

Preface and acknowledgments

Rarely have I been so gripped by the emotional power of an idea as this one: that Jesus is the Lover of my soul.

When I started delving into the spiritual meaning of the Song of Songs, I had little idea of the waves of love that would crash over my head. When I started preaching it, I was nervous – was it just me, or would others have a similar experience?

Some did struggle a bit with the poetry, but, for many, the love of Christ came alive in a striking new way. Jesus himself was making himself more real to us. I don't think any of us (including me) had experienced anything quite like it before, probably because the book is unique.

It is heady stuff – breathless love poetry, exotic settings, erotic imagery, word pictures that need some background explanation, the ups and downs of a relationship that is both human and divine. Sometimes it has felt as though I was eavesdropping on things almost too intimate and too sacred to be described. At other times I found myself wondering if Christ could really love me that much and say those sorts of things to me. Was it really OK to encourage people to see and feel that too? But, again and again, the spiritual meaning of the words hit home with fresh delights: yes, he did, and does.

There are superb commentaries on the Song of Songs; this is not another. There are fine explanations of what it says about human sexuality and marriage; I have not tried to add to them.

What I have done is to give extended treatment to the idea that Jesus loves me with the passion of a man for a woman, and that the Song of Songs illustrates this in extraordinary colours, scents and tastes, a music of words to set our souls on fire in response.

Many people have contributed directly and indirectly to the book. My heartfelt thanks to my beloved wife Debbie for her support in so

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many ways, and to everyone at Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, for the time I have had for writing, prayer and study.

A number of friends who heard the sermons on the Song of Songs (the seedbed for this book) sent me comments on how the Song had affected their walk with Christ. Some of these are included, with changed names, in the text; many thanks to all of them. Yet again, I am grateful to Dr Amy Donovan, an expert on volcanoes and improving her pastor's writing, and also to Mark Meynell, Neil Thomson and Tim Chester who read the text with similar eagle eyes. An anonymous reader made many suggestions that led to improvements. I am full of gratitude to Eleanor Trotter, who has been a magnificent editor, and to Mollie Barker for her fine-grained copy-editing.

This book is dedicated to Robin and Alice Whaley, partners in the work of the gospel and friends in the love of Christ. In their walled fruit garden (like Song 4:12) in Kosovo, I met Christ more deeply as I studied the Song of Songs (summer 2018) and then wrote the first draft of this book (summer 2019). Their friendship and their garden identify them in a special way among the many friends Christ speaks of in Song 8:13:

You who dwell in the gardens
with friends in attendance,
let me hear your voice!

This book is my response to Christ's words to me there. I must also mention Little Gidding, a special place for me, where this text was polished in high summer and repolished in early spring.

Above all, I am grateful to the Lord Jesus Christ, who revealed more of himself to me as the Lover of my soul, through the metaphor of spiritual marriage, in new and beautiful ways.

Julian Hardyman
Cambridge

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Show me your face

Show me Thy face! – one transient gleam
Of loveliness divine,
And I shall never think or dream
Of other love save Thine;
All lesser light will darken quite,
All lower glories wane;
The beautiful of earth will scarce
Seem beautiful again.¹

We used to sing this hymn in the church I joined when I started my working life. I had never heard it before. I love it and now include it in church services from time to time. When we sing it, we feel caught up in the writer's longing for a glimpse of the glory of Christ. As we read the words, we feel something stirring in our own souls.

Drawn by beauty

We feel ourselves being drawn into the words of Moses in Exodus 33:18: 'Show me your glory [that is, your beauty].'² We remember Psalm 105:4:

Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.

Or Psalm 27:8:

My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'
Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Show me your face

There is a beauty in the face of Christ which our renewed hearts long for. We want ‘to gaze on the beauty of the LORD’ (Psalm 27:4).

With that background, hear what the lover is saying to the beloved in Song 2:14:

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding-places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

The Song of Songs is doing the same thing as the rest of Scripture. It is a beautiful picture of human love, but it constantly points us beyond human intimacy to Jesus as the Lover of our souls.

My study of Jesus as the Lover of our souls draws most heavily on the Song of Songs. It is not an exposition of the Song, still less a commentary. It is written to help you to discover how Jesus is the Lover of your soul, and some of what that means for your relationship with him. It is like discovering a whole new world!

He’s after me!

