

# OpenTheo

## December 29th: Song of Songs 6 & Luke 23:26-49

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The Bride, awesome as an army with banners. The crucifixion.

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## Transcript

Song of Songs, Chapter 6. Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine. He grazes among the lilies.

You are beautiful as Terzim, my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing. All of them bear twins, not one among them has lost its young. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.

There are 60 queens and 80 concubines and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed.

The queens and concubines also, and they praised her. Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners? I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a prince.

Return, return, O Shulamite, return, return, that we may look upon you. Why should you look upon the Shulamite as upon a dance before two armies? In Song of Songs, chapter five, in a dreamlike passage, the bride failed to open the door to her beloved, and when she looked for him, he had gone. She was beaten by the watchmen of the city and asked the daughters of Jerusalem for help finding her beloved, as she was sick with love.

The daughters had responded, what is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us? In response, the bride gave a wasif or blazon, describing the incomparable bridegroom from his head to his toe to the daughters of Jerusalem. While initially seeming sceptical, after the wasif, the daughters of Jerusalem wished to join the bride in her search. One of the features of love, as it is depicted in the song, is the desire to share it with third parties.

The lovers want others to see what they see in each other and to share in their joy. Throughout the song, third parties are present, and the love of the couple is recounted to them and witnessed by them. The song is not the song of one voice and of one person's love.

Both lovers sing to each other, about each other, and in unison with each other. Yet the song isn't even a song merely of two voices and their private sharing of their love. They continually testify of their love to a wider audience, an audience that has its own voices.

As constant witness to the couple's love for each other, the community frees the couple to be who they are for each other. Unlike the common romantic image of the couple who are absorbed in each other's gaze to the exclusion of the entire world, the couple in the song are continually relating their love to a broader public. Unlike the voyeuristic third party of the pornographic, the song's viewer is also interlocutor, guest or friend, involved in a relation enduring through the mediation of time.

The lovers also desire and delight in each other as those who find a place and identity and praise in wider society. The bride desires her bridegroom as one who occupies a particular place in society. Solomon is the one surrounded by the valiant men of Israel, the one crowned as the king of Israel.

Much as the lovers constantly relate their love to a society beyond them, so their desire is aroused by the perception of their beloved as one with public glory and honour. The mediation of the society expands the movements of love, self-gift and desire. In their

union, the couple wish to relate themselves to a wider public.

Their union is discourse creating and meaning producing. It's a bond that projects itself out into the world. In their union, a fountain is opened up, producing a stream of life that will flow out beyond them to others.

When the Lord first created the woman for the man, he did not create her only as one to share a face-to-face, I-thou relationship with him, but also in order that they might live and act side by side, creating a world and a society together. While marriage has at its heart an intimate private bond, a bond that even has the dreamlike character of another place and time, that bond has the most profound public consequences and naturally projects itself into a common history and community, especially in the bearing of children. Children are the primary, but by no means the only, third parties with whom couples share their love for each other.

From the perspective of the third party, love can also be a source of great joy. The couple are rejuvenated in love, but that renewal is not exclusive to them. Those who celebrate their love can share in their joy and experience renewal for themselves as they rejoice with them.

While it might provoke envy in some, most find vicarious delight in witnessing a young and beautiful couple and their love for each other. Perhaps there are few better examples of this phenomenon than royal weddings, as the joy of a couple in each other can transfix entire nations and represent a symbol of hope for a whole people's life and future. Over the course of the song, the place of the daughters of Jerusalem changes.

While they are initially addressed by the bride on various occasions, in this broader scene in the book, they become more active as speakers and participants. In the opening verse of this chapter, they offer to seek the bridegroom with the bride. By now, they recognize the once despised bride's surpassing appearance, referring to her as most beautiful among women.

And their willingness to seek the bridegroom makes them active participants in and supporters of the couple's love. Besides officiants, alongside a bride and bridegroom at a wedding, one typically finds a best man and groomsman, bridesmaids and a maid of honor, the father of the bride and the other parents, and a witnessing congregation. All these parties have their own share in the couple's joy and the joy of the occasion.

