

## CANTICLES 8:6, 7 BURNING LOVE

“Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is 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,  
he would be utterly despised.”<sup>1</sup>

“‘**T**il death do us part” hangs on as a quaint slogan with no real meaning that is used in modern wedding ceremonies. I have observed that many modern marriage ceremonies now include vows that declare the marriage will last “so long as love shall last.” Of course, this is quite different from vowing fidelity so long as “both shall live.”

Where did the faithful get the idea of commitment expected from husband and wife so long as they both shall live? How is it that the churches of our God stressed permanence in marriage so strongly? Didn’t believers in an earlier era take into consideration the possibilities of family pressure, new love interests or temptation intruding into the lives of married couples? Or why do Christian pastors fail to consider that people might fall out of love? Perhaps theologians from an earlier era were so focused on esoteric concepts that they were incapable of thinking realistically? Or, can it actually be possible that from earliest days believers accepted what is written in the Word as authoritative for life and practise?

The Song of Songs is a love poem. This poem presents in graphic detail the love of Solomon for a young woman, and it expressively, colourfully speaks of the love with which she reciprocates. There is passion—raw passion—in this poem. However, there is an aspect of love that is absent from much of modern love underlying all that is written in this brief book.

I suspect that women in this day are as romantic as they ever were. Every woman wants to be appreciated for who she is, loved for her own character and not only for what her lover can take. Men still want companionship—someone who will stand with them as they move throughout the stages of life. Both men and women today are inundated with the message that they must engage in an endless search for satisfaction; the reason the search is empty is that they are taught that personal gratification trumps selfless love that gives without thought of receiving.

I don’t know that I will convince the young that biblical lovemaking is truly gratifying; there is no way to know this until you have lived long enough to verify it as true. I suspect that having been raised in the confused and confusing atmosphere of the modern pursuit of personal gratification, it will be nearly impossible to believe that one can find fulfilment through giving without reservation. However, the precepts of the Word stand—commitment to one person and selfless giving to make her or him all that she or he should be still yields the richest rewards.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Before launching into the message proper, I believe it will prove beneficial to take the time to point out the different complexions of the word “love.” The Hebrew term speaks of affection between two human beings [e.g. **GENESIS 22:2; EXODUS 21:8**], as well as people loving God [e.g. **DEUTERONOMY 6:5**]. In a similar manner, God loves mankind, especially His chosen people Israel [e.g. **DEUTERONOMY 4:37; ISAIAH 43:4**]. As an aside of perhaps some significance, nowhere are children commanded to love their parents; children are to revere, honour and obey their parents. Husbands are to love their wives, and wives are to love their husbands [**1 SAMUEL 1:5**].

However, people may love things that are concrete or abstract. Isaac “loved” delicious food [**GENESIS 27:4**]. Others are said to love wine and oil [**PROVERBS 21:27**] and bribes [**ISAIAH 1:23**]. The Psalmist loved God’s commandments [**PSALM 119:47**], His law [**PSALM 119:97**], His testimonies [**PSALM 119:119**] and His precepts [**PSALM 119:159**]. At other times, men are said to love death [**PROVERBS 8:36**], vain words [**PSALM 4:2**], cursing [**PSALM 109:17**] or a false oath [**ZECHARIAH 8:17**]. At other times, men are said to love truth and peace [**ZECHARIAH 8:19**], salvation [**PSALM 40:16**] and wisdom [**PROVERBS 29:3**]. Thus, it should be evident that the concept conveyed by the Hebrew word is akin to what is conveyed in the most neutral sense by our English term “love.”

In contradistinction, the Greek words translated into English by our word “love” break down into three concepts. One word—not found in the Bible—refers to the act of love, the physical expression of love. Another word speaks of affection such as would be expressed between family members. However, the word usually associated with God’s love for mankind, and consequently the love that is urged on those who believe in the Son of God, is a selfless love that seeks to benefit the one loved. This selfless, sacrificial love is in view in our text.<sup>2</sup>

#### LOVE’S ACCEPTANCE —

“Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm.”

The verses of our text are not infrequently read at Christian weddings. I’ve even heard them read at the weddings of non-believers. They are powerful words, if we understand what is said. The verses open with a plea for acceptance. Love that meets the biblical criterion accepts the one loved and seeks acceptance from that one. Thus, Shulammite—the young woman who is Solomon’s love interest in this poem [see **SONG 6:13**—pleads for acceptance.

In that ancient day, seals were made with wood, clay or stone. The seal was used to impress an image into lumps of clay or wax. If the seal was cylindrical—worn on a cord around the neck, it could be rolled over a lump of clay, producing a distinctive image. If the seal was on a finger ring, it might include a seal or a scarab. Whichever form the seal might be it would be engraved with pictorial images, written text, or both.