Seeking the face of Christ is entirely biblical, but the extraordinary thing is that this is about *Jesus*’ longing to see *my* face. The man in the Song of Songs calls his beloved a ‘dove’ – he is a gazelle, but that is OK, as both are metaphors! The dove is not visible. She is hiding in a cleft in the rock of a stony outcrop on a mountain. But he is keen to see and hear her, so he calls to her to come out and show her face and coo back to him.

The young man uses this image to portray himself wanting to see his girlfriend’s face and hear her speak. She is looking away and silent. Perhaps in modern terms she is absorbed in her smartphone! He wants eye contact. He longs for her attention. Why? Because her voice is so sweet to him. It is like his favourite music, his top song of all time. Hearing her speak thrills him – not just her voice in general,

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but all that it represents when she speaks to him: that she should want to talk to him!

And it is not just her voice. He longs to see her face. He finds her lovely. Her face pleases him aesthetically. When he sees it, there is a deep thrill in his gut, a kind of heady delight. Again, it is not simply her face in the abstract. It is her face turned towards him in love. How he longs to see her smile at him!

At the human level, this is a powerful portrayal of a lover longing for his beloved in deep appreciation. But we can and must take it a step further. This is Christ speaking to us, to you, to me. This is the voice of the heavenly Lover revealing his desire for his earthly beloved – you! Jesus himself says to your soul, ‘Show me your face. Let me hear your voice. Your voice is sweet. Your face is lovely.’

Don’t rush on too quickly. Pause there. Read these short simple sentences again. Pause between each part. Imagine Jesus himself saying these words to you today.

As you read and reread them in this way, pay attention to your reactions. So many people need to stop at that point and let this sink in. All sorts of objections start bubbling up in our minds. Surely this can’t be right? Are we interpreting this correctly? How can this be true of me?

If you are in Christ, you can be sure that this does indeed apply to you, and that Christ himself says these words to you. As we have seen already, he desires us because he finds us desirable. These verses focus in a helpful and specific way on his desire for our attention and our speaking.

He wants you to turn your attention to him because he finds your face, your focused attention on him, ‘lovely’. This reverses the normal reasons we have for focusing on Jesus. We tend to think of how we might benefit. We want him to help, please, soothe, maybe even delight us. And there is nothing wrong with any of that. We pray, ‘O Lord, show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely.’ That is absolutely right too.

However, this is the other side of the relationship. He wants us! And, surely, we want to please him, to delight him, to satisfy him,

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don't we? Of course we do. When we think of it, we want nothing more! The difficulty is believing that *he* wants *us*. But this verse tells us emphatically that he does. And we'd better believe it, however hard that can feel at first.

Dane Ortlund, in his book on the eighteenth-century American preacher Jonathan Edwards, puts it this way: 'Divine beauty is not only to be apprehended in God. It is to be reflected in us. It's why we exist.'²

You may well be wondering at this point what this looks like in practice. Now, I had never really noticed the verse above – 'My dove in the clefts of the rock . . . show me your face' – until I started studying the Song with a view to preaching sermons on the book. As I worked through the interpersonal drama of chapter 2, I realized that these were words that Christ was saying to me. Over the next few months they came to me repeatedly. The dialogue in the shaded box represents the way in which the Lord kept pressing his demands, his desires, on me.

Oh gosh, it's 7.30 already. I'm late. Too late for a quiet time. I suppose the Lord will understand.

Show me your face.

But I'm too busy.

Show me your face.

But you've got lots of other disciples – why can't you pick on one whose alarm clock went off on time?

Show me your face.

But I haven't had time to shave. Lots of people are not going to want to see my face at this rate!

Show me your face.

But I . . . I . . . My 'face' just isn't worth seeing.

Show me your face.

Lord, even I don't like my face very much, let alone what's behind it, and you have much higher standards than me.

Show me your face, for your face is lovely.

Show me your face

Oh no it's not. It's lopsided and blotchy and I've got revolting spots on my forehead.

Show me your face, for your face is lovely.

You aren't going to give up, are you, Lord?

Show me your face, for your face is lovely.

OK, I think you've got my attention now. But what can I say?

Let me hear your voice.

Well, I think that's happening, isn't it? I can't imagine you're enjoying it particularly, though . . .

Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet.

But I have a sore throat. And, seriously, all I'm doing is moaning.

Your voice is sweet.

OK, Lord, you win. This isn't about me, right? This is about you. You just want me! Well, I love you, and your face is beautiful to me, and your voice is lovelier than any other voice. Thank you.

Outworking

As part of our sermons on the Song of Songs at church, we had a 'Creative Responses to the Song' evening. I invited people to use their creativity to respond to what they had been hearing.

