

## Superlative Song

Scripture has a powerful response for those who think that God dislikes romance

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Painting by Domenico Morelli depicting the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs stands, through the centuries, as an immovable testimony to God's intention for man and woman. It is a rebuke to our tiny loves, a constant goad to our lackluster marriages. It calls drifting and depleted couples back to the Creator's ideal: Do not settle for less than joy. It is far from a manual, and yet in its poetry it shows how the secrets of connubial bliss are found in the readily available commodities of openness, verbal affirmations, playfulness, occasional getaways, committed oneness, and working through trials.

We thought we had made too much of love when we had made too little of it. We thought our songs too charged with passion when they had fallen short. Our honeymoons are a mere two weeks when God had suggested a year: "When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken" (Deuteronomy 24:5).

The ancients, embarrassed by the Song, stripped it clean of scents and touches. It is no shabby proof of divine inspiration that when the smoke cleared on the canon in the mid-third century, the Song was still there. Cyril of Alexandria (376-444) made the two breasts of the Shulamite the Old and New Testaments. The bearded ones were right that the Song is about Christ, but it is about Christ via the erotic love of husband and wife ("This mystery is profound"—Ephesians 5:32).

For some of us, the Song is not only helpful but essential. It gives permission to be as in love as you want to be. It destroys the notion that God grants romance as a concession but holds His nose. It debunks the notion of lovesickness as a brief

biological agitation for the prosaic purpose of perpetuation of species. If your marriage passes from intoxication into humdrum cohabitation, it is not God's idea. Put away from you the fatalists who say: "Romance is a flame that dies but companionship is its consolation." Put away those who believe that "letting yourself go" after the ring is on is normal. Not from heaven does such counsel come. "At your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

The Shulamite brings warning: "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, . . . that you do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases" (2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4). She is so very much in love with this man that she doesn't want her friends to forfeit this experience by forcing love prematurely, by taking matters into their own hands. (Also, note the emotional price tag for love—3:1-5; 5:2-8.)

The "daughters of Jerusalem" are cheerleaders, for our sakes. This love affair enjoys the approval of objective onlookers and is not some tawdry tryst that must keep a nervous lookout from men and from the light.

Tend your marriage, even if you think it is too late. There is wonder-working healing in a touch, a look, a word, an unexpected embrace. Nor is it artificial to work on love. C.S. Lewis reminds us that a garden is not less beautiful for needing to be weeded and fussed with (The Four Loves).

"Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards" (2:15). What are the little foxes but our inconsiderateness, laziness, resistance, hard-heartedness, and above all, unbelief? Believe in love, for love is of God. Everything in the universe is arrayed on its side.

The world has had many songs since the world began, but this one is the Song of Songs. The Hebrew construction in the superscript indicates the superlative. Tell me what is more superlative, if you know. Whatever you propose, the daughters of Jerusalem will spurn it and will say: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised" (8:6-7).

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