

Learning to Love Wisely

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[0 : 00] Okay, well, good morning, everyone. Lovely to see you here today. Please can I invite you to grab a Bible and absolutely use the contents page to find this book of the Bible called The Song of Songs.

I would say it's just after Ecclesiastes, but that might actually cause more confusion than help. So contents page, The Book of the Song of Songs is where we're going to be over the next six weeks, getting into this wonderful book of the Bible together.

I don't think we've ever preached here in my time at Brunnsfield. So really excited to get into it today. Today, we're going to read chapter one and the first little bit of chapter two in about 15 minutes time. So just in case you think I've lost the plot, that's the plan.

So please do keep it open in front of you. I thought it'd be helpful to try and get our bearings in this portion of God's words today. And with that in mind, let me confess what Alex and I watch when we're tired and we just want to watch some mindless TV at the end of the day.

You know, we've all got our kind of go-to programs. Maybe it's the Beach Grove Garden. Maybe it's Full Contact Six Nations on Netflix. Well, for us, it's Friends. And you can judge me on that if you want. I'm okay.

[1 : 22] We're watching Friends recently and there's a scene that came up where Joey and Monica are talking about how easy it is to move on after a breakup.

And this is Peak 90s TV. I grew up on this stuff. Joey says this, It's never taken me more than a week to get over a relationship.

To which Monica replies, It's never taken you more than a shower to get over a relationship. Peak 90s, friends. Let me summarize Joey Tribbiani's attitude to women.

As long as it's consensual and no one gets hurt, then it's game on. And if it ever gets costly and you don't fancy the hassle, then move on.

It's the best way to live your life. Not the kind of greeting you want in your Valentine's Day card, is it? When that day rolls around in February.

[2 : 21] But it is what the sexual evolution of the last few decades promised us. More sex, better sex, and more fulfilled people. And we've got to ask the question, a couple of decades on, Has this revolution worked?

Has the revolution as it threw off the old sex reserved for marriage fetters of previous generations, has it worked?

Well, it's interesting you've got people around today, non-Christians feeding into this discussion, who are telling us that it hasn't. So here, for example, is non-Christian sociologist Jean Twenge, in her book Generations, which is well worth a read as she tracks the differences in the generations. And it's a fascinating read. Here's what she says. Gen Z adults should be having the time of their life sexually. But they aren't. In fact, Gen Z is having markedly less sex than Gen Xers and Millennials did as young adults.

Maybe you've heard of the sex recession. For Gen Z, it's a sex depression. Interesting. Or here's American non-Christian author Louise Perry, in her book The Case Against the Sexual Revolution.

[3 : 39] She writes this. I don't believe the last 60 years or so should be understood as a period of exclusive progress or exclusive decline. Because the sexual revolution has not freed all of us, but it has freed some of us, and selectively, and at a price.

And if you read her book, here's what she observes. Who are the people in our world, down in the generations, who've benefited from the sexual revolution and what it promised? The rich, those with power, and those who are famous.

Now, worth clocking that for where we're going to go in about 15 minutes' time. Friends, here's two observations for you this morning. However you come to church, whenever you think about the God of the Bible, whatever you find yourself doing in life, here's two observations.

Number one, the sexual ethic of our generation isn't delivering. And number two, what God has to say is worth hearing.

Because God has something to say into this whole arena of sex, romance, and relationships. And maybe for you here today, that is brand new. You thought, I didn't think God had anything to say into that whole subject.

[4 : 57] Friends, I love that you're here, if that's what you're thinking today. Love that you're here. And I'd love for you, with patience and grace, to journey with us as a church as we explore what God has to say into this whole arena.

Have you ever considered, dear friend, that there is more to the heart of Christianity than maybe you've got in your mind at present? Have you ever considered that those longings that you have to be loved and to be known, and why they seem to be so elusive, is because you're looking for it in all the wrong places.

Have you ever considered that the purpose of our existence, the reason that we are created with desires, is that so we'd have our breath taken away by a different kind of love from the God of the universe.

Come and journey with this in this book. Because here is an eight chapter love drama that celebrates the love and sexual intimacy that is enjoyed in an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman.

Now get this, this is a song that was considered so racy and suggestive that apparently Jewish men were not allowed to read it publicly in the synagogue until they were 30.

[6 : 17] Welcome to the Song of Songs, which is a Hebrew superlative, basically saying this is the best song ever.

And the Song of Songs, along with the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs, this is part of the wisdom section of our Bible. I think it's probably one of the least understood and tapped into portions of the Bible.