My own contribution was a self-portrait. I tried not to 'improve' anything. I wanted it to be the opposite of airbrushing. So I chose a photo in which I was not at my best. I had in mind the approach Rembrandt took to self-portraits, summed up in Oliver Cromwell's famous instruction to a painter:

Mr Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it.³

I was happy that the portrait achieved what I wanted – a representation of how I often see myself. But, in spite of all that, I hear his

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voice saying, ‘Let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.’ It summed up the preceding eight months of growing closer to Christ. And as I showed him my face, I found him showing me his.

Chloe, a geography student from our church, shared this insight:

My boyfriend gave me a small bookmark for my Bible with these verses written on it: ‘Show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.’ He was giving me a physical reminder of the truth we were learning together: that Jesus invites me into a more intimate and more passionate and more truly satisfying relationship than any romantic human relationship. As Paul reminds us (for we so often forget), marriage mirrors Christ’s relationship with the church (with me!), and it is that relationship with the Divine which contains truest intimacy and passion. This feels hard to fathom, and harder still to live out. However, it is also music to the ears of my generation, which is first and foremost a generation of the heart, longing for passionate and purposeful lives in which we love and are loved. As Ed Sheeran says: if you’ve known love in your life, then you’ve really lived.⁴

Christ asks us to turn our faces towards him because he loves the beauty he is creating there.

Dane Ortlund has another wonderful insight on this subject:

The Christian life is a life of beauty. This is [Jonathan] Edwards’s legacy. Love, joy, gentleness, prayer, obedience – all these . . . emphases are spokes extending from the hub of a soul alive to beauty. All are diverse manifestations of this single, fundamental reality. They are what healthy Christians exhale, having inhaled the loveliness of God.⁵

You have ‘inhaled the loveliness of God’. Will you breathe out and let him savour the fragrance?

Voices

True prayer involves a journey down into the depths of our hearts to meet God in the totality of who we are. That is not an easy journey. We are easily distracted. So we use whatever it takes (getting alone, leaving the smartphone in the next room, turning off the music, sitting quietly, and perhaps even breathing deeply and slowly) to escape practical distractions.

But even then, there are voices that get in the way ('you're a deep disappointment to God') and layers of insecurity ('we are not sure that our true self will be acceptable to other people . . . And we are not sure that our inmost self is acceptable to us'⁶).

Many of us see our own ugly failings and try to take it out on ourselves. We are like the character in the novel *The Better Sister* by Alafair Burke, who had gained a public profile and found it impossible not to check her social networking feed: 'Catherine [her sister] had told me recently that my compulsive need to read the horrid things that anonymous strangers wrote about me online evidenced a subconscious desire to punish myself.'⁷

This character is looking for negative and destructive voices. While we all need to be open to correction and to constructive feedback, too many of us Christians are also listening to the wrong voices.

The voices are hard to ignore because we have been listening to them for so long. The layers are difficult to penetrate; we have set them up as defences, after all. This reminds me of the song 'Sam's Town' by The Killers, where someone says he is sick of being judged all the time, living in fear of what people might find out about him.⁸

That is where a Scripture text like this will help us if we understand it as part of the gospel. We look outside ourselves at the free gift of Christ's righteousness. Then we look within. Not for one moment does it undercut our understanding of our own sinfulness and our need for self-examination and repentance. But it enables us to respond as people clothed, covered and cleansed by the righteousness of Christ, and as people whose ugliness really is being changed into something beautiful by Christ, and for Christ's own delight. For

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even the sight of a tear-stained face, stammering out our own humble acknowledgment of our sin, our hatred of it and our plea for his forgiveness rather than trying to manufacture our own, is beautiful and lovely to him.

Questions

- What are your major obstacles to hearing and receiving Jesus saying the words of Song 2:14 to you?
- How can you lay these obstacles to one side?

Think about how these words can work in your life when you don't feel great about yourself, and when you come to church but are quite disengaged from the Lord.

Prayer

Lord, these words are almost too much for me. I do find it hard to believe them consistently. How can they be true? How can you want my attention? How can you long for me to speak to you? But I know that your Word is true. I want to hear this and receive it. Help me.

Thank you. Thank you that, in Christ, this is true. This is how you hear me and see me. As I take this seriously, I feel something hard and cold melting inside. I feel tense fears lurking within me being relaxed and soothed. At the same time, I feel myself being taken outside myself, to focus less on myself, as though I am being removed from the centre of things and replaced by you and your desires. I turn to you in willing surrender and love: I want you to have as much of me as I can give. Amen.