**Understanding the Song of Songs**

**Guest:** Philip Ryken  
**From the series:** The Love of Loves in the Song of Songs (Day 1 of 3)  
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**Bob:** Dr. Phil Ryken, who's the president of Wheaton College, says, when we read the Song of Solomon, we should see parallels between human love and our relationship with God. He says that you'd never know that's the case from where the book starts.

**Phil:** I read the first verse and I'm like, “Whew! Does anybody else think it's getting warm in here?” [Laughter] It's not just a kiss; it's “kisses she wants.” She wants them on the mouth. I mean, there's an intensity and a passion here, right from the beginning.

Obviously, this is human-level romance he's talking about—physical attraction/sexual desire. We shouldn't try to interpret the kisses relate to something specific in our relationship with Christ—it's more big picture. Human-level romance is teaching about our passion for Christ/His passion for us—the intimacy of that relationship.

**Bob:** This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, September 9th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. So, what can we learn from the Bible?—from the Song of Solomon about marital love?—and about God's love for us? We're going to explore that today with Dr. Phil Ryken. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I'm excited about our guest, and I'm excited about the topic we're going to be talking about today.

**Dave:** Why is that, Bob?

**Bob:** Well, the topic—because it's a biblical topic—and because it's an exciting topic; right? Don't you agree?

**Dave:** I don't know. What topic are we talking about today, Bob? [Laughter] I want to hear you say it.

**Ann:** Me, too; he's trying to throw us under the bus.

**Bob:** We are talking about the greatest love song ever written, and that's what the Bible claims. It's the Song of Songs—right?—written by King Solomon.
Dave: I thought he was going to say, "Can't Buy Me Love—[Laughter]—greatest love song every written."

Bob: No; I wouldn't say so.

Dave: No; this is the greatest love song every written.

Bob: And before we dive into talking about that, I want to make sure our regular FamilyLife Today listeners know that, this week and next week, they have the opportunity to sign up for the greatest weekend they can have this fall.

Dave: Yep.

Bob: Sign up to attend an upcoming Weekend to Remember® marriage getaway. We're going to be hosting getaways in more than three dozen cities across the country this fall. If you sign up this week or next week to attend a getaway, your and your spouse will save 50 percent off the regular registration fee. And really, there's nothing better you could do for your marriage, than for the two of you to get away for a weekend this fall and just spend time together, learning about God's design for marriage.

There's information about the Weekend to Remember on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com. You can call if you have any questions or if you want to find out when it's coming to a city near where you live. The number is 1-800-FL-TODAY to take advantage of the special half-price offer for the Weekend to Remember marriage getaway. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com and register today, or call to register at 1-800-FL-TODAY; and then we'll see you at an upcoming getaway.

Now, back to the greatest love song every written. We have, to talk about that with us today, the president of Wheaton College, Dr. Phil Ryken, who is joining us. Dr. Ryken, welcome to FamilyLife Today.

Phil: Yes; it's great to see you, Bob, and really great to be here with Dave and Ann. I appreciate your work. And it's great to talk about the greatest of all songs.

Bob: That's right. I've followed you since your days at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. You were the pastor there; right?

Phil: Yes; 15 years in downtown Philadelphia.

Bob: And then you took a job as your dad's boss.

Phil: Yes; actually, I like to think of it as my dad's boss's, boss's boss. [Laughter]

Dave: Why is that?
Phil: He's been teaching at Wheaton for 51 years. His boss would be the Department Chair, and the Department Chair's boss would be the Dean of Humanities, and the Dean of Humanities boss would be the Provost, and the Provost's boss would be me. [Laughter]

Bob: So, he's a little down the food chain there.

Phil: Yes; well, in a way; but you know, your dad is still your dad.

Bob: When my daughter—who, by the way, has her masters from Wheaton—we were looking at undergraduate schools; Wheaton was one that we considered. When we got to campus for a campus visit, she and I were both excited because she got to sit in on one of your dad's classes,—

Phil: Oh, great!