In scriptural uses of marital metaphors for Christ and the church, and wedding images, there are many examples of such third parties. The father of the bridegroom who gives the wedding feast for his son, the friend of the bridegroom, the wedding guests who are supposed to attend in spotless attire, the mothers of the bride and the bridegroom, the virgins who go out to meet the bridegroom upon his arrival, etc. The eschatological wedding is depicted in scripture as an event of cosmic joy, to which all are invited and in

which meaning all are implicated.

As love is brought to its fullest flowering, it brings more and more people into its orbit. As the bride asks the daughters of Jerusalem, who on another level of symbolism are the cities of Israel depicted as bridesmaids surrounding the bride of Zion, to help her to find her beloved, we might expect that chapter 6 would recount that search, especially as it begins with further questions directed to the bride from the daughters of Jerusalem to assist them in the search for him. Yet we are surprised to discover that the beloved does not seem to be lost after all, as the bride declares that he has gone down to his garden, returning to the imagery at the heart of the song in chapter 4, verse 16 and 5, verse 1. In fact, she is not separated from him.

Rather, she is enjoying the most intimate relationship with him. He is grazing among the lilies, familiar imagery used to describe his taking of delight in her. Here the refrain from chapter 2, verse 16 is repeated, My beloved is mine and I am his.

He grazes among the lilies. The inseparable bond between the two lovers, comparable to the bond described in the covenant formula, I will be your God and you will be my people, prevents any final division of the lovers. How do we understand the strange narrative shift here? The impression the song gives us is that, as the bride lovingly described her beloved, the beloved appeared to her sight once more.

Many of the themes of this passage are explored in the Gospel of John, where Mary Magdalene seeks desperately for the man that she loves, an imagery that should remind the reader of the song. In John's Gospel, Jesus is buried in a sealed and previously untouched tomb in a garden, filled with the richest spices. Mary, coming to the tomb in the darkness of the very early morning, finds the stone removed and the bridegroom nowhere to be found. Distraught, she tells others.

Weeping in the garden after the others have left, she is addressed by one whom she initially presumed to be the gardener. And behold, it is Jesus. From that open garden and fountain will come forth the blessing of the Spirit's spiced wind and the water that would renew the earth.

The bridegroom's voice re-enters in verse 4 as he praises the beauty of his bride. This passage parallels with that of chapter 4, verses 1 to 6 in the macro structure of the book, and it directly repeats several of its details. Behold, you are beautiful, my love.

Behold, you are beautiful. Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them has lost its young. Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind

your veil.

Your neck is like the Tower of David, built in rows of stone. On it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that graze among the lilies.

Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will go away to the mountain of Myrrh and the hill of frankincense. However, in the description of this chapter, the bride has become even more dazzling and radiant, as is evident in the elaboration of the earlier description in verses 8 to 10. The praise of chapter 4 was the bridegroom's own praise of the bride.

Now, however, he speaks of the way in which his voice has been joined by that of a mighty company of others. In chapter 3, verses 7 and 8, Solomon's palanquin was surrounded by the majesty of a mighty company of warriors. Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, all of them wearing swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by night.

Now the bridegroom is also surrounded by sixty queens, eighty concubines, and all the maidens of the royal court. Yet, even in such a regal, glorious, and beautiful company, she is utterly incomparable and unique. She has always been the only one.

She was like the only begotten child of her mother, the apple of her mother's eye, and now she is the one dove of her beloved. On the one hand, the bride is set in ever greater company. On the other, she is set apart from others all the more.

In Proverbs chapter 31, verses 28 and 29, the praise of the virtuous woman is described. Her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praises her. Many women have done excellently, but you surpassed them all.

In a comparable statement, the voices of all the women of the court are united in the praise of the bridegroom, extolling her dazzling radiance. They compare her to the beauty of the moon, the splendor of the sun, which one cannot bear to gaze upon, the awesome glory of a great army, before whose manifest might and majesty all would surrender. Verses 11 to 13 are difficult to understand and interpret, especially verse 12, which has several textual issues.