The seal would be used to indicate ownership or for maintaining security. “One would use a seal called a bulla to secure a treasury, to guarantee the authenticity of a royal edict or a deed, and to protect the contents of a scroll.”<sup>3</sup> Understanding the significance of the seal, its importance to the owner, many people understand that the young woman is asking Solomon to take possession of her. If this is the case, she is offering herself to Solomon in an exclusive fashion. This is not the idea of “free love” that seems to characterise modern relationships; rather, this points to exclusivity and commitment.

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<sup>2</sup> **Septuaginta: With Morphology** (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Duane Garrett, **Word Biblical Commentary: Song of Songs/Lamentations**, Vol. 23B (Word, Dallas, TX 2004) 254

However, there is information here that is necessary in order to understand more perfectly what is being asked. “Set me as a seal *upon your heart*,” is her request. This plea is followed by the equally strong request to “[Set me] as a seal *upon your arms*.” The English language no longer displays gender in its words, as is true for most languages of the world. In the original language of our text, the endings for heart and arm are masculine, demonstrating that the Shulammite is asking to mark her lover as belonging to her; she is not asking to be possessed. She is not pleading with Solomon to take possession of her; rather, she is asking him to commit himself to her, taking her love as the signature mark that he is committed to her.

This is a statement indicating the absolute devotion of a couple in love; the words are an expression of the love they have for one another. Undoubtedly, the passion of young love is inherent in this portion of the poem; but the earlier portions of the poem provide ample evidence of the deep, burning passion that comes from commitment to one another and of the acceptance of one another. These words of the text speak of unbreakable devotion.

Modern people sometimes object to such strong statements as these. Some years past, I performed a wedding ceremony for a delightful couple. As I require, the couple attended a series of premarital sessions designed to address the common problems that will threaten their love for one another. During this time of study, we address such practical issues as holidays, making a budget and handling finances, learning how to have a healthy fight, and other matters that can mar a marriage. At the last, we design the wedding ceremony, drafting the vows and actually planning for the wedding day. I serve as an advocate for the bride, running interference with the bride’s mother to ensure that the ceremony is the bride’s, and not her mother’s wedding.

It was toward the end of our time together in these sessions; we were addressing these final matters when the bride—a brilliant young lawyer—stated, “I refuse to say that I will submit to him.” I had known the couple for some years; I knew her to be of quite fiery temperament. Rather than reacting to her adamant statement, I asked why she felt so strongly about this issue. She stated that she was a modern woman, and she didn’t believe a woman should have to submit to anyone—not to him, not to anyone. I asked her to open her Bible to a particular portion of the Word and to read what it said. The Scripture passage was **EPHESIANS 5:22-24**.

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

I pointed out that women are to cultivate a submissive attitude to their husbands. This is not a cultural issue, nor is it an antiquated form of misogyny. The requirement for an attitude of submission reveals the heart of a woman in love with the Master. We walked through the matter as I pointed out that she was inviting her fiancé to assume his rightful place as spiritual head of the family. By pledging her submission to her own husband, she was acknowledging that he bore responsibility to assume a role as the spiritual head of the family as God had assigned.

I also read **1 PETER 3:1-6** with the couple. “Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.”

The word “likewise” in that passage points back to what has preceded. All Christians are to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” [1 PETER 2:13]. In particular, Peter commands Christians to be subject to the government—both federal and provincial, in our own case, and to employers—or masters if that should be the case. Then, the Apostle turns his attention to wives, stating they are to have a similar attitude of submission to their husbands. He uses the example of Sarah, who even called Abraham “Master.”

It is significant that he imposes a similar responsibility on husbands, initiating his command with the same word, “likewise” [1 PETER 3:7], insisting that husbands are to be understanding of their wives while fostering an attitude of treasuring their wives [literal concept].

Finally, he points out that the entire assembly of believers is responsible to work toward “unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart and a humble mind” [1 PETER 3:8].

The young woman discovered that submission to her husband is not a generalised condition demanding that she become a doormat, or that she must obey every edict pronounced by any man, but that in the home she was to express her understanding of the role of her husband by accepting him as her protector and as her spiritual leader. Such an attitude becomes a practical demonstration of the request made by the Shulammitte. She is asking for her husband’s devotion and commitment; she is tacitly pledging her troth to him.

Love—biblical love—receives the love of the one loved; and just as fidelity is pledged, so biblical love requites the love pledged with commitment and fidelity. You may wonder if there is a statement providing practical guidance for such love? The answer is “Assuredly, yes!” The Apostle Paul has written in what has become known as “The Love Chapter,” a practical guide for showing love to one another. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

“Love never ends” [1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-8].

## LOVE’S ENDURANCE —

“Love is 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.”