Bob: —and your dad's legendary!

Ann: What did he teach?

Phil: He teaches English Literature. He's semi-retired; he retired at age 70—that was 7 years ago. He's been teaching one class a semester since then—still doing a lot of writing.

Bob: In 1984, he wrote a book called *How to Read the Bible as Literature* that is a classic. It helps you understand how to understand the Bible—the specific genre of the literary work of the Bible; it's fascinating.

Ann: Interesting; that makes me want to get it.

Bob: When you were being sought out as the possible president at Wheaton, you obviously called your dad and said, "What do you think?"

Phil: Yes; my dad loved the pastoral ministry I was doing in Philadelphia. He knew those burdens are heavy—you both [Bob and Dave] know that—all the challenges of ministry. But these burdens are heavier, in many ways; and he knew that would be the case.

So, what do you want for your children? You want them to follow the Lord—that's the main thing—but, if you could, you'd preserve them from hardship and difficulty—

Ann: That's true.

Phil: —and just be in that sweet, happy good place in life; so he had mixed feelings about it.
Bob: I know this is a little off subject; but I just have to say—being a university president/a college president at an evangelical institution today—you are facing some significant challenges.

Phil: Yes; I mean, that's probably a radio show for another day; but college presidencies have become extremely difficult jobs—it's why there's such high turnover.

I think you're right—any role, where you're on the front lines of ministry—and that's true for every person, right here, in this conversation—because we're trying to present biblical truth. You're on the front lines of spiritual warfare, so that's going to be contested; and you're going to face all the other difficulties that everybody faces in life. [Laughter] But there are going to be some additional burdens, challenges, heartaches with that.

Bob: Well, I hope our listeners will pray for you and pray for Wheaton—

Phil: Yes.

Bob: —because we need—I say we; the church/the body of Christ—needs Christian institutions, like Wheaton: that are faithful to the Word of God, that are discipling and training and equipping the minds and the hearts of young people. We're grateful that you do that.

Phil: Yes; thank you. And I praise God—you know, we're part of a Christian higher education movement. There are, just within the council of Christian colleges and universities, 50,000 young men and women that graduate from our schools every year—

Dave: Wow.

Phil: —and have an opportunity to go out and change the world for Jesus Christ.

Ann: Exciting.

Phil: And Bob, one of the things that they need to be thinking about is their love relationship with Jesus Christ and, in many cases, how to really flourish in marriage relationships.

Can I bring us back to our topic?! [Laughter]

Ann: Oh! Look, he's an expert in transition!

Dave: Hey, Bob, I think you've been replaced. [Laughter]

Phil: I'm just trying to be a good guest here.
Bob: So, that's the perfect segue into the book that you've recently written called *The Love of Loves in the Song of Songs*, which is an extended meditation on the greatest song ever written—the Song of Solomon.

Last time you were here, we talked about 1 Corinthians 13; so this issue of understanding love—God's love/human love—this is something that's been on your heart for a long time.

Phil: Yes; and I'll say something I probably said when we visited before, Bob. The topics I write on—they're not the topics I'm good at. [Laughter] They're the topics I need to work on, so we're right back where we were—working on growing our love for God and our love for others—specifically, in the context of marriage; although really, the Song of Songs is not limited to that. It has wider application for all of us.

Bob: And let's start with that, because there's been theological controversy about how to interpret this book for centuries. Wasn't it Spurgeon who thought this was completely allegory and had nothing to do with human romantic love?

Phil: Yes, and that's not an uncommon view. Some of the early church fathers had that view. When Bernard of Clairvaux did—what was it?—72 sermons on the Song of Solomon for the chaste monks in France, it wasn't a sort of human level—“Here's how you work out your marriage,”—kind of book at all. It was all about the soul's romance; ultimately, with Jesus Christ.

