

“Better Than Wine”

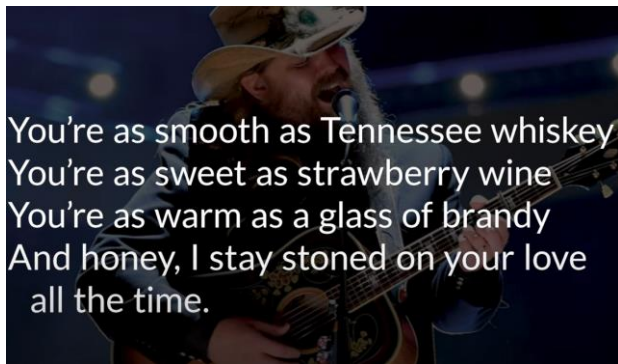
Several years ago, my wife introduced me to a new country song. Well, new to me at least. It tells a story of a man who's losing himself.

"Used to spend my nights out in a barroom," he says. "Liquor was the only love I'd known."

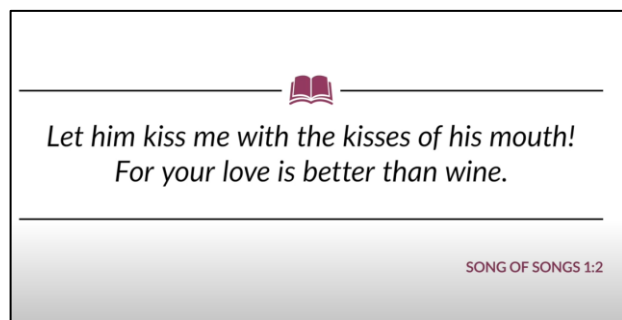
It's clearly something he's not proud of. But then something happens. He meets a woman; and she has this incredible effect on him. And he tells her,

"You rescued me from reaching for the bottom and brought me back from being too far gone."

Then comes the chorus. I'm not going to try to sing it because there's no way I can sing like Chris Stapleton! But there's something captivating about the lyrics in and of themselves.



This week, as I was reading the Song of Songs, I was reminded of that song by Chris Stapleton and those lyrics because they sound just like something that the author of this book would write. But also because that's how the poem begins. Although in this case it's the woman making references to alcohol.



Nothing like starting off with a bang, right? No introduction. No explanation of why she's so captivated by this man. Just pure, simple desire.

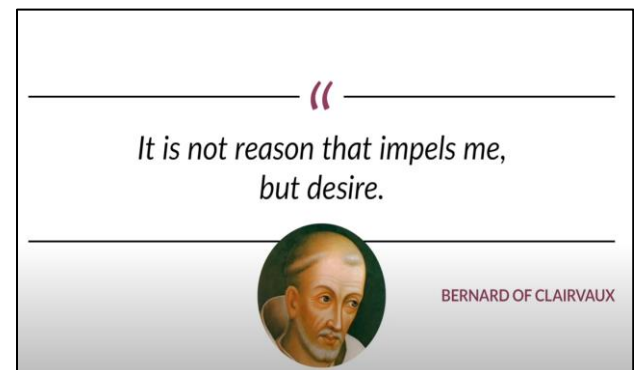
She yearns for him. She longs for his kisses. She craves it more than she craves food or wine. The first words that we hear in this song are words of insatiable desire - and maybe that should tell us something.

From the time, really of the early Enlightenment until today, it's been common to think of people as first and foremost thinkers. What matters most is what we think, what we believe, and that's what determines how we behave. There's certainly some truth to that. Rational thought is what separates us from animals, after all.

But recently, some philosophers have begun to seriously question this understanding of the human person. It's not our thoughts or our beliefs, they argue, that most drive our behavior; because the most powerful factor in our lives isn't reason they say, but desire. It's not so much what we think that determines who we are, but what we want, what we love, what we long for.

You are what you love - as one philosopher likes to say. And that's the first thing we encounter in this song.

Bernard of Clairvaux summarizes the bride's attitude this way:



But that doesn't mean that she has no reasons for her desire of this man. She does. And she tells us so. In verse 3, she says:



*Your name is oil poured out;
therefore virgins love you.*

SONG OF SONGS 1:3

On the face of it, that doesn't make a lot of sense. Of course, it's easy to imagine a young woman who's so in love that she is thrilled even to hear the name of her beloved.