You know, if you have ever loved, the intensity of love. Undoubtedly, loving another stirs the emotions as few other aspects of life can. The Shulammitte startles us by introducing an unexpected characteristic by comparing love to death. Death was considered the strongest thing known to mankind in that ancient day; and death is still seen as strong. In fact, death is strong, though we who are believers know that death is a hollow terror since Christ’s resurrection.

Solomon, in another place, reminds us that death is an irresistible and inevitable force. “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them” [ECCLESIASTES 9:11, 12]. Shulammitte affirms that love is stronger than death, however. She avows her love; and even death cannot destroy that love.

As I was preparing the message, I paused to listen to a news report. I had left the television on, and Fox news was reporting the funeral of two little boys, five and seven, killed by their father. He had seized them from a social worker before blowing up the house. The reporter and the news anchor each spoke of the sadness of the event and of the finality of death. The pictures of the funeral and the grief all expressed served to remind all who watched of the finality of death. However, in our text, Shulammitte affirms that love is as strong as death and that it is more enduring than the grave. Here, then, is the basis for the long-used marriage vow, “I . . . take thee . . . to be my wedded (husband/wife), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish; ‘til death do us part.” It is a pledge that love cannot be conquered, even by death.

This becomes evident when we translate the parallel line somewhat more literally: “passion is as unrelenting as [the grave].”<sup>4</sup> Jealousy, or more properly, “passion” is not to be understood as a negative emotion, but rather it should be understood in the positive sense. Neither is this the momentary passion of sexual excitement; instead, the concept is ardour—burning love. Such love ensures that the couple that has been married for many years not only grows comfortable with one another, but the bond that binds them is strengthened day-by-day. They have passed through trials, supporting one another without surrendering their individuality. They have seen the worst in each other, and yet they have brought out the best in one another. This word speaks of love that builds up, love that makes another better, love that glorifies the one loved. The concept is biblical jealousy—not the desire to possess with nefarious design on the one possessed; it denotes a single-minded devotion to the one she loves.

Perhaps an example of God’s love for Israel will make this apparent. God, through Zechariah, presents this testimony. “The angel who talked with me said to me, ‘Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the LORD of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem” [ZECHARIAH 1:14-17].

Another example of godly jealousy is the desire to protect exemplified by God.

“The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;  
the LORD is avenging and wrathful;  
the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries  
and keeps wrath for his enemies.”

[NAHUM 1:2]

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<sup>4</sup> See **NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

One scholar has observed, “There are two, and only two, relationships described in the Bible where jealousy is a potentially appropriate reaction: the divine-human relationship and the marriage relationship.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, there are only two relationships that can be considered exclusive. One can have only one God; and one can have only one spouse. This knowledge forever banishes the thought that we can condone polygamy or polyandry, just as it lays to rest the thought that we can worship another God. If we who are known by the True and Living God attempt to worship another god—whether a demonic being, possessions, pride, pleasures or any such thing—we invoke God’s jealousy. Just as God’s jealousy will attempt to rescue that relationship, so the jealousy of our spouse will seek to protect the relationship we share from harmful intrusion by another person.

Love is inexorable; love is able to overcome negative forces that threaten our marriage. Love can overcome chaos, creating order and life. The love shared by the lovers binds them together permanently. The passion of their love holds them as relentlessly as death. Such love is desired by all, and discovered by so few. Modern life conspires against such love, focusing as it does on one facet while neglecting romance, passion, shared excitement.

Shulammite continues with her soliloquy, speaking of the passion her love generates. She compares the passion of marital love to “the very flame of God.” Then, she points out that water is incapable of drowning the fiery flame of love. Tides and torrents cannot quench love. “Love never ends” [1 CORINTHIANS 13:8].

It is worth noting that this young woman demands fidelity of her man. The sexual devotion is the same demanded of Solomon’s sons in PROVERBS 5:7-23. In that ancient world, and to some extent in this present world, it was a given that adultery committed by a wife was a heinous offence—it was punishable by death under the Law. However, adultery by husbands was treated far more casually—expectations for husbands were less than for wives. She is demanding fidelity of her husband. Garrett makes the point that the bride is making the same claim on her husband that Lady Wisdom makes on the young man.<sup>6</sup>

“Wisdom cries aloud in the street,  
in the markets she raises her voice;  
at the head of the noisy streets she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:  
‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?  
If you turn at my reproof,  
behold, I will pour out my spirit to you;  
I will make my words known to you.  
Because I have called and you refused to listen,  
have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,  
because you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,  
I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when terror strikes you,

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<sup>5</sup> Tremper Longman, New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Song of Songs (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2001) 211

<sup>6</sup> Garrett, op. cit., 257

when terror strikes you like a storm  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish come upon you.  
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently but will not find me.  
Because they hated knowledge  
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
would have none of my counsel  
and despised all my reproof,  
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,  
and have their fill of their own devices.  
For the simple are killed by their turning away,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
but whoever listens to me will dwell secure  
and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.”

