

## James, the Brother of Jesus

Many Bible scholars believe that the author of the book of James was Jesus' younger half-brother. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus' death and resurrection. During the Sermon on the Steps, we heard that we're called – through that particular Scripture passage – to care for widows and orphans. It was an important message for the church in Jerusalem in the days when it was first written. See, the church in Jerusalem had a problem. Call it racism, folks "being on the outs," favoritism, or whatever else comes to mind – but when you look at Acts 6, the church in Jerusalem had a problem with the equal distribution of support to widows. The Greek widows were given less than Jewish widows. It was a big problem.

James' book is considered to be Wisdom literature in the New Testament – like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. It's a collection of short sayings and discussions of practical topics. James focuses on things like concern for the poor, the responsible use of wealth, keeping control of the tongue – that's hard to do – living a pure life, and patience and endurance in times of trial. Something I want to point out about that passage we heard earlier is probably one of the best known verses in the book. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows," (Jas. 1:17). God is the Giver of every gift. Speaking of wisdom literature and gifts, I'd like you to turn with me to the Old Testament, Solomon's Song of Songs 2:8-13. **Read Song of Songs 2:8-13.**

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is a book that celebrates love in its most passionate and poetic form. At first glance we might think it's an intimate dialogue between lovers. Traditionally the book has been attributed to King Solomon. The Song is a collection of lyrical poems that express the beauty of human love. When it was originally written, love poetry was a common form of writing in the Middle East.

## Culture Shift

Sadly, this book has been largely neglected by the Church today. People don't like talking about, or reading about, a topic that's been part of our humanness since God first made Adam and Eve, and told them to "be fruitful and multiply," in Genesis. But it hasn't always been that way. The ancient Church fathers and the mystics of the Middle Ages preached from it. Origen, one of the ancient Church fathers, wrote a ten volume commentary on it. Bernard of Clairvaux preached 86 sermons on it, and never got beyond chapter 2.

The Song of Songs stands out from all other books of the Bible. A lot of people, reading this brief collection of love poems which contain strong and graphic statements

that show great delight in the mysterious passion binding together a man and a woman, may ask, “Why is this in the Bible?” There are a couple reasons I can think of, off the top of my head, as to why this particular book is in the Bible. First, it gives us a much-needed opportunity to reflect on human love in a healthy, unblushing, and Biblical way. There has been a culture shift between when the Bible was put together by the ancient church and today. In our society now, we live in a world of extremes. So many people see things as black and white – and they forget that where the colors meet, there’s a lot of gray.

There are a lot of people in our society who are worshiping sex. Now, they may not come out and say that, but that’s what it boils down to. There are ads on television that tout pills men can take so they can feel like they did when they were 20 years old. You can get red light therapy to shrink the fat cells and freeze the love handles off, so you can be more physically appealing. And then you have folks, where anything human body related is a taboo topic. There are people out there who think being physically intimate even with their spouses is something gross and dirty. On it’s most basic level, the Song of Songs seems to say that physical love of the most passionate kind is a beautiful gift from God. Friends, the gifts He gives us are good – sometimes in our humanness, we misuse them.

### **Look! Here He Comes!**

When we experience physical intimacy with our husband or wife, we should give thanks to God who made us male and female. That’s a message that people in the Church – and also those outside the Church – need to hear, and a topic for another day. I want us to look at this through the lens with which our ancient Church fathers and mothers viewed this particular book. They understood that these poems were pointing beyond human passion, to a union even more amazing and wonderful – the one between God and Israel originally, Christ and the Church, and the Holy Spirit and our souls.

The passage opens with the feminine voice. She says, “Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice,” (Song 2:8-9). She’s dying to see him. And it’s clear, that nothing’s going to keep him from seeing her.

Isn’t Jesus like that? Doesn’t He do everything He possibly can to see us? To be able to be with us? I think of the parable of the prodigal son, and how that father runs out to meet his wayward son. Christ does that for us. He lays glory aside. He is willing to be born into absolute poverty in a stable in Bethlehem. Then He overcomes mountains and hills of sin and separation to be with us – and He shows us His willingness to do that even to the point of death on the cross.

## **The Season of Singing Has Come**

“My beloved spoke and said to me, ‘Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me,’” (verse 10). He’s not inviting her just to physical presence, but to a deeper union. Christ calls the Church to rise from our slumber of sin and the darkness of the world in which we live. He invites us into a closer relationship with Him. He calls us to a spiritual awakening and renewal.

This is what’s missing in so many churches today. Spiritual awakening and renewal. Put another way, they’ve gone spiritually cold. The Song points to a passionate spirituality. Think of it this way. You’ve been in love before – how all that feels emotionally. If human lovers feel so deeply for one another, and if love takes Christ even to the cross of shame and death, then isn’t His divine love for us passionate, and deserving of a passionate human response? We might not like to think like this, but our God – Jesus Christ – is a most passionate Lover.