And it's wonderful. The wisdom section of our Bibles have all sorts of things to say into our everyday realities. Wisdom literature, this is all about how to live God's way in God's world for our good.

Say it again. How to live in God's way in God's world for our good. Isn't it amazing that God would speak into this? Friends, God has things to say into every aspect of our life.

And he has things to say into the deepest parts of our lives. Do you know why? Because he made all of life. And that means we always need to be asking ourselves when we're in this portion of our Bibles is how is this teaching us to be wise?

[7 : 32] What is there here for me to learn? What am I supposed to be understanding about sex and relationships? And what we're going to get in the Song of Songs is the great debunking of two great lies which we often believe about sex.

Here's the first one. I'm sorry I didn't quite line up in the PowerPoint. The first one is a lie that we too easily assume in the church and it's this, that we can't talk about it. And the Song of Songs would come along, burst that bubble and say not true.

I think because we often don't talk about it, what we've often done as the church is that we've passed on to the next generation a bunch of sexual morals at the expense of the accompanying story which undergirds it and which people can understand it.

And because we've not passed on that story, we've just passed on morals. No wonder people, friends, look in the world and think they're having so much more fun than we are. As far as the origin of human sexual desires is concerned, can we just put it out there that this was God's move? Right? It's not like Adam and Eve got together at the beginning of the Bible and God happened to walk along and catch them in the act and said to himself, how on earth did they figure that out?

[8 : 55] No, being naked and not ashamed, man and woman delighting to become one flesh as they come together was God's idea, not humanity's. And that's to say right up top that God is for sex.

God put those desires in human beings. Yes, for us to enjoy, but we're going to see as we go on ultimately as a signpost for us to see that it points to something deeper.

And here's the second line and it's one that we too easily accept from our culture and it's namely this. Feelings are king. Either sex is nothing, but Joey Tribbiani is treated as cheap. It is the, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas or as Tina Turner sang, if you're around in this generation, what's love got to do with it? Lyrics as shallow as they are catchy, it's physical only logical.

You must try to ignore that it means more than that. So sex is cheap, sex is nothing, or we go the other extreme and sex is everything.

[10 : 04] We're going to think about this more next week, that you've got to find the one. And if you don't find the one, then you're missing out. And what we've got to see is that this is the drumbeat of the world.

It's the narrative that we're consistently being sold when it comes to sex and romance. And again, the Song of Songs would come along, burst the bubble and say, not true. And that's why, to quote my friend Tom, down in Bath, what this series is all about is turning down the volume of the world's song and turning up the volume of the Song of Songs.

Let me just go pastoral just for a minute. Because maybe you're thinking, honestly, the last thing that I need right now is a love song.

If I wanted that, I'd just tune into Radio 2 on a Sunday morning, listen to Michael Ball, does it way better than we do. Because then at least I could turn it off. Maybe for you, even contemplating this stuff, it just brings back memories and feelings of regret and mistakes.

Or maybe it's pain because it reminds you of someone who you once shared that level of human and sexual intimacy with and you miss them more than words they can convey. Or maybe it's resentment because you'd love to be married, but for whatever reason it just hasn't happened for you.

[11 : 41] Hear me say, however this lands on you today, two things. Number one, that it's okay, in fact, it's more than okay to find it difficult.

And part of being a church family together is carrying each other's burdens. the happiness and the heartache.

God has put us in each other's lives so that we can walk with each other through the joys and the sorrows that come our way. But here's thing number two.

Friends, to some extent, we are all wounded in this area. And we all need the healing perspective and hope which is found in the Song of Songs because this song is one massive signpost to the beauty of Jesus.

And my prayer for this series series is we contemplate his person and his character is that we would feel the intensity of his love towards us.

[13 : 02] How often in life it feels like no human words can really heal and help when we are wounded and hurt in this area. But his words can.

And I pray that they will. Now listen, some of your Bibles might say Song of Solomon. Maybe just worth asking at this point who's this guy Solomon.

Well Solomon is the son of King David and Solomon in the Bible becomes synonymous with two things. Two W's if you like. Here they are. Number one is wisdom.

So he comes to personify wisdom through the Bible. It's the gift that God gave him. But here's number two. It's woman. And I love that the Bible gives us that warts and all.

His downfall is his love of sex and of women. In fact, the Bible would tell us that this guy had a thousand sexual partners. Women are tools to be used to satisfy his sexual desires.

[14 : 09] Think back to that quote a few minutes ago in Solomon's world who has benefited from the sexual ethic of his day. He has. Why? Because he is rich, he is powerful, and he is famous.