The speaker in verse 11 is unclear. Is it the man or is it the woman? Cheryl Exum and Edmé Kingsmill are among those who argue that it is most likely the woman, while Michael Fishbane and Arthmar Kiel understand it to be the speech of the man. Dwayne Garrett suggests that we understand this as the woman's willing response to the man's invitation in chapter 2, verses 10 to 15.

There, he invited her out into the joy of the springtime, whereas Kiel notes that the imagery of vines and pomegranates is more typically used of the woman. While most

commentators understand the speaker of verses 11 and 12 to be the same, Kiel argues for a shift from the man to the woman and that verses 12 and 13 should be read as a unit. Transported by her desire, in a dreamlike state, she seemingly finds herself in a great procession of chariots, presumably with her beloved by her side.

Seeing the woman radiant in such a glorious spectacle, verse 13 might describe the daughters of Jerusalem calling upon her to dance so that they can see her beauty, or perhaps wanting her to turn back to face them after the procession has moved beyond them. They are rebuked, however. Such a sight belongs to the bridegroom alone.

While they can share in the joy of the couple's love, their gaze can only venture so far before it is prevented from becoming intrusive by going further. The daughters of Jerusalem here describe the woman as the Shulamite. This name, some suggest, recalls the character of Abishag the Shunamite, the beautiful young woman who helped to keep the elderly David warm, yet without having relations with him.

After David's death, Adonijah, his son, had sought to marry Abishag, which Solomon recognised was part of a strategic play for the kingdom. Kiel notes the possibility of an allusion, then, to a beautiful young woman from the country who unsuspectingly becomes caught up in courtly intrigues. This verse is the only place where the title Shulamite occurs, and the most important connection, it seems to me, is between it and the name Solomon itself.

Shulamite is like a female form of the name Solomon. The woman has become a glorious female counterpart to Solomon, reflecting his radiance in relationship with him. Something similar happens in the greater narrative of the scripture.

In the book of Revelation, for instance, we begin with a vision of the glorious bridegroom, and end with one of the unveiling of the glorious bride, whose light is a reflection of the light of the Lamb himself. A question to consider, what are some of the ways that the couple's love is related to other parties in the song? And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide his garments.

And the people stood by watching. But the ruler scoffed at him, saying, He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one.

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him some sour wine and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews, One of the criminals who were hanged nailed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come

into your kingdom. And he said to him, Truly I say to you, Today you will be with me in paradise.

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he breathed his last.

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was innocent. And all the crowds that had assembled for the spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances, and the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.

In Luke chapter 23, as Jesus is led out to his crucifixion, Simon of Cyrene takes up his cross and follows Jesus. Notably, he's a Gentile. Simon of Bethsaida denies Jesus, but Simon of Cyrene follows him.

At this point, when the twelve have largely abandoned Jesus, it is the unlikely disciples, converts, and figures, along with the women that come to the foreground, people like Simon of Cyrene, the centurion, Joseph of Arimathea. What is happening to Jesus is just the harbinger of more terrible things to come in Jerusalem, when its leaders have favoured the way of insurrection over the way of Jesus. Jesus is followed by a multitude, and many women mourning and lamenting for him.

We might perhaps hear the voice of Zechariah chapter 12 verses 10 to 14 here. On that day, the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Haradrimon in the plain of Megiddo. Jesus addresses the women as daughters of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was on and is often spoken of as a daughter in the prophets and the city is represented by its women. Jesus presents his death as a foreshadowing of Israel's own fate. The people following may weep for him but they should recognize that Jerusalem as a whole will suffer the same fate in its time.

He quotes Hosea chapter 10 verse 8 Jesus is led away to be crucified with two criminals. Luke has a much lighter narrative brush stroke than Matthew for instance but he wants us to note his prophecy being fulfilled in the background. Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 for instance One criminal is on his right and another on his left.

Jesus is like an enthroned king, flanked by others. If Simon of Cyrene illustrated discipleship in carrying the cross after Jesus, the criminals illustrate those positions that disciples that wish to be exalted must occupy. Jesus responds to the situation by prayer for the very people who are crucifying him.