“See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me,” (verses 11-13). What a beautiful description of the changing seasons! You can almost smell the flowers and taste the fruit. Life seems pretty grand when you’re in love! I know you’ve experienced that before, church. I have as well.

## **Times Change, God Doesn’t!**

Back in February, 2007, Kendra and I took a weekend roadtrip with Kayleigh, Hunter, and Kendra’s cousin Cody, down to Wilmington, North Carolina. I don’t even remember our reason for going. We stayed at the “Golden Sands Hotel” in Carolina Beach. It was a five story beachfront property, and we were on the fourth floor, with a balcony facing the Atlantic Ocean. It was the first time I’d seen the ocean – and it was beautiful!

We went back down later that year in August, and while staying there, got married by Judge George Foster Pellom. Seasons change, and people change. Judge Pellom died this past February, and the “Golden Sands Hotel” has moved just up the street, into what looks to be an eight story building that’s twice the size of the original, and now known as the “Golden Sands Oceanfront Resort.” Times change. But God does not! He will always be a Lover attempting to woo us and wow us into ever deeper relationship with Himself – and with others.

In Christ, the old season of law and judgment is replaced with the new season of grace and redemption. Christ offers His people a new life – one that is vibrant, abundant, and filled with joy. But getting there isn’t easy. Living a life of faith is a leap across a chasm with our eyes closed, but with our hearts already resident on the other

side. Faith is truly the donation of ourselves – body, mind, and soul – to the tremendous Lover who never leaves us or forsakes us, the One to whom we belong whether we live or die.

### **Faith is Dangerous**

Oftentimes, faith is tamed down. Housebroken, if you will. It's drained of every risk or passion. It's rationalized, sentimentalized, made cold and dull. Faith like that is not good. It'll get us nowhere. And it's blasphemy. Listen to what Jesus says about wimping out – going soft – on faith:

To the angel of the church of Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of My mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. (Rev. 3:14- 18).

Even the Pharisees and Sadducees who plotted against Jesus never had the nerve to dismiss Him as sentimental, cold, going soft, or dull. They regarded Him as a rebel. He was a burning coal that they couldn't contain in their hands even for an instant. So they put Him in a tomb, thinking that by snuffing Him out, He would be gone forever. They were unsuccessful.

Faith, by nature, is dangerous. And based on Solomon's words, passionate spirituality is the only kind there is. It's easy to find passionate people today. They're at football games, cheering for the Ohio State Buckeyes. Or at rock concerts. People are passionate at those events.

### **Have Passionate Spirituality**

The thing that happens in a church when people are passionate may be less noisy, but the passionate follower of Jesus Christ is not content to be counted among the "cheerful" people with empty hearts. They recognize the importance of relationships – with Jesus, with each other, with people who don't yet know who Jesus is. They're convinced that God is active in the world – and in their lives – on a daily basis. They view prayer, personal study of Scriptures, and other spiritual practices, such as caring for orphans and widows, as inspiring and sustaining experiences.

At the same time, having passionate spirituality and legalism of any kind are mutually exclusive. I can't love God and love neighbor if I'm pointing out what's wrong

with my neighbor. If I'm nit-picking flaws, I'm not loving them. Instead, we have to see obstacles as opportunities, and turn defeats into victories.

As we get ready to do a Back to school blessing, keep in mind that our kids, school staff – all of us really – have a lot of opportunities ahead of us in the coming year. And as followers of Jesus we should have confidence in our union with Him, knowing that He reigns now and always – even if it doesn't seem like it in our temporary circumstances. Christ demonstrated His love for the Church at the cross and empty tomb. As His followers, He calls us to respond with hearts filled with devotion and joy – with passionate spirituality – and to share that with each person we encounter, whether we think they deserve it or not.

**Prayer:** Blessed are You, O Lord and Lover, source of beauty and depth of passion. Strengthen and inspire us to do the word we hear and live the faith we confess. Amen.

### **Blessing of the Backpacks**

At this time let's have students of all ages, teachers, school staff, bus drivers – anyone involved in education – come up here so we can bless you.

**Blessing:** Friends, this school year, may you be curious and kind, gentle and strong, brave and loving. With each new day, may you be reminded that God is always with you. As you sit and stand, as you learn and play, in every fear and each celebration, may you know God, your Friend, is always there.

**Prayer:** God of fresh starts and new beginnings, we bring ourselves and our feelings to You. In our hearts we carry big feelings, unanswered questions, and hopeful expectations. There are endless possibilities of what the year might bring – of what we might learn, who we might meet, and who we might become. God our Friend who is always with us, be with us through it all. For the grown-ups going back to school, God-with-us, be with them, too. Thank You, Father, for teachers, helpers, caregivers, and leaders, and for all they do to help us learn and grow. God, our Friend who is full of wonder, fill our hearts and bless our hands. Amen.