We might imagine her sitting in her bedroom, writing the name of this man in her journal, with little hearts all around it. But if that's what she means, then why would she say that his name is the reason that other women love him? Your name is like poured out oil "therefore" virgins love you?

But all of this makes more sense when you remember that when the Bible refers to a person's name, it is not just a reference to what they're called. It's a reference to their reputation, to their character, to everything that they are. Your name is who people know you to be.

So this woman is not saying that she simply loves the sound of her beloved's name. She's saying that it's his reputation, his character, who he is - that is what enchants her.

Then she continues and we begin to understand even more what it is that she finds so attractive about this man. In verse five, she's speaking to some of her own peer's - daughters of Jerusalem she calls them. She says something rather curious about herself.



I am very dark, but lovely.

SONG OF SONGS 1:5

She knows that she's lovely. At least part of her knows it. But she's also very aware that her looks don't really meet the normal standards of beauty, because she's been hard at work out in the sun, and it's darkened her skin in a way that's unattractive, or at least would have been considered unattractive at the time.

And she knows that. It's why in the next verse she says:



*Do not gaze at me because I am dark,
because the sun has looked upon me.*

SONG OF SONGS 1:6

There's at least a part of this young woman that feels insecure, unsure of whether or not this man will love her. And it may not just be on account of her skin. In verse six, she says that her brothers were angry with her and made her work outside and tend the vineyards. And then she adds something rather odd.



... but my own vineyard I have not kept!

SONG OF SONGS 1:6

She's obviously speaking metaphorically. She wouldn't have had a private vineyard of her own to maintain, and she may be referring once again to her complexion. My brothers forced me to work outside and with all that work, I've totally neglected my own appearance. Maybe.

But some scholars argue that her reference to not keeping or not guarding her own vineyard is, in fact, a subtle way of admitting that she's failed to guard her virginity. She's failed to keep herself

pure, which may be why her brothers are angry in the first place.

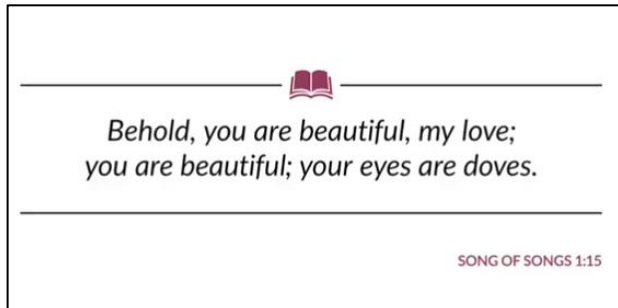
And whether or not that's true, two things are abundantly clear.

- First, this woman is madly in love with this man.
- Second, like many people who find themselves smitten, she's unsure how he'll respond.

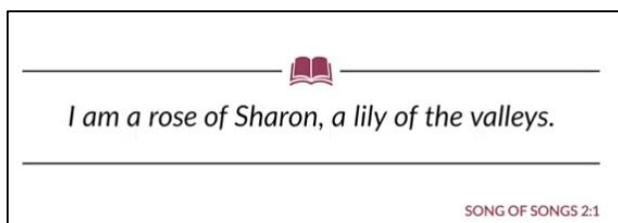
His first words to her come in verse eight, and there's a kind of playfulness to what he says:

She wants to know where he is, where he's keeping his flocks so she can see him. And he responds by saying, well, if you do not know, O fairest among women, why don't you just follow the sheep tracks?

It almost sounds like he's teasing her. But then in verse nine, he drops the teasing and begins to tell her how lovely she is. And then notice what he says in verse 15:

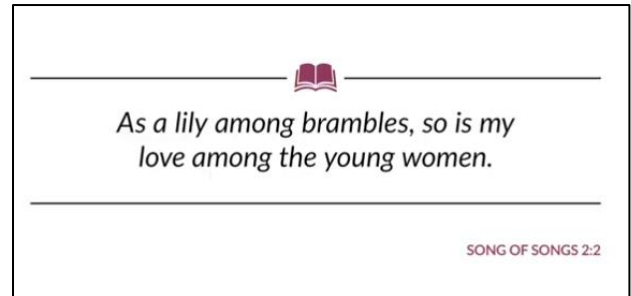


You can start to see with these words why it is that she loves this man. She knows about him. She adores who he is, his name. But maybe even more than that she is drawn to him because no matter how unsure of herself or how unworthy she may feel, he finds her beautiful and his words make her begin to believe it.