He intercedes for the transgressors. He appeals to the fact that their sin is unwitting. And

this unwitting character of the people's sin is also asserted by the apostles in Acts chapter 3 verses 13 to 19.

And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know. And the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.

But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out. They will have another chance.

However, if they reject the message of the church, only certain judgment will await them. Jesus is here fulfilling his own teaching, given near the beginning of his ministry in Luke chapter 6 verses 27 to 29. But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, to one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either.

In the dividing of his garments by lot, we again hear the voice of scripture, this time from Psalm 22 verse 18. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. Jesus is then mocked by the rulers, the soldiers and even one of the criminals crucified alongside him.

The mockers decrease in their social status, manifesting how humiliating Jesus' position is. The mockery focuses upon Jesus' claim to be the Christ, and his supposed identity as a failed saviour. We might remember the challenge of Satan back in chapter 4, if you are the son of God, and hear that same challenge in the words of the scoffers here.

Jesus is being mocked as a king, he's served sour wine by cupbearers, he's placed with someone at his right hand and his left, he's given a royal superscription above his head. Once again the prophetic words of scripture are lying in the background. In the mockery we might hear the words of Psalm 22 being fulfilled again, this time from verses 7 to 8. All who see me mock me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads.

He trusts in the Lord, let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him. The soldiers' mockery also fulfils Psalm 69 verse 21. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

The soldiers refer to Jesus as the king of the Jews, as they are Gentiles, and would have thought in that category, rather than the category of Messiah. The division between the two criminals, one to be raised up, and the other facing an even greater judgement, might invite comparisons between Jesus and Joseph, who is also associated with two criminals with different fates. However, whereas Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him when he was elevated, the criminal here asked Jesus to remember him



when he comes into his kingdom.

A truly startling claim in the context, when you think about it. Here's a man being crucified, dying on a cross, and the person next to him asking to be remembered when he comes into his kingdom. All of the appearances are against this condemned, seeming false Messiah entering into any kingdom whatsoever.

But Jesus is still saving at this point. The penitent criminal is also an example of the divisions emerging in the responses to the death of Jesus. There is darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour, like the penultimate plague on Egypt, when darkness lay over the whole land.

All that remains is the death of the firstborn. And these are also akin to the signs of Christ's coming and judgement, the signs of decreation. The curtain of the temple is torn in two.

A division between God and his people is removed, and a way into God's presence is made open. Jesus alludes to the Psalms in a number of his sayings on the cross, recorded in the Gospels. Verse 46 alludes to Psalm 31, verse 5. In the crucifixion accounts, the words of the Psalms are very prominent on Jesus' lips.

Reading the words of the wider context of the Psalms that Jesus quotes is also illuminating. These are not the words of someone in the grip of despair. They're the words of someone confident in the Lord, even in the severest moment of distress.

These words anticipate resurrection. Our passage ends with the description of three different witnesses, the centurion, the assembled crowds, and his acquaintances with the women who had followed him from Galilee. They're watching at a distance.

And the reactions of the first two witnesses, the centurion and the assembled crowds, are described in parallel. Both are responding when they saw what had taken place. The centurion declares the innocence of Christ.

Herod, Pilate and the centurion who carried out the sentence all concur in recognising Jesus' innocence. However, the centurion goes further. He praises God.

He recognises the hand of God in Jesus' death, something that was presumably apparent from the signs accompanying the death, and also the manner in which Christ died. The assembled crowds also react to what they have seen. They react in mourning, and perhaps even contrition for what has happened.

They beat their breasts and returned. Already, perhaps, we have a sign of remorse paving the way for Pentecost. The death of Jesus, then, is immediately followed by signs of new life and promise.

Jesus' acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee are at a greater distance. And perhaps we should hear Psalm 38 verse 11 in the background here. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off.

The role of the women as witnesses will also prove important in the rest of the narrative that follows. A question to consider. Why is it that it is the words of the Psalms that are most prominent in the context of the crucifixion, especially on Jesus' lips? What might we learn from this about the importance of the Psalms more generally?