

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 2, 2018

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#) & [James 1:17-27](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Song of Solomon 2:8-13 (From *Homiletics*; “Dreamwork”, September 2, 2018)

Based on Song of Solomon/Song of Songs/Canticles chapters 4 and 7, a hilarious cartoon appeared decades ago in the *Wittenburg Door* magazine, titled “The Song of Solomon Illustrated (for our literalist friends).” It depicts the beloved woman quite literally as having such “lovely” features as a stone-tower neck, flock-of-goats hair and twin fawns in the “chestal area.” The point is that the Song of Solomon, like much biblical poetry, is to be interpreted figuratively. Yet how far should Song’s metaphors be pressed? How is Song to be interpreted as a whole?

The title, in the Hebrew of 1:1, is the superscription: “The song of songs, which pertains to Solomon.” “The song of songs” is a Hebraic way of expressing a superlative: It means “the greatest/best of all songs” (or “Solomon’s Most Excellent Love Song” — NET), just as “holy of holies” means the most holy place (the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle or temple) and “king of kings” means the most exalted king. The “which pertains to Solomon” (*‘asher lishlomoh* in Hebrew) can mean “about Solomon,” but it’s usually understood as an attribution of authorship, just as a similar expression attributes several psalms to David. The question is whether such superscriptions are original to the texts or are later editorial headings. As with the book of Proverbs, some material could have been written by the wise King Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:32: “He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five”) and some written by others, and then compiled by a later editor.

Song 2:8-13 is one of multiple similar songs within the collection that speaks of love between a man and a woman. “Male and female [God] created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply....’” (Genesis 1:27c-28a). A relatively balanced number of interchanges of love poetry are spoken by the man and the woman, although the book begins and ends with songs by the woman. Parallels exist to Egyptian love poetry and to other biblical passages. Parts of Psalm 45 (a “love song” — see the title) are associated with this text in the Revised Common Lectionary. Psalm 45 is addressed to God’s anointed king over Israel, on the occasion of a royal wedding. See also Isaiah 5:1-7 (commonly called “The Song of the Vineyard”): “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill” (v. 1). See also Proverbs 5:15-19.

There are three primary systems of interpretation of Song. Note that none of these is fully “literal” (see *Wittenburg Door* above). The first says that Song gives expression to human love, namely love between a man and a woman. Most American readers would not find the poetry to be *explicitly* sexual, though it has been interpreted that way; it is certainly erotic in one sense or another. This is likely the original meaning of these songs when written; it is also the understanding of most modern interpreters.

But for quite some time, Jewish and Christian commentators alike, out of embarrassment and/or theological yearning and insight, followed what could be called a quasi-allegorical interpretation in which the detailed metaphorical love language conveys God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church (or for the individual) and vice versa. This, along with the attribution of Solomonic authorship, may partially explain why the book was originally accepted into the canon of the Old Testament and not expurgated from it by Christians. But it overlooks the greater likelihood that Song initially was intended to be a compilation of human love poetry.

A third interpretation combines the best of both the human love and divine love interpretations. This understanding finds the love between man and woman to be *analogous* to that of God for Israel and Christ for the church or for individuals along with human beings' loving response to God. Have you ever noticed the similarities between secular love songs and much Christian devotional music and poetry? Sometimes when you first hear or read them, you have to pay close attention to the fuller context to see what type of love poetry it actually is. Even though Song itself should be interpreted as erotic love poetry, rather than allegory, there are undeniable parallels in Scripture *comparing* love between a man and a woman to that of God/Israel and Christ/church, e.g., Hosea 2:14-23; Isaiah 62:4-5; Ephesians 5:21-33 (after a discussion of the mutual responsibilities of wife to husband and husband to wife, the writer compares their relationship to that of Christ and the church); Revelation 19:6-9; 21:1-7 — the marriage supper of the Lamb (the crucified and now-risen Jesus Christ) and the new Jerusalem (which is the church, in context) coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband. The "your God" / "my people" is covenantal language (as in Exodus 6:4, 7; Jeremiah 11:1-6), based on divine *hesed* (steadfast love/covenant loyalty). In that light, it is quite legitimate to use the text of Song of Songs analogically, though not allegorically. Among others who have discovered this possibility, see Robert W. Jenson's *Interpretation*-series commentary on Song of Songs. An interesting side note, in the light of how Song has been interpreted: Although Song, as the book of Esther, makes no direct mention of "God" or "Lord," there's a possible exception in the last part of Song 8:6. Roland E. Murphy ("Song of songs, book of." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, 154) translates it: "[Love's] darts are fiery darts, the flame of Yah [a short form of Yahweh]" (which would mean lightning coming from the Lord, per the Koehler-Baumgartner lexicon). Similarly, see the New Jerusalem Bible and the New American Standard Bible, as well as NIV's footnoted alternative translation. This is a possible legitimate understanding of the *consonantal* (unpointed) Hebrew text.

Song 2 (the whole chapter) is to be understood in the light of the book as a whole (see everything above). This passage is from the woman's perspective. The woman's beloved is like a strong gazelle or young stag (see vv. 9, 17). He invites her tenderly and lyrically to arise and come away with him into the springtime of their lives. The foxes (amorous distractions or other hindrances to the blossoming of their love) that might spoil their vineyard are to be caught. "My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies" (v. 16). God still invites us to enjoy human love *and* to become part of the mutually passionate love-relationship between God and God's people through Jesus Christ.