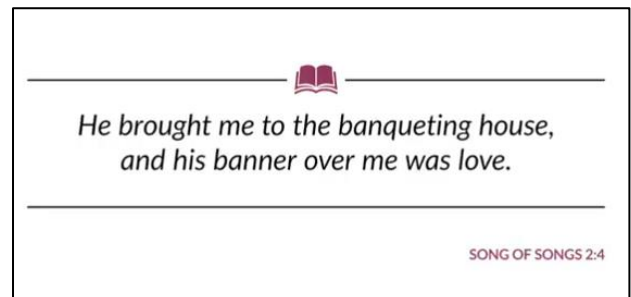


This may not be quite as strong of a statement as it seems. Obviously she's beginning to be more convinced of her beauty. She's starting to think of herself as a flower. But these flowers that she names - they are common flowers. So she may be saying that she still feels a little common, like a wildflower.

But if that's the case, his response should erase any final insecurities:



If you're a wildflower, he's saying, then to me you are a wildflower standing tall in a sea of weeds and thorns. And apparently she loves that response, because the next five verses after that contain some of her most extravagant words yet. She delights in this man. She likens him to an apple tree that will provide her both shade and food. She thrills at his ability to provide a home for her, and begins to imagine a future home with him. And she's especially captivated by the affection that he just seems to so freely shower upon her.



That's the literal, straightforward meaning of these opening poems and back and forth.

But what does this tell us about our relationship with God?

Well, first of all, it tells us that the spiritual life begins with and that it must include not just belief, but love. And it's interesting that the love with which the song begins is not the love of the man for the woman, but the woman's love and her desire for the man. Which means that the song begins by speaking of our desire for God. To quote the Lutheran theologian Robert Jensen:

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When we read the Song for the love between Israel and the Lord, its account of that love does not begin with the Lord's initiative, but with Israel's longing and the Lord's desirability.

ROBERT JENSON

Now we need to be careful that we don't let this observation lead us to the wrong conclusion. That doesn't mean that the song is suggesting that our relationship with God begins with our initiative. I'll explain why in a minute, but for now, just think about that.

What this song seems to be suggesting is exactly what Saint Augustine knew so well, which is that we are creatures of desire. We are creatures driven by longings and wants, and that is precisely the foundation of our relationship with God. True faith, insofar as this woman exemplifies it, doesn't just want favor or forgiveness from God. True faith wants God himself, Christ himself.

How does Psalm 42 put it?

As a deer years for streams of water,
 so I yearn for You, O God.
 My whole being thirsts for God,
 for the living God.
 When shall I come and see
 the presence of God?

PSALM 42:2-3

It is desire that drives this woman toward her lover, and it is desire (the psalmist says) that drives him toward God.

And that that way of speaking, it's not meant to be exceptional, that is meant to be the normative experience in the spiritual life. True faith, as Jonathan Edwards famously argued, true faith is not an emotionless set of beliefs about God, nor is it a life of apathetic duty. True faith is passionate. It will always involve what Edwards called religious affections - love, hate, fear, desire, grief, joy, These strong passions.

If we learn anything from this song, then we must learn that a true relationship with God cannot be devoid of such passion. Whether you know it or not, you are a person of deep desire and longing and love, and that desire must play a role in your spiritual life. You remember what Jesus said in his letter to the church in Ephesus - in Revelation 2? He begins by commending them for their toil and endurance, and he also commends them for their passionate hatred of evil; which may seem surprising, but it just reaffirms the importance of passions. But then he says this:

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But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