And all that means that unless he had a complete change of heart, I think he is unlikely to be the author of this song because this is all about sexual enjoyment in a one man, one woman marriage context, and that wasn't really his game.

So what is perhaps likely going on here is that the person who wrote this is putting words in Solomon's mouth as it were as he symbolizes and personifies wisdom as if to say this is how true wisdom speaks and operates when it comes to sex and relationships.

And here's what we're going to see. God's heart for this, his blueprint is that this is not about self-serving. No, wisdom for sex and relationships is man and woman made equal in dignity and worth in the image of God, participating in a relationship of radical self-giving.

And this goes right against the grain of that day and it goes right against the grain of this day just in different ways. But here's what I want you to see. Notice, come with me to the text.

[15:34] We're going to get there. Notice who gets the microphone first in this song. Have a look at it. Who gets the microphone first? Clue? It's not him.

Do you see it? It's not him. Again, think of Solomon's world. Think of the sexual ethic of his day. Who gets the first line in this song?

It's her. Hugely significant. Because she is no damsel in distress. The woman in this song is not some kind of Middle Eastern eye candy.

She is on the front foot and she's telling us why she's singing her song. She's telling us what she's found in her man and her man's going to tell us what he has found in her.

Now, we're going to get to the text. Bogdan's going to come. We need this in 30 seconds time. But here's the question I want you to ask as we walk through it. Because remember, this is a song and we hear it how we hear our modern day songs full of images, metaphors, poetry, all that kind of thing.

[16:38] Don't need to take everything literally because you're getting a lot of bother if you do that in this song. But you can work out what's going on as you feel the beat of this song. Right, Bogdan, here's the question.

What are they trying to tell us about their love for each other in this song? Bogdan, you come and read it and then we'll get back into it together. Morning.

I'm Bogdan, a member here. We're in Song of Songs 1 down to 2-7. Song of Songs 1. Solomon's Song of Songs.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes. Your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the young women love you.

Take me away with you. Let us hurry. Let the king bring me into his chambers. We rejoice in the delight of you. We praise your love more than wine. How right they are to adore you.

[17:40] Dark am I, yet lovely. Daughters of Jerusalem. Dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun.

My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of their vineyards, my own vineyard that I had to neglect. Tell me, you whom I love, where you gaze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday.

Why should I be like a veiled woman besides the flock of your friends? If you do not know a most beautiful woman, follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tent of the shepherds.

I liken you, my darling, to a mare among Therese chariot horses. Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold studded with silver. While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. My beloved is to me a statue of mare resting between my breasts. My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms from the vineyards of En Gedi.

[18:40] How beautiful you are, my darling. Oh, how beautiful. Your eyes are dull. How handsome you are, my beloved. Oh, how charming. And our bed is verdant. The barns of our house are chedders, our rafters are furs.

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily in the valleys. Like a lily among the ferns is my darling among the young woman. Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young man.

I delight to sit in the shade and its fruit is sweet to my taste. Let him lead me to the banquet hall and let his banner over me be love. Strengthen me with raisins, refreshing me with apples, for I am faint with love.

His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me. Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the dogs of the fields to not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. This is God's word. Amen. Nice. Okay. Bogdan did that without giggling. Excellent. It's brilliant.

[19:46] So friends, what we have here in the opening scene, remember this is a drama. So I think you can kind of make a case that there's a progression throughout this. We'll find the wedding day in a couple of weeks' time but what we have in this section is this couple kind of first meeting each other.

And really her song has got two notes to it. Now track with me in the text and you'll see this. She's telling us firstly why she's fallen for him.

Now notice how sensual this is. Verse 1. She enjoys his touch. She wants to be kissed by him all over. Verse 2. Guy's clearly got his old spice on.

He smells great. She says the thought of being with him is better than tasting the best wine. But here's what I want you to see. What else has she fallen for about this guy?

His name. Do you see it? His name. Which in the Bible is always associated with one's character. So in other words you hear this guy's name and you're thinking to yourself quality guy.

[21 : 00] He's a catch. And that's why she knows that all the girls want you. Now this guy's a shepherd. That's what he does. But to her he's like a king.

That's what's going on here. He's the cream of the crop. The love bug has well and truly bitten. She is smitten. And then we get this group. Do you see them called the others?

You jump in here at verse 4. The friends. They're kind of like the best friends of the woman. So this is bridesmaid material. This little group here. And all the way through the song they're kind of in the background watching this romance between this guy and this gal blossom and flourish.

And they pop up throughout the book offering wisdom. Now again I guess this group are a bit like that scene in Greece. Do you know the one where all the girls gather around Sandy and tell me more tell me more.