Commentary on James 1:17-27 (From *Homiletics*; "YouTube It!", September 2, 2018)

The epistle of James is known as one of the "general" epistles. While it begins with salutations and greetings like any other letter, the non-specific discussion in the body of the document reveals that it was not written for any specific congregation. James' style has most often been cited as a form of *parenesis* — a string of admonitions or moral maxims bound together with very little narrative. However, this so-called "epistle" could just as easily have had its origin as a Christian homily or sermon.

It was the tone of these maxims that caused Martin Luther to cast such disparaging remarks at James' epistle. Luther felt that James' emphasis on the "works" of faith (encompassing all of 1:19–2:26), on Christian activity, undermined Paul's emphasis on justification by faith alone. But even though (while in one of his famous snits) Luther christened James an "epistle of straw," the Reformer never actually relegated James to a "second canon" with peripheral importance.

The verses read in this week's epistle lesson clearly demonstrate James' emphasis on "works" as the tangible effects of faith. Yet verse 17 begins by acknowledging the tremendous gifts that have come to creation from God's own hand. The "perfect gift" James refers to is discussed in more detail later, but the fact that it is clearly a "gift" seems to negate any fears about James suggesting we somehow "earn" God's pleasure through good works.

James' intriguing "Father of lights" image is unique to Scripture. Evidently, James means to stress God's creative power and identity. As "Father" of all these lights, or the stars and other heavenly bodies, God's role as Creator and Originator of every good thing is emphasized. This creative God remains unchanged with "no variation or shadow," unlike the heavenly lights God has created, which are constantly changing. While the terms the author uses here are definitely references to astronomical events (trope and parallax), the events themselves are not specified (e.g., an eclipse, the waxing and waning of the moon or the shift between night and day).

Verse 18 contrasts with the reference in verse 15 to "that desire ..." that "gives birth to sin." James' unique vocabulary is evidenced again by the fact that the phrase "gives birth to" is found only in these biblical verses. God's demonstration of the ultimate generous act was having "brought us forth by the word of truth." Our "new birth" is accomplished through this "word of truth." While "first fruits" was originally a cultic reference and as such is well-established in OT tradition, "first fruits" also has a specifically Christian reference. Christians are the "first fruits" of a redeemed creation (see Romans 8:19-23).

Verse 19 begins with James' familiar address "my beloved," but his topic reveals that some of those he is speaking to are not so well loved at all. One of James' recurring themes is the danger of an unrestrained tongue. His preaching against anger is dealt with most extensively in 3:1-12, but he continues to bring it into this discussion as well. Note that while the NRSV begins this discussion with the pastoral-sounding "You must understand this," James' imperative could also be translated with a more scolding tone: "Of this you can be certain ..."

James connects his repeated diatribes against anger with his other main focus here on "works" by proclaiming in verse 20 that such outbursts "do not produce God's righteousness." Human anger is not a tool God uses in producing divine judgment, so it is not a beneficial work or evidence in Christian life. Unguarded anger spewing out of Christians negates what James wants to stress has been "implanted" within the true Christian heart. The new birth in God's word that Christians experience must be followed by the Christian putting away evil behavior. The term translated to "rid yourselves" or "put away" (*apotithemai*) was commonly used in James' day as a reference for "taking off" clothing. Christians are to put off/take off old non-Christian ways of acting and speaking once they have been re-born. James' reference to an "implanted" word should not be confused with some "inborn" goodness that somehow comes to the surface in Christians, but is definitely transplanted into human beings. Jeremiah's well-known reference to the "new covenant" that is written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33) is far more what James has in mind.

It is in verse 22 that James states most succinctly the dichotomy that exists between those who are "doers of the word" and those who are "merely hearers." But while James is perhaps the most well-known for his vigorous emphasis on "doing," Paul actually says nearly the same thing in Romans 2:13: "not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

But just when James seems to have made his point most clearly, he immediately inserts such an unusual metaphor that we almost lose his focus. The mirror metaphor used in verse 23 and running through verses 24-25 is an odd shift, but the mirror itself was often used by philosophers and theologians of the first century in a variety of ways. James uses the mirror here to further emphasize the different attitude that molds "doers" and "hearers." Part of what throws us off is that the mirror image seems to change in midstream. In the first case, the "hearers" look into a mirror and see themselves or their "natural face." The vision, however, does not impact or change them in any significant way. They simply see, then depart and forget.

Within James' image is the suggestion that the ones who see just their own image in the mirror find the vision absorbing only while they are actually gazing into the mirror. In other words — out of sight, out of mind. The "doers" on the other hand need only to glance into the "perfect law, the law of liberty," in order to be changed for life. The vision they catch stays with them; they "persevere" and become "doers who act."

This "perfect law" recalls James' mention of the "perfect gift" in verse 17. This perfect law James speaks of is the

law as now perfected by Jesus' own ethical demands — the “law” according to Jesus. This also makes the law now a “law of liberty” — for as an internalized law written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33), it is now freely available to believers. Only those who catch the vision of this perfect law go on to be the “doers who act.”

In the final two verses, James once again returns to his focus on the acerbic, abusive tongue as the greatest detractor to true religion that is “pure and undefiled.” As an advocate of the “doer,” James offers curbing the tongue as a positive, definitive action Christians can “do” to bring their faith alive. The plea for compassion to “orphans and widows” is a similar command — making those who are traditionally the weakest and most vulnerable members of society the focus of Christian love in action.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?