REVELATION 2:4

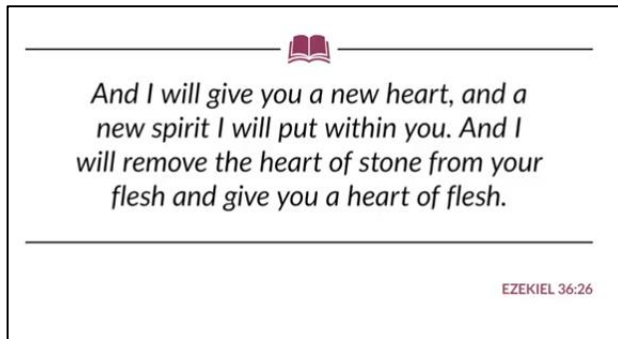
They were dutiful enough. They were even passionate when it came to despising the things they should despise. But their faith lacked the fire of love. That fire that's so apparent in the words of the bride. She doesn't just believe in the man. She yearns for him.

That's the first thing that we learn from this song. But I also think there's a second lesson for us.

Remember what I said - that just because the song begins with the bride's longing, we

shouldn't therefore conclude that our relationship with God begins with our initiative?

In fact, the Bible clearly and repeatedly tells us that whatever longing and love we have for God, that's not something that we have conjured up. Even that is a gift from God. In Romans 5, Paul says that the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Which in some ways is a fulfillment of what God had said centuries earlier through the prophet Ezekiel.



So you see, while the song begins with the bride's experience, with her longing and her desire, we know that in the spiritual life, even the love that we feel begins not with our initiative, but with God's.

But I think that this song can actually teach us something even further. Because what is it that inspires the woman, her passionate love, and her desire for this man? Remember, she begins by feeling unsure of herself, perhaps unworthy of his love. But she starts to forget all that when she begins to hear his overwhelming words of love for her. He tells her that she is beautiful, even though she's dark and hasn't kept her own garden. He tells her that she is a wild flower in a sea of brambles, and that only inflames her love even more. She sees how he cares for her, how he provides shade and sustenance for her, how he feeds her, how his banner over her is love and that wins her over.

It reminds me of George Herbert's poem "Love." Like the Song of Songs, it's a poem about love.

But really about how God pursues us in love. And it begins with someone who feels deeply unworthy of being loved.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.

GEORGE HERBERT
"LOVE (III)"

Love recognizes the hesitation that this person feels and gently tries to prod further, asking if there is anything that he lacks. A guest, he answers, worthy to be here. Love insists that he is the guest, but again there's hesitation.

I, the unkind, the ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

GEORGE HERBERT
"LOVE (III)"

You can see how love is chipping away at this person. Every protest, every hesitant thought, every shameful feeling is being countered and overcome by love's unconditional adoration.

And finally, the person admits what it is that's really holding them back. Yes, you have made my eyes. But the truth is, he says, I have marred them. I have sinned. Let my shame, he says, go where it doth deserve.

But love just won't let it go. When the person admits their guilt and shame, and how they've misused the gifts they've been given, love simply says, "and know you not who bore the blame?" It doesn't matter what the person says. It doesn't matter how ugly or how unworthy they feel. Love just keeps inviting, keeps insisting that they sit down and enjoy the meal that's been prepared.

Until finally the person concedes.

So I did sit and eat.

GEORGE HERBERT
"LOVE (III)"

It's a beautiful depiction of God's relationship with us. Because, like the person in the poem and like the woman in the song, we know our faults and our flaws. We know that we've made ourselves ugly and unworthy.

God bade us welcome. Yet our souls draw back guilty of dust and sin. But just like the bridegroom, God doesn't stop. He showers us with love. He bears the blame. He makes us beautiful.

Gregory of Nyssa, the 4th century church father, noted the similarities between how the bridegroom treats this darkened bride and how Christ treats us. Because we too are sinners, Gregory says, we too are dark ones. But Christ, he says:

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Christ came into the world to make dark ones bright, not calling the righteous to himself, but calling sinners to repentance, whom he caused to shine like stars by the waters of rebirth.



GREGORY OF NYSSA

And maybe you too, like the bride, maybe you feel darkened. Or maybe like the man in the poem you draw drawback: ashamed, guilty of dust and sin.

But you know Jesus has a way of igniting love in our hearts. And the way that he does that is through the gift of his own love. When, like the bride, you begin to pay attention to the bridegroom and his care for you and his delight in you, and how even when you feel ugly, he makes you beautiful.

Then perhaps you too will begin to realize why his love is even better than wine.