

“The Fire of Desire”
Song of Songs 7.1-13
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SEE HOW HE LOVES HER! He stands at a distance and drinks in her beauty. He can't take his eyes off his beloved. Every part of her physical body is celebrated and described in intimate detail—head to toe, and everything in between.

He misses nothing. Nothing too modest or unsightly. He is blinded by love. He simply adores her. And with his words he tenderly undresses her, finding her naked beauty more spectacular than any of her adornments; what she is, handcrafted by God, is more beautiful than anything she could buy at Macy's.

Oh, to be so adored! What would it feel like to be so loved . . . just as you are? If you were so adored, what would it do to you?

Look how the words of the poem return the couple to Eden, to the dawn of creation, where Genesis tells us that Adam and Eve were both naked and unafraid. The *Song* returns the couple to that cry of exaltation: “At last, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh!” This is creation-love; love before the Fall. It is new-creation love; given us in Jesus Christ. They complete each other.

There is, of course, a lesson here for those who are married, and if you are, don't miss it. But there's gospel here for all of us, married or not. The words of the first man, Adam, to the first woman, Eve, are also the words of the New Adam, Jesus Christ, to the New Eve, the Church. These words of adoration become gospel to each of us as Christ speaks them over us—for we are each the beloved of Christ; Christ is our divine Lover.

With these words Christ draws you and me, naked, back into Eden, the garden of original beauty and safety, a place of infinite grace and abundant pleasure, a vineyard without sin and pain and brokenness. In the Garden, your divine Spouse stands at a distance and drinks in your beauty. Christ eyes won't leave you. Christ heart is fixed on you.

Sound too good to be true?

It isn't too good to be true; it's the word of the Lord.

And we say, “*Thanks be to God!*”

Look how she responds!

Aroused by her lover's desire for her, she takes him by the hand into the garden. And there she says, “I will give you my love.” There in the garden, their love is an unrestrained celebration of the beauty of creation—both the fruit and flowers of the garden, and the innocent pleasures of their shared bodies.

Through this picture of her response, the Bible intends to teach us that marriage is not an institution just for the raising of children, the maintenance of family life, a way we help each other as we age. It can be those good things, but at its center God desires for us to live the kind of love—the fullness of love—that desires each other in the purity and pleasure of physical union and the holiness of desire.

The purity and pleasure of unrestrained physical union. The holiness of desire.

That such things are uncommon doesn't make them untrue. That talking of them

makes some of us uncomfortable doesn't give us permission to be silent about what the Bible wants us to know and enjoy.

This text is the word of the Lord.

And we say, "*Thanks be to God!*"

Now look from the Bible to our lives.

Marriage today rarely knows these things: the purity and pleasure of unrestrained physical union; the holiness of desire.

We talk about modern threats to marriage. Many work politically to protect and restore marriage. But what if the real threat to modern marriage is this loss of desire and pleasure? This text wants to say, "restore desire and you'll restore marriage and resurrect it to be the gift it was meant by God to be. Ignore desire and the gift of pleasure and politics won't help much at all."

But why is it that marriage today too often seems to bring an end to desire? Why do lovers look outside the marriage relationship in search for pleasure—sports teams, hobbies, entertainment, drugs and alcohol, pornography, affairs? Why is it that the birth of children, our involvement in responsibilities, and the presence of physical problems in our bones and brains too often spell the end of desire? Can married couples have children and work jobs and live with changing bodies and still look upon each other with passion and desire, and enjoy each other with pleasure from inside marriage?

If not, then the Bible is cruel and misleading.

But I don't think the Bible is selling us a bill of goods. I think we're just lost; captive to sin; imprisoned far away from the love we long for. But if we're lost, then we can be found. If we're bound up, we can be set free.

It's true that some of us have been abused physically. We've been so hurt relationally that we're afraid to make ourselves vulnerable again. It's true that some of us aren't happy with ourselves, our bodies, or our partner's. But it's also true that all of us can find help for healing and growth.

For you who are married or on your way toward marriage, here's something you can use if you want to live this text (which is what this text wants you to do, in whatever way fits for your stage of life and the health of your bodies): Fire can't burn in a closed space. Put a glass jar over the top of a candle and it suffocates. The fire of desire needs air, space, distance.