I think it's really both/and in this regard—obviously, this is a human-level romance—this woman that's fallen in love with this man—to some degree—the story of their love relationship and the people in their community around them, and how they're involved. But anytime we're talking about love, and romance, and marriage—there's a bigger biblical story here—which, I like to say the Bible starts with a blind date [Laughter] and it ends with a wedding reception.

Dave: Wow.

Phil: It takes a while to kind of unpack all of that; but, you know, it begins with God presenting a woman to a man. What is the first thing he does? He starts speaking poetry—love poetry: “This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

We can talk about the way the Bible unfolds this great mystery; but one of the main ways that God talks about His relationship with us—the main metaphor, image, picture of it—is this love relationship/a marriage relationship; ultimately culminating, at the very end of the Bible, in the wedding supper of the Lamb and the celebration that's around that. That's a big frame around our whole Christian experience.

Even when we're in a book like the Song of Songs—actually, there's no book like the Song of Songs—[Laughter]—but even when we're in the Song of Songs, and we're
talking about a lot of things at a human level—very familiar from our experiences—there’s a bigger picture, and this is a pointer to our love relationship with Jesus Christ. Like a lot of things in the Bible, there's a lot going on: it's multi-dimension; it's operating on a couple of different levels.

**Dave:** I really liked how you did that in your book, because I've read—I don't know if I've read as many as Bob has—on this topic, the Song of Songs. [Laughter] But I've read several books on the Song of Solomon. I didn't get out of them what you did, in terms of—you kept it horizontal: “Here’s the relationship, on the earthly plane, about a love between a husband and wife.” But then, you always kept going vertical and saying: “But this is a bigger thing.” Talk about that—you just did a little bit. You wouldn't let that go—every chapter, you bring it back to remind us: “This is bigger than just a man and a woman.”

**Phil:** For a couple of reasons. One thing is that, anytime that I'm teaching the Scriptures, I always want to have, not in the background, but actually in the forefront of my thinking: the cross and the empty tomb; the gospel; the saving work of Jesus Christ—His death for our sins; His resurrection for our eternal life.

I believe the whole Bible is Christ-centered. We've got to read the Bible—I mean, this is getting back to how to read the Bible as literature—we've got to read each part of the Bible, as the part of the Bible that it is/according to the literature that it is—we also have to see it in the big story of God's redemption.

I take very seriously what Paul does in Ephesians, Chapter 5; because, here, you have Paul talking explicitly about marriage; which by the way, the Bible rarely does. What it does say, therefore, is hugely important; and it gives you the broad principles which you then have a lot of freedom to work out in the shape of the way that God has made you and your relationship. Here’s one of the places—Ephesians Chapter 5—there’s a lot about marriage right there. At the end of that, Paul says, almost dismissively: “Oh, by the way, what I'm really talking about”—yes, we've been talking on the horizontal level—“I'm really talking about Christ and the church.”

I think that has broader application than just to Ephesians Chapter 5. Paul is elevating things and saying that we always have to keep in mind this love relationship between God and His people. You come to the gospels—the Messiah comes; and basically, the groom is walking into the room—He's the bridegroom. He's the bridegroom in the context of the whole story that the Bible has been developing.

I like to think of the Song of Songs as the soundtrack for a romance that's been building, from the beginning of Genesis, and is going to find it's culmination in eternity.

**Ann:** I think it's easy to do that with other books of the Bible; however, I've talked to so many women that—with this book, the Song of Songs—this is a difficult one, because Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. They're thinking, “I don't even like to hear
teaching from this book—it doesn't even make sense—and that's God's relationship with us?” How do you answer those questions?

**Phil:** A couple of things on that. First of all, I think it is a difficult book. But I also think, rather than staying away from the difficult things, we should be leaning into them. That's why we need resources to help us and to give us a guide.

What I will say about Solomon is a couple of things. First of all, Solomon had a *thousand* times too many relationships. [Laughter]

**Ann:** That's a good way to put it.

**Phil:** And that's evident from the story as it's told in Kings.

On the other hand, we know that Solomon was renowned for his wisdom. He had a beautiful way with words; he was a poet as well as a king. I think we can definitely take the Song of Solomon as Solomonic, possibly something he wrote. The way that it's expressed in the Hebrew is a little looser than that, so it could be kind of "of Solomon"—like: "of Solomon's court."