That's the kind of thing that's going on here. Right? And you've got to see this. Her happiness is their happiness. Do you see it?

[22 : 10] Her happiness is their happiness. Side note how wonderful are friends in your life like that who genuinely are happy for you when life goes well.

Who don't begrudge. Who don't get jealous. Friends who genuinely want the best for you. Can I say it's a wonderful sign of maturity? Be that kind of friend.

But the camera pans back to her and we get the sense that she's beginning to feel insecure about how she looks. Verse 5 I am very dark.

Similarly like the tents of Kedar. Kedar. Now those were tents that were notorious for being made of dark brown cowhide.

So you get the imagery here of what she's saying. Now you might be thinking why is that an issue? Well to have a tan in this day isn't a sign of health and wealth like it is today.

[23 : 17] Like she's just come back from the south of Spain or something like that. Right? Her skin is tanned. Do you see it? Verse 6 because her stepbrothers have made her go out and work in the farm.

Do you see it? And she's tanned from all that time that she's spent working in the baking sun. And I guess her tan says to the world that if you like she is a working class kind of girl.

And that's why she says my own vineyard I had to neglect. Now vineyard they're just a metaphor for her body. You get the picture? She's been working all day.

Her hair's everywhere. She smells terrible. She looks sweaty. Every one of her fingernails has got dirt underneath. And what she says she looks at herself she says I am a rose of Sharon a lily of the valleys.

Now we've got to work a wee bit hard to see what she's saying there. A rose of Sharon is like a common ground flower in this day. So if your garden is anything like mine right now this is like a daisy.

[24 : 33] Every single one looks the same. You couldn't tell the difference from any of them. There's nothing to see here. That's what she's saying about herself.

And all that means that she's thinking to herself I don't like the way I look. Now friends how modern is that? And I was reading this week about how one of the most popular social media picture filters made popular by the likes of Kim Kardashian is this thing called Insta Baddy.

And it's this filter where you can girls can puff up their lips and narrow their cheekbones. Young girls are using this all the time. And the tragedy of it is that experts have concluded about this filter that it's almost impossible to replicate in real life.

In other words it is totally unnatural. natural. And I feel that in a way maybe that I wouldn't have a decade ago with four daughters, the world that they're growing up in. Friends, what are we teaching them about beauty and where it comes from?

Here is a young woman feeling unworthy because she doesn't fit into social stereotypes about what beauty really is. and we need to see where she finds it.

[26 : 00] And friends, this is wonderful and if you take one thing from this today, take this. She doesn't find it from within herself. She finds it in what this man from the outside says is true about her and that he speaks it over her.

And his words from the outside into her life totally transform the game. Again, we're going to park that thought from where we finish at the end.

Because is she unworthy? What does this guy think about her? Is he going to run a mile when he really sees who she is? See him respond at verse 8. And see how his words transform her.

What does he say? Oh, most beautiful among women. What's he saying? The feeling is mutual.

What does he say? I love this. I compare you, my love, not to a summer's day.

He says, I compare you to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. Now, given you're like a horse, there's not a chat up line, guys, that we should be using anytime soon. But when you consider that Pharaoh's chariots, this is the king's horses.

[27 : 19] Now, if you remember that Aladdin street parade, you can tell what life stage I'm at, okay? You understand that the horses, the king's horses are going to be dressed in fine linen, adorned in jewels.

That's what she's saying. You're the best. Verse 15, you are beautiful, my love. How beautiful, you ask? Well, chapter 2, verse 2, you are like a lily among brambles.

Again, going to work hard. Lily among brambles. What is he saying? He's saying all the girls in the world are black and white and you're the only one in color.

That's what he's saying. He's got eyes for her alone. And see secondly then, her tell us then in light of his words to her, how she feels when she's with him.

Verse 3 of chapter 2, what great delight as I sat in his shadow. Get this, his banner over me was love. So she's telling everyone who'll listen that when she's in the presence of her man, she finds life, she finds acceptance, she finds love, and she finds security.

[28 : 37] love. She's with her man. That's the kind of love she feels when she's with her man. And that's why she turns to her friends, these daughters of Jerusalem, again verse seven, and she says, nothing compares to this.

Nothing compares to this. And then comes the refrain, one that we're going to hear repeated often throughout this letter. It's going to come up three times at key points throughout.

Her advice to her friends is do not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. Or in other words, until the time is right.

And you better believe in a few chapters time, she is going to tell us when the time is right. And I'm away that weekend, and I've given it to JT, and he'll do a wonderful job of that. But here is what she's saying.

