

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE MESSAGE OF SONG OF SONGS

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

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B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. "The Greatest is Love"

- i. In human Interrelationships.
- ii. In the ultimate of human Life, which is Religion.

II. Therefore

- i. Sanctify your human Love by the Ultimate.
- ii. Interpret your religious Life in Terms of human Love.
Passion.
Abandonment.
Fidelity.

- a. The Foundations of Love.
- b. The Strength of Love.
- c. The Methods of Love.
- d. The Experience of Love.

THERE is no book in the Old Testament more easy to deal with in regard to its message than the Song of Songs, if we accept one very simple canon of interpretation. That is to be found in our lecture on the content of the book. Let me, therefore, repeat the words of one brief paragraph therefrom:

“The songs should be treated first as simple and yet sublime songs of human affection. When they are thus understood, reverently the thoughts may be lifted into the higher value of setting forth the joys of the communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God, and ultimately between the Church and Christ.”

To take this view of the Song of Solomon is to recognize the supremacy of love. Human life finds its highest fulfillment in the love of man and woman. The supreme thing in religion is love between the soul and God. The highest realization of that supreme experience of love between God and the soul is created by Christ.

In Him, God came near to man in order to woo him. In Him, man came to know God and to love Him. Therefore I can sing the songs of Solomon, as did the mystics, as setting forth the relationship between Christ and His bride.

Still to my amazement I hear the Bridegroom singing:-

**“As a lily among thorns,
So is my love among the daughters.”**

Still I hear the bride replying:-

**“I sat down under his shadow with great delight,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
And his banner over me was love.”**

Still I hear the mystic language both of bride and bridegroom as each of the other declares, **“My beloved is mine.”**

In the first place, this was undoubtedly an earthly love-song, but it was very pure and very beautiful. There are men and women who would find indecencies in Heaven - if they ever got there - but they would take them in their own corrupt souls. To those who live lives of simple purity, these songs are full of beauty, as they utter the language of human love; and finally, in spiritual experience, they express the relation of such as have been wooed by God in Christ, and thus have come to know and love Him.

The permanent values of the Song are two.

- it is, first, a revelation of the true nature of human love.
- it is, secondly, an unveiling of the highest religious experience.

The mode of expression is peculiarly Eastern.

There are no neutral tints. My artist friends must be patient with me if I declare myself Philistine enough to believe that neutral tints are evidences of a decadent age. This Song of Solomon is magnificent in its gorgeous colors, in its high figures of speech, in the prodigality of its protestations. If there be no mystical value in the book, it is yet full of human interest. It is only in the atmosphere created by such flaming color, superlative utterance, and overwhelming audacity, that it is possible ultimately to appreciate the strength of love. The cool, calculating, mechanical man who dislikes this book has never been in love, and probably never will be.

Beginning, then, with this acceptance of the book as a collection of human love-songs, I find that it reveals much concerning the nature of love which is of supreme importance.

- The foundation of love is laid bare.
- The strength of love is revealed.
- The methods of love are indicated.
- The experience of love is described.

Through all the words which Solomon and the Shulammitte utter, each to the other, there breathes the spirit of mutual satisfaction. In that the very foundation of love is laid bare. Those standing without may be unable to see the reason why each finds perfect rest in the other. That inability does not alter the fact. And that fact is the fundamental one in love.

Joseph Cook, of Boston, in his second lecture on "*Infidel Attack on the Family*," declared that a supreme affection is the only natural basis of marriage, and that supreme affection can only exist between two. In all the songs of bride and bridegroom throughout this book that supreme affection is manifest. In this fact they illuminate the original Divine purpose of love between man and woman as the basis of marriage. As we have said, the fact is evident through all the songs.

One or two brief quotations by way of illustration will suffice.

**“As a lily among thorns,
So is my love among the daughters.”**

That is the language of a man in love.

