

TRANSCRIPT: A Passionate Love of God
By John Arnold

The Text: Song of Solomon 2:8-13.

"The voice of my beloved. behold he comes leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a Gazelle or a young stag. Behold there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me, arise, my love, my fair one, and come away and low.

The winter has passed. The reign is over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth. The time of singing has come and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth it's fig and the vines are in blossom. They give forth fragrance. Arise my love, my fair one, and come away."

THE SERMON

I've been preaching 25 years and you know what? I've only preached on this book one other time in 25 years. It's not one that gets looked at much and actually even from its very origins The song of Solomon was a hotly debated book as to whether it should even be in the scriptures. As I said a moment ago, it's kind of a love letter, if you will, between a man and a woman. There are times where it gets pretty passionate, even a bit racy, if you will, and there was great debate as to whether or not it should be in scripture as early as the first century AD. We see some of that debate going on among the rabbis. Ultimately, eventually there was a rabbi who kind of sort of won out eventually over the debate. He said of the song of songs,

"The whole world is not worth the day that the song of songs was given by God to Israel all scriptures are holy. But the song of songs is the holy of holies."

So to him it was the penultimate scripture, if you will, out of the scriptures that they had at that time. There are others who shared his sentiment later on. One of the early church fathers, a man named Origen, wrote a ten volume commentary on the Song of Songs, which I just can't even imagine. I haven't looked at that yet. I can't imagine how he wrote for ten volumes on this little book. It's only eight chapters.

In the Middle Ages, we have more commentary on this book than any other book in the Bible. And then last but not least, I'll mention Bernard of Clairvaux. He was from, I want to say around the 13th, 14th century. Bernard, wrote 86 sermons from the song of Solomon and he never got past the second chapter!

So I'm hoping he didn't do it as a series that would be 86 weeks. It'd be almost two years for the first two chapters. That's like a word by word commentary, you know?

So, obviously there's something in this that's worth looking at if it has demanded that much time and attention by. Some of the people that have gone before us. And yet I've never been in a class that's taught it. And as I said, I've preached it only once in 25 years. So we're going to slow down, really going to look at this. It is, as I said, a poem that is a love letter between two people. Why would it be in the Bible?

I think God wanted it there as a reflection of just how much he loves us. An allegory, a story, where we could look and go, "Wow, okay, I want you to see how much these two people love one another. This is how much I love you, Israel, and how much you should love me."

And then by extension later, how much the church should love Christ and how much Christ loves the church. And that's not a big stretch to imagine. There are numerous places in the Old Testament where God compares his relationship with Israel to that of a relationship between a man and a wife. And when Israel is unfaithful, he describes it as adultery because marriage is the most intimate, the most faithful, the most dedicated covenant that we have and know of. So why wouldn't God use it to reflect and teach us about the covenant he has with us?

And this is also reflected in the New Testament. I won't read through Paul's whole passage, but there's a couple of places where Paul talks about the relationship between men and women. And sometimes people get really hot and bothered about those passages because those are the passages where Paul talks about, you know, women submitting to their husbands and husbands loving your wives as Christ loved the church.

What a lot of times people miss in that whole thing is after Paul talks very distinctly about how much we should care for one another as husbands and wives. And he paints this wonderful picture of that. The very last statement he makes in that passage is that this is a mystery. He says, "I am using it to teach you about the church"

So the covenant of marriage is a wonderful, wonderful reflection of God's love for us and in the lectionary this is paired up with a passage from Mark that is a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees about the disciples not washing their hands. They're not observing this tradition, this ritual of washing hands. And this made the Pharisees were very upset with the disciples.

Jesus basically looks at them basically says, "Stop majoring on the minors." because what he tells them is, "Why are you worried about these traditions of men? And yet you're ignoring the commandments of God. You're not loving God. Because ultimately what is his fight with the Pharisees? It isn't over ritual. He doesn't talk about washing hands at all. He doesn't come back and go, "Well, okay, this is why we're not washing our hands. We washed them earlier."

He doesn't do that. He doesn't come back and explain or try to defend what the disciples are doing. His whole complaint with the Pharisees is this, your hearts are far from God. You're doing all this stuff and your hearts are far from God. You're ignoring the most basic commandments.

One time I preached this text from mark and um, I didn't wear a robe that Sunday. I my robe in my office and I came walking in and one of the ushers did this double take. And he says, "I think you're missing something." And I was like, "What are you talking about?" And I went on up there and started. You could feel this nervous energy in the room because I had never ever walked in there without my robe on to lead worship.

When I finally got to the point where I was preaching a sermon. I said, "You know what? How many of you were like really uncomfortable because I'm standing up here without a robe. Well, you know what? That's a tradition that we've created. It's a meaningful tradition, but that's a tradition we've come up with and you're all bent out of shape over that. And guess what? We shouldn't be. . We're grossly

missing bigger things in the picture of God. For weeks now, we have desperately been trying to find someone to teach our children's Sunday school and we can't get anyone to step up to the plate to teach Sunday school. And one of the most basic things God told us is to pass faith onto our children and we're failing to teach our children. Yet, you're worried I don't have a robe on this morning. We might really ought to rethink our priorities a little bit."

I had somebody sign up to teach Sunday school, by the way, by the end of that sermon. I need to keep that one in my hip pocket as a great way to get a volunteer.

You know, we get upset, we get bent out of shape sometimes in church over things that are majoring on the minors. Things that are just trappings, if you will. And in the middle of all that, we're failing to love God. And at the end of the day, it's all about loving God.

My wife and I are greatly overeducated around God. I have a master's of divinity. So I went and I took several years of my life and I did nothing but read about God, read about the Bible, read about prayer and work on that. And I've spent 25 years doing that. My wife has two masters and a doctorate. She's really overeducated about God. But the two of us together, I think fall short in God's eyes. We fall short of a young woman I met, back in April of 1988.