[PROVERBS 1:20-33]

The love of Shulammitte expressed through the poem is undoubtedly sensual love, even erotic love; however, the love between a man and a woman grows in intensity, ideally and ultimately growing into a reflection of the love that is shared between God and His people. Think of the tenacious love God has for His people as expressed through the Prophet Hosea.

“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my burning anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and not a man,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.”

[HOSEA 11:8, 9]

Anyone who imagines he or she can lightly enter into love and then quench it after it is ignited is deceived. Such a person will generate turmoil within her own heart as to ensure that she will be consumed—there will be nothing but trouble from their lover. It is well within character for Shulammitte to raise this issue as she has repeatedly called on the chorus of Jerusalem girls not to arouse love before it is ready.

“I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
by the gazelles or the does of the field,  
that you not stir up or awaken love  
until it pleases.”

[SONG OF SOLOMON 2:7; see also CANTICLES 3:3; 8:4]

**LOVE’S WORTH** — Love is an exclusive, soul-consuming experience for which we humans yearn. To have such passion for another is a gift. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be sold. Shulammite is not speaking of sexual favours that can be purchased or sold; she is speaking of that exclusive experience of love itself. Such experience can never be bought.

“If a man offered for love  
all the wealth of his house,  
he would be utterly despised.”

Love may be freely given; but love is not for sale. This is a point that is easily forgotten in our day: love may be freely given (and it is within the confines of marriage); but love is not for sale.

The mindset of this fallen world has confused love and sex; it imagines that sex is a conquest of personal fulfilment. Our world celebrates the transient, even sacrificing the permanent on the altar of the temporary. For the most of mankind—including far too many professing Christians, we think of love only in terms of personal gratification. If you doubt that assessment, think of how love is communicated in our culture. We are virtually incapable of separating love from sex. Mark Driscoll observes, “Thousands of articles are churned out on how to cope with a past of multiple partners and how to find the next one.

“Porn is a massive industry, generating \$10 to \$14 billion annually in revenues.

“Nearly every sitcom on the air seems to make light of sleeping around, and films like ‘No Strings Attached’ and ‘Friends with Benefits’ lure young eyes to the theater, while a sex-crazed Tucker Max boasts about his conquests and skyrockets to the top of the New York Times bestseller list, becoming a cult hero for young slackers everywhere.

“It also explains why sex trafficking is a \$32 billion global industry, 45,000 to 50,000 young girls are trafficked in the United States every year, and why one in 12 youths experience sexual victimization, including sexual assault and attempted or completed rape.”<sup>7</sup>

Lest you think that this is a problem for the United States, an article was published by QMI Agency this past week that details how between 3,000 and 4,000 young people in Quebec are currently being trafficked as sex slaves in Ontario.<sup>8</sup>

The problem for our culture, and for us as individuals, is not sex; it is not even that we have a distorted view of love. The problem is us. The underlying cause of all the problems in this world is sin. The Apostle, speaking of the human condition writes, “Although [mankind] knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen”  
[ROMANS 1:21-25].

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Driscoll, “What the Bible Really Says About Sex,” 3 January, 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/01/03/what-bible-really-says-about-sex/>, accessed 3 January 2012

<sup>8</sup> “Sex slaves trafficked from Montreal to Ontario,” CNEWS, <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Crime/2012/02/10/19363386.html?cid=rssnews canada>, 10 February 11, 2012, accessed 10 February 11, 2012

All of mankind is included in this condemnation. We Christians cannot condemn those outside the Faith, because we are included in this awful censure. Shortly after writing the words just recited, Paul wrote, “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things” [ROMANS 2:1]. Soon after writing this, he will pen those awful words of condemnation, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [ROMANS 3:23],

What is desperately needed is a new life—one created by God Himself. Such life is offered to each person through faith in the Son of God. Christ the Lord died because of our sin, and was raised from the dead to make us right with the Father. Just as we read in the Word of God, our need is to be born from above. God calls us, saying, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. With the heart one believes resulting in a right standing with the Father, and with the mouth one confesses resulting in freedom” [ROMANS 10:9, 10 author’s free translation].

There is need for renewal of life even among the members of the churches of our land. Husbands must be encouraged and held accountable to love their wives supremely; and wives must be held accountable and encouraged to respect their husbands. Each of us who are Christians must be held accountable to treat one another with respect due to brothers and sisters. Each of us must learn to control our own body in holiness and honour [see 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-7]. This cannot be accomplished until we are born from above and into the Family of God. May God Himself speak to our hearts and purify our lives to the praise of His glory. Amen.