**“As the apple tree among the trees of the wood,
So is my beloved among the sons.”**

That is the answer of the woman's love. The whole passage finely illustrates the meaning of supreme affection between two. In each case love is absolutely exclusive. Each sees the other as the only one. By the side of the lily, to the spirit of the man, all others are as thorns. To the vision of the woman one tree is supreme in glory and beauty, while all the rest are massed as **"the trees of the wood."** This kind of love is not born amid the feverish excitement of a London season. Neither does it result from inane trifling with the subject of love and marriage. Love at its highest is supreme affection between two. Love at its deepest is the unreasoned but absolute mutual satisfaction of one woman and one man in each other.

The strength of love is fully revealed throughout the songs.

One passage will suffice by way of illustration:-

**"Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm:
For love is strong as death; Jealousy is cruel as the grave:
The coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame
Many waters cannot quench love, Neither can the floods drown it:
If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,
He would utterly be contemned."**

No exposition is needed of this passage, so clear and forceful is it in its setting forth of the overwhelming and all-victorious strength of true love.

In Paul's classic description of love there is one simple statement into which all this teaching is concentrated, so that it flashes with the luster of diamonds:-

"Charity [Love] never faileth."

That supreme and all-inclusive truth of the strength of love is illustrated throughout the whole of these songs.

The methods of love are revealed, as through the idyllic nature of the book the story of the wooing and betrothal, the marriage and the after life is told. Inspired by love, Solomon is irresistible, and to the strength of that appeal of love the Shulammitte yields, not weakly, but with a strength that is only overcome by the supremacy of love. In every sentence that falls from his lips, Solomon reveals the intensity of his devotion, to the appeal of which the Shulammitte answers with intensity more quiet but none the less strong. Finally, in all his attitude, Solomon is overshadowing and protective, and the Shulammitte rests in his shadow with great delight, in perfect security.

The experience of love is that of rest, joy, and courage. Each finds in the other the place of that perfect content which is of the essence of rest, and which cannot be disturbed by storm or tempest. In the fullness of love there is abiding gladness, which fills the heart with songs, and flings its light upon all circumstances, so that the grayest day is illumined, and the roughest sackcloth is transfigured into the glory of the purple.

In the union of the strength of the love of each there is courage, which enables both to face all circumstances without faltering, and side by side to win every contested field, or even out of defeat to gather values which are of the essence of victory.

If this, then, is only a human love song, would to God that those who know its strength would sing it in the highways and byways, to recall men and women from superficial and frivolous thinking about love, to a true conception of its height and depth and beauty.

Three times the singer breaks in upon the songs of the bride and bridegroom, and always with the same words:

**“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the roes, and by the hinds of the field,
That ye stir not up, nor awake my love,
Till he please.”**

Thus suddenly, in the midst of the music, there is a pause, and the voice of the singer is heard in interpretation and warning. The method is not that of melody or of harmony, but rather that of recitative, in which at the end of the marriage, between the wooing and the betrothal, and in the midst of the united life the revealing caution is uttered. I would that the interrupting charge might be inscribed in letters of fire, and hung in every hall where young people assemble. In the presence of the glory of love it warns them not to trifle with the most sacred thing in life. Thus, as a song of human love only, it is chief of all the songs of human life, in very deed the Song of Songs.

It is when we thus see the beauty of it in its first application that we discover how wondrously it flashes its light upon the vaster spaces, and inevitably becomes the unveiling of religious experience at its highest and best.

I do not hesitate to affirm that I believe this was the ultimate intention of the writer.

It is an interesting fact that the Chaldee Targum contains a Jewish commentary on the book, the title of which reads:

“The songs and hymns which Solomon, the prophet-king of Israel, delivered by the spirit of prophecy before the Lord, the Lord of the whole earth.”

That title being, as we have said, not Christian but Jewish, is most suggestive. It describes Solomon, not as a king merely, but as a prophet-king, and justly affirms that the songs and hymns were delivered by the spirit of prophecy, and, moreover, that they were delivered before the Lord, the Lord of the whole earth. If Solomon wrote of human love, he nevertheless sang before the Lord. The undoubted thought of that ancient title is that the songs had a spiritual significance. This interpretation is warranted, moreover, by the fact that the writers of the Old Testament dealt with the relationship between God and His ancient people as that between husband and wife.

In the Psalm which bears the title “A song of loves,” in which the writer declares that he speaks of the things which he has made touching the king, both the king in his glory and the queen in her beauty are described. The whole of the prophecy of Hosea is based upon this great conception, and in some of the greatest passages in the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the same illustration is used.

