem, about two idealized individuals and their relationship. It is a poem, rather than a narrative story with a beginning, middle and end.