I met her on a retreat that was very profound for me. It is similar to Pilgrimage. The retreat is called HEC. HEC stands for handicapped encounter Christ. And what was unique about this retreat, unlike anything I'd ever been on, is that they paired able bodied people with disabled people as partners for the weekend. That has a profound impact on how you experience the weekend.

I had for my partner a giant of faith in my eyes. A man named Dan Scannell. Dan's now gone. He was severely disabled. He was in a wheelchair. He essentially was nonverbal and he had extremely limited movement. With great effort he could use a computer board to pull up common words so that he could speak with people electronically. Also, he could sort of make some grunting type sounds to let you know yes or no. Having him as my partner was very humbling.

But the person that I'm referring to that I feel like maybe closer to the heart of God than Susan and I with all our learning and all that education was a young woman who was name was Angie. One afternoon we had just finished listening to a talk and we were speaking in small groups. As we were doing so Angie, this young woman stood up to speak. I would guess she was late twenties. I really had a hard time pegging her age because not only did she have some physical disability, but there were some developmental disability. She was almost childlike in her demeanor, but I remember vividly Angie standing up while we're having our conversations around our tables and she said, in her halting speech. "I believe that if Angie were the only person ever to live, Jesus still would have came and died for me"

You could hear a pin drop in that room and I thought, she gets it. She gets it, perhaps more than all of us with all our learning and our big words and our fancy theological terms that we might come up with. She gets just how much God loves her and it was obvious how much she loved God back because of that.

And a life of faith is really that simple. It's about loving God. We want to get so distracted on so many other things. And in today's text from the Song of Solomon text, twice we are told, "Come away My Beloved, my fair one come away, my beloved, my fair one. Twice that comes up.

My question for you is, "How do you respond to that? What does it look like and what would it mean for you to come away, to be with God in some way, to spend time with God in some way.

God calls us into intentional time with him and to help you with that a little bit. I'll wrap up with this. Going back to those five love languages I mentioned in the children's sermon, I think there could be some keys there. Uh, for one, let's go to words of encouragement. I think one way we can love God in terms of a words of encouragement is actually to tell God I love you.

When we had the last potluck supper, I shared with folks what I call formula of praise. Where you simply tell God I love you, and then began to tell God who God is to you and what God is to you. So, one way to love God is verbally.

The second way we might express love through those love languages is through obedience. If we think in terms of acts of kindness or acts of service. We can love God by being obedient to what we know God wants us to do. Sometimes I have found God has needles on to do something, you know, leans on me to do something. The more I resist it and the more I walk away from it, the quieter God seems to get.

It's kind of like you're asking God for more, but God's responding, "Well, I've given you something and you haven't been faithful with that yet. Why don't you do that first and then I'll get back to the other things."

So I think through obedience, through serving God, through acts of kindness, if you will, we can love God.

What about loving God through quality time? How often do you just sort of tarry with God...where you just take time to step apart and have time just for God. Obviously, right now you're doing that and that's good. But you know what, I think we need to do that probably on a daily basis. Take some kind of time for God.

Imagine if we only ate once a week instead of a eating every day. We need to feed our soul. We need to nourish your soul and take time, and Jesus did it. How we're not going to get away from doing something that Jesus needed.

There are several places where we're told he withdrew and he went to a wilderness place or he went to a separate place and he took time out. In fact, he oftentimes took time out when things were most demanding. We have a habit of thinking, "Oh, I'm too busy right now to take time out for God."

Whenever we feel too busy, that's when we need it the most. I love something the reformer Martin Luther once said, "I have so much to do I couldn't get by with less than three hours of prayer."

Excuse me, if I did three hours of prayer, I wouldn't get anything else done. I have a different mindset around that, but we need to take time to tarry with God.

Waht about the love language physical touch? Now we can't reach out and touch God, but I do think we can express our love of God physically. For example, when you pray, do you bow ever before God? Do we humble ourselves before God? I'm not a great kneeler in prayer, but the times where I have knelt in prayer have always been very powerful times,

What can we do to humble ourselves before God in some physical way? Maybe we lift our hands up or like David dance before the Lord. Y'all might freak everybody out if you started dancing in Presbyterian worship one morning, but God might be very happy about it.

The bottom line is, do we physically somehow show God how much we care and love God?

And then what's our last one? Oh yeah, gift giving. Do you give? Do you give generously? Do you somehow take and honor God through what you have? God gives us the means we need. Do we support the Ministry of God with what God has given us? That's another way that we can show great love of God is by giving. So there you have it. There's those five.

I would encourage you to think about what calls to you most out of those five as a way to respond to God's call to "Come away my beloved. Come away, my fair one." I would encourage you to heed that call. Make a conscious effort this week. Let's close with prayer...

CLOSING PRAYER

Most? Holy God, we are grateful for your love. And you know, just like any relationship, if we're not intentional about showing how much we love someone, there's a good chance it won't happen. We'll neglect it and we'll fail to do it. And we do not want to do that with you.

Lord, we want to come before you with our love in very tangible ways, God, guide and lead our hearts this morning to know what that is that we can do. Um, Lord, we also come before you this morning with needs. One of the ways you love us is you invite us to come before you with the needs of our hearts and to let you know what is anxiety inducing for us/ You tell us to cast our cares upon you. And so we pause for a moment in silence, Lord. And we're simply going to do that. We're simply going to cast our cares on you and trust in your faithfulness to hear our prayers. So now in silence, Lord, hear our prayers.

(pause in silence)

Thank you God for hearing our prayers. And lastly, Lord, we come before you with words that your son taught his disciples to pray, saying our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.