If we pass from the Old Testament Scriptures to those of the New, we find in the crowning letter of Paul’s system a passage in which, in order to state the marriage relationship on the highest plane, the apostle applies the same thought to the relation between Christ and His Church:-

“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

Thus the Hebrew writers used the figure to indicate the relation between God and His people; and the great exponent of Christian truth shows how the ideal is perfectly realized in the relation between Christ and His Church,

If then we are justified in discovering in these songs language which may be used as setting forth the relationship between Christ and His people, we may take the revelations of human love which they convey, and use them as both revealing and expressing the perfections of that communion. The foundation of the love existing between Christ and His own is that of mutual satisfaction. As to our satisfaction in Him nothing need be written.

We constantly give expression to the truth:-

“Thou, O Christ, art all I want,
More than all in Thee I find.”

The thought that He finds satisfaction in us is one which must fill us with perennial astonishment, but it is none the less true. Even if to-day we fail to see the glory of His perfected work in us, it is nevertheless true that in His redeemed at last He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied. That mutual satisfaction is the very foundation of love. Let each express it in individual language. I am satisfied in Him, and He is satisfied in me; not in me as I now am, but in that which He will make me, in that which I shall be, when His work is perfected in me.

Of the strength of the love nothing finer can be said than by quotation of the actual words of the song:-

“Love is strong as death . . .

**Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it.”**

As to His love for us, the Cross is the literal and actual proof of these words. As for us, in proportion as we yield ourselves to the constraint of His love, it becomes true that

**“Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it.”**

The methods of love suggested in the song perfectly interpret the methods of Christ with us, and our methods with Him. All who know Him are conscious of the irresistible nature of His love. It was and is to that we yield ourselves as we sing:-

“Nay, but I yield, I yield,
I can hold out no more;
I sink, by dying love compelled,
And own Thee Conqueror.”

Moreover, of the intensity of His love it is impossible to speak; but in its approach, in its constant method, we are forever conscious of it. Our love to Him has the same note of intensity in proportion as we yield in whole-hearted abandonment to the appeal of His. His love of us is ever that of the overshadowing and protective One.

All the words of the song only find their perfect fulfillment in those who know and trust Him, and are able to say:

**“I sat down under his shadow with great delight.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
And his banner over me was love.”**

Finally, in this mutual love of Christ and His people, there is the same threefold experience of rest, joy, and courage.

Zephaniah, in the sweetest song of the Old Testament, which sets forth the love of God for His people, declared:-

**“He will rejoice over thee with joy;
He will rest in His love,
He will joy over thee with singing.”**

Thus, as we let this song sing to us in all its purity and strength, the story of human love on its highest level, it inevitably lifts us on wings into a more perfect understanding of the relationship between Christ and His own.

If these be the permanent values, what is the living message of this book?

This may be stated in few words. The book declares to-day the truth embodied in the word of Paul: "**The greatest of these is charity.**" Love is the greatest fact in all human interrelationships. It is the greatest experience in the spiritual realm. It is religion. That surely was the meaning of our Lord's words, when He said: "**Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like unto it is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**"

The final living message of the book is twofold.

First, human love should ever be sanctified by the thoughts of the ultimate love which it illustrates. All things on earth have relationships stretching out into the infinite and eternal. There should be - and, indeed, there can be - no perfect human love which does not harmonize with the spiritual and the Divine.

Secondly, we must attempt to interpret our religious life in the terms of our human love. Its terms are those of passion, abandonment, and fidelity, the burning flame which pours life right out in service, and keeps it true. If we may but come to such realization of our fellowship with the Lord as to express our love to Him on this wise, what a change will be wrought in all our experience, and in all our service.

Thus we admit that the Song of Solomon is an Eastern love song, and if no more than that, it is full of beauty, and full of value; but because it is so perfectly a human love song, and because human love is offspring of the Divine love, the song reaches out and carries us with it to higher heights, forever helping us to understand the final experiences of the soul in religion, those of the love of God for us, and our love for God.

~ end of chapter 22 ~

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