

The Flame of the Lord

Hello & welcome to the *Voice of the Church*; I'm Pastor Ryan Swale, & today we're gonna look at just a few verses toward the end of the Song of Songs, what many take to be the key to understanding the whole book: Song of Songs 8, verses 5 through 7, where it says, "Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor. ***Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong as death, & jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.*** Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it'd be utterly despised."

I had the privilege of preaching this for a wedding not long ago, & I did something unusual; I began my sermon with the story of a bride dying of cholera just before her wedding... There was a young lady named Nancy Thornwell engaged to be married. Her father was a Presbyterian pastor in the 1800's, &, as her pastor, he had the privilege of announcing the upcoming wedding. Only, in the weeks to follow, Nancy contracted cholera, & the wedding would instead be a funeral...

And, as Nancy was on her deathbed, her father came to her side, stricken with grief, & cried, "*Oh, my daughter, what a tragedy; this was supposed to be your wedding!*" To which young Nancy replied, "Do not weep for me, father. For I go to a far greater groom than I am prepared to meet..." And not long after that, they buried Nancy in her wedding dress with the words on her tomb, "As a bride prepared for her groom."

Nancy understood something that's important for us to understand: that marriage is not ultimate, but is shadow of something else. Or to use the words of our passage, a 'flash' or spark of the divine flame of God's love in the gospel... God's love is ultimate; marriage is penultimate; a pointer to that heavenly marriage to the greater groom than you or I are prepared to meet... And what this passage does is teach us 3 aspects of marital-love that point to God's love for us in Christ: the bride speaks of *faithful* love; *fierce* love; & *fruitful* love. And these 3 things, when present in earthly marriages, "paint a picture" of the greater love that the Son of David, of whom this song sings, has for his bride...

First of all, she speaks of a *faithful* love. "Set me as a seal on your heart & on your arm." That's covenant-language, like we sometimes use of baptism (it's a *sign* & *seal*). And she's asking for an outward seal of his inward affection for her (something like a wedding ring).

Malachi 2 calls marriage a covenant, & she's saying, "This covenant needs a sign, so that you & everyone around us will know that I belong to you & you belong to me." She's looking for a sign of his faithfulness. His faithfulness that she says is to be "strong as death," that means *irreversible*. Just as death is final, so the love signified & sealed on his arm is to be irreversible: *'til death do us part*. It's not a contract where he remains with her as long as she provides some service; but it's a *covenant*. And in this covenant relationship, his faithfulness to her is unto death. Even when she has nothing to offer. And in that way, his faithfulness to her even when she appears underserving, pictures the faithful love of the Greater-than-Solomon & Son-of-David of whom this song sings. Who loves us despite our unloveliness.

Next, she speaks of a *fierce* love. "Jealousy is *fierce* as the grave." It's a *passionate* love. One that'll not tolerate rivals, but is rightly jealous of anything that may drive a wedge between them... Like the jealousy of which the 10 Commandments speak when it says God doesn't want us worshipping idols. There's a right kind of jealousy when a relationship is to be exclusive (and I would say is not appropriate *until* that relationship is exclusive But once it is, there is a fierce love, forsaking all others). A fiery passion that we see described in those words, "a flash of fire."

I believe it was Bruce Lee who called marriage "friendship caught on fire." A passionate love that starts as a flame & matures into these deep-burning unquenchable coals... And is so deep & unquenchable that nothing can stop it. Nor would anything be traded for it. But it says, "If a man offered to give you all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised." In comparison to your bride, everything else is to be despised. "None but the love of God above it, & the love of all others beneath it." And when there is that fiery, passionate, fierce love in a where a husband & wife do not merely tolerate each other but are *affectionately desirous* of one another, the fierce passion of Jesus is foreshadowed – a flash of the flame that took him to the Cross because he so loved his bride, with a love that is stronger than death... That's what this passage is teaching us: faithful & fierce love like that is a flash of the very flame of the Lord...

And the other thing we see in this passage is that it's also to be a fruitful love, as it speaks of her waking him under the apple-tree where his mother was in labor with him. This idea of fruitfulness speaks of the purpose of marriage as being "outward-looking," not only about gazing into the eyes of one another, but living together in fruitfulness & blessing to the world. In the same way that God's love for his people, throughout the OT, overflows in blessing to the nations.

And his love for his bride in the New, overflows in those words of Revelation 22 where the Spirit & the **Bride** say, “Come! Let everyone who thirsts drink freely” and find satisfaction. Marital-love in the Bible, patterned after Christ’s for his people is to be faithful, fierce, & fruitful, overflowing in blessing to others... Not a selfish love that only wants to take. Not a fickle love that only wants to be faithful when it’s convenient. Not an apathetic love that’s indifferent. But a faithful, fierce, & fruitful love.

And the Bible says when that love is lived out in Christian marriages, the story of the gospel is dramatized, where Christ is **faithful** to his people, even when they’re unfaithful; where he’s **fiercely** passionate such that he’d trade not only “all the wealth of his house” for her, but the glory of heaven to die on a Cross; and **fruitful**, such that when he gives us himself, he does so that we might have life & have it abundantly, overflowing in blessing to others.

That’s the sort of love this Song is commending; and it points us to Jesus. Whose faithful love to his people is the only thing that enables us to love like this... And, so, if you’re listening today & you think to yourself, “Wow! I could never be faithful like that; I could never love with that kind of godly passion; or outward-looking desire for my marriage to be a blessing to the world, but I’m actually pretty selfish.” That selfishness that you see in your marriage is a little microcosm of the selfishness & sin in your heart from which you need to be saved...

And the good news of the Song of Songs is that the love that’s depicted in the spark of marital-love is the love of Jesus who came into this world to die for your sins. As Martin Luther said, to take you in your impurity, like a harlot, and unite himself to you so that his royalty might be yours: “simultaneously justified yet sinful; a harlot by heart & queen by status.” That’s the story of the gospel – the only solution to your sin, & then the pattern for you to live in light of: loving faithfully, fiercely, & fruitfully to the glory of God so that something of Christ & the church might be seen in your marriage... That’s the story the Song of Songs sings. The story of the Son of David and his Bride... Thank you for listening, and may God bless you.