Look at our lovers in the text. He stands at an appreciative distance and adores her. Then when the time is right and she can no longer restrain her desire, she crosses the distance and draws him to herself. And there, in the spaciousness of the garden, they come together and give themselves to love. The fire of desire needs space to thrive. To thrive, you need both space and closeness. Your need for safety requires the closeness of your partner, but your need for adventure, mystery, and playfulness requires space.

And so, you must cultivate a clear sense of self. And you must allow your partner to have a clear sense of self, individuality. Too close, too comfortable, too familiar, and you put the fire of your love under a box: desire cannot burn there. And that's what happens over time to too many marriages are and why many go looking for pleasure outside the marriage.

But space doesn't mean emotional distance, a disconnected aloofness. This happens in marriage too.

Look to our couple in the text.

He stands at an appreciative distance. And she is a separate being, fully herself—and she mystifies him. Theirs is a passionate distance. Each of them is to the other both familiar, and intensely mysterious, elusive . . . truly another each doesn't want to live without.

If I were to ask every couple here, “When do you find yourself most drawn to your partner?”, nearly everyone would answer something like: “When I see her across the room at a party,” “When I watch him sing in the choir,” “When he's doing something he enjoys,” “When she dresses up,” “When he's running,” “When she's entertaining family.”

Do you see the common thread?

Every couple loves and that love gives you comfort, but desire thrives on space. Fire needs air to breath. So, if you want to increase your desire for each other, cultivate individuality. Step back and look at each other from a distance, and then flirt with each other from across the space. You'll come to say in the words of this poem, “I am my beloved's and my beloved's desire is for me.”

If it's true that marriage today often knows love but little real desire, the same is true in our spiritual lives.

God too can become so familiar that your relationship with God brings you real comfort, but honestly, many of you confide in me that it's become dull, boring. Most of you do things to spice it up. You try a new Bible study, go to a conference or retreat, serve on a ministry team or participate in a service project. But still you wonder if there isn't more to the Christian life than what you're experiencing. And many of you end up looking elsewhere for pleasure. But *God*, who is infinite pleasure, is right in front of you. “What is the chief aim of life?” the Reformed Catechism asks. And the answer? “To glorify God and *enjoy* God forever.”

To what degree do you really desire and enjoy God?

I mean, do you really desire and enjoy God in the way described in this text—a holy desire for the unrestrained pleasure of love that's not just spiritual; it's physical, involving your body as well as your mind? Am I crazy? Can we really love God physically?

Yes we can. We “love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength”—spiritually and *physically*.

St. Paul tells us, that “your *bodies* are temples of the Holy Spirit,” (1 Cor. 6.19). And again he says, “Offer your *bodies* as a living sacrifice, for this is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12.1). Jesus came *bodily* . . . physically. And at this Table, he invites us to do what this text invites lovers to do: drink the “best wine that goes down smoothly over lips and teeth” (Song 7.9). Isn't this exactly what we'll do in a few minutes?

Christ draws us into the vineyard where he gives us his love (Song 7.12,). What better image is there for Holy Communion? Christ speaks to us in the words of this poem: at this Table I will share my love: “new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved” (Song 7.13). Holy Communion isn't an idea. It's not just words. It's not a mere remembrance. It is a physical encounter where you feel Bread and taste Wine, and God in Christ comes you physically, not just spiritually. Christ's spirit and body cannot be separated; that's the genius of the Incarnation.

But most of us will hardly taste the Wine today. We'll barely notice of the Bread.

Why? It's all too familiar.

In your love for Christ, you need what every couple who wants to love fully and passionately needs: a sense of space, mystery, and awe. The fire of your desire for God needs air.

So step back today and look with new eyes upon Christ, your Beloved. Hear Christ speak loving words about you, no matter how you feel about yourself. About you Christ says, "How fair and pleasant you are, O beloved, delectable one!" Then, run across the space between the two of you, and in the words of this *Song*, "climb the tree" (for the Cross is a tree), "lay hold it its branches," (it's cross beams are branches), and let God's "kisses" be to you "like the best wine that goes down smoothly," warming you in love.

This kind of desire for God is as uncommon today as it is in marriage. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. Jesus Christ declares that with God all things are possible. Desire. Pleasure. Within marriage. Desire. Pleasure. With God.

The Bible says so, and it is the word of the Lord.

And we all say, "*Thanks be to God!*"