You're not going to find a love like this in a one-night stand. It's too precious just to give away to somebody who may or may not be there the day after. No, to experience it, she's saying to her friends, with a person who has committed themselves, body and soul to you, we'll think about more about that next week, and isn't just in it for you on your Instagrammable best days, but will still be there loving you, holding you on your worst days.

[29 : 59] That's the right time. Friends, the sexual intimacy of this song, it's intimacy in the context of commitment. And so, two questions this text asks us to think about when it comes to the whole area of sex and romance.

Here they are. Number one, friends, are we looking for the right things? The wisdom here, particularly for those of us who aren't married, but are looking into this whole area of relationships, is to base those decisions on more than just how someone looks.

Are you looking for someone who has a name, their character, and in particular, do they love Jesus?

Do they love him? Do they seek to follow him? And as they follow him, are they going to love you like he loves you?

And would you strive to be someone of whom others look at and conclude, what a name. And for those of us who are married, let this remind us of the power of words.

[31 : 19] As we watch this young couple shower each other with compliments, the challenge is not to lose that sense of appreciation and affection for your spouse.

You know, what attracted you to your spouse in the first place? When was the last time you held hands in public? What do you notice about them today that you can compliment them on, particularly when it comes to their character?

Where are they growing in godliness? This says to us, don't let the fire of romance go out if it's in your power to do something about it.

So, friends, are we looking for the right things? And here's the second thing. Are we listening to the right words? Because maybe you hear the words of verse 15.

Behold, you are beautiful, my love. And you long that someone would say that about you. And this is where we're going to close this first section this morning.

[32 : 33] We're going to pick up so many more of these themes as we go. But I just want to finish here. You know, maybe you're of this generation who you played this game where you picked up a daisy and you did this whole thing, you pulled off the petals one by one.

Remember that line? He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not. Which way is it going to go? Strikes me that that is where this woman is at the start of this song.

I'm not sure he does. Friends, the good news for you today as we think about the broader purpose of this song and where it points us, is that if your faith is in Jesus, there is someone who says it over you and delights to say it over you.

He says, you are beautiful, my love, and his name is Jesus. And let's allow that to bring us wonderful assurance today.

No matter what your marital status, your romantic relationships, wherever you're at, friends, this is the voice that matters. And this is the voice that we need to allow to transform us.

[33 : 51] And the wonderful thing is the gospel says it's not token. The wonder of the gospel is that Jesus loved us even when we were his enemies.

He loved us when we were dead in our transgressions and sins. So it's not like we made the first move. The gospel says the initiative was all his.

A father that existed, father, son, spirit, the father sends the son, the son takes human flesh, the son came for us, he lived for us, he died for us, and if your faith is in him today, you can know on your best day and on your worst day that he loves you, he has taken all your shame, and all our mistakes, and all our regrets, and all our guilt, he has taken it away through his work on the cross.

And at the time he united us to himself and he clothed us with his beauty. And that's why he says to us on our best days and on our worst days, you are beautiful, my love.

Oh, friends, let us be reminded of our Savior and his stunning and his surprising love for us.

[35 : 27] Don't ever doubt it. No matter how you're feeling, no matter what season of life that you're in, do not doubt his love and his commitment to us.

And the thing is, Christ loves us and he longs through the circumstances of our lives to teach us and to birth in us that same love for him in return.

You know, we all feel that love is, as you two sang, the sweetest thing. but with Jesus, we can know why. Because his love for us is the story of the cosmos.

Can I just plug, just before we pray and finish, we've got tons of these books at the back to flog, and they're free, just take them or you can give a donation if you want. They're just called Surprised by Jesus.

Friends, if your affections for him have maybe petered out, maybe they're low, maybe you're struggling at the minute, maybe you're weary, can I highly suggest this book will help you.

[36 : 37] Maybe something fresh to read devotionally, maybe just something to read this afternoon. It is wonderful. Come and be surprised by Jesus. His love for us is the story of the cosmos.

Please come back next week, we'll get more into this song, but why don't just now we pause and let's pray because I realize that we've touched on a lot of things this morning and let's allow God through his Holy Spirit to minister to us this morning through his word.

And so Father, I am so aware of my inadequacy here, inadequacy here. Father, I pray that your spirit would be working in our lives.

Lord, even to the deepest of wounds, would he through your word be bringing that healing knowledge of who Jesus is today. Father, we just want to commit ourselves to you and we ask that you would help raise our eyes to consider the beauty and the worth of Jesus.

Thank you truly that he is the great lover of souls. Father, help us to rest in his wonderful love for us, we pray.

[37 : 56] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.