I think another way of possibly looking at this—here's an analogy—just think about how fascinated people are with royal weddings from England. You know, people get up early; they'll have parties; they may even do something in their wedding, which they saw done in the royal wedding.

**Ann:** It's true. You guys may not know that, but it's very true. Women will get up at 3 a.m. to watch these weddings.

**Phil:** There's something about a wedding, which has a royal quality to it anyway. I mean, this is the prince and the princess—they're coming together.

It may be that this love relationship, which is kind of a rural relationship between this country girl—you know, maybe, it is literally Solomon; but maybe, it's sort of set in the context of the Solomonic court to elevate/to see the dignity and beauty of this relationship. That's another way of looking at the Song of Solomon.

I definitely would not let Solomon himself be a stumbling block; because I think that, if you start doing that—who in the Bible isn't a stumbling block?—only Jesus isn't. That's one of the ways we get pointed back to Him, again and again, in the Scriptures.

**Bob:** We assume that this book is talking about Solomon himself because the king keeps being referenced. If it's a rural girl and somebody else, they wouldn't call him the king; would they?

**Phil:** I think that's one of the strong reasons for thinking that this does have Solomonic authorship. I'm just trying to tease out some of the possibilities here. Particularly—I don't
know if it's Chapter 4, possibly—there's this royal procession. The king is coming, and he's obviously there for the wedding; and that's the context.

Bob: Yes; when we get to verses in the Song of Solomon like, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”, and it starts to get kind of steamy, should we interpret that as somehow our relationship with God? Should we write worship songs that talk about sloppy wet kisses? Is that what we're supposed to do?

Phil: Please, no. [Laughter] It's interesting that you say, “When we get to verses…” Bob; because that's actually the first verse. [Laughter]

Bob: Good point.

Phil: We're having a good conversation here; we haven't even gotten past verse 1. [Laughter]

I read verse 1—one thing to say about the book—these are chapel talks that I gave at Wheaton, and then there's a revision process. I like to get people's input, and improve them, and things like that.

I read the first verse and I'm like, “Whew. Does anybody else think it's getting warm in here?” [Laughter] It's not just a kiss; it's “kisses she wants.” She wants them on the mouth. There's an intensity and a passion here, right from the beginning.

Obviously, this is human-level romance—she's talking about physical attraction/sexual desire, and she's honest and frank about that; ultimately, I think, in a holy way. We shouldn't try to interpret the kisses relate to something specific in our relationship with Christ—it's more big picture. Human-level romance is teaching us about our passion for Christ/His passion for us—the intimacy of that relationship.

I don't think of Song of Solomon as allegorical, where you've got to line up each thing in each verse to something that you read in the gospels. It's more symbolic—big picture symbolism—than specific allegory.

Bob: So, this theme of being enthralled with romantic love—you've experienced that in your marriage; right?

Phil: Yes.

Bob: Have you experienced being enthralled with passionate love for Christ?

Phil: Yes; so sometimes; I would say the same thing about human marriage, too. I mean, there's a lot of the ordinary and the everyday, the comfortable, the deep affection that's just comfortable. C.S. Lewis writes about this; he married late in life. I won't be able to quote it exactly; but he just talked about this affectionate love, where you're
actually just with another person. You don't actually even need to be talking about anything or doing anything together—you're just enjoying being in the presence of someone, in a sort of comfortable way.

I think we experience the whole range of things in our love relationship with Christ:

One of the things I experience—I think a lot of believers do—you're hearing the testimony of somebody, who came to faith in Christ/how God intervened in their lives—you want to be saved all over again. You're just drawn to Christ, again, in that moment.

Or those times in which—it's not every time; it may only be occasionally for many of us—but you are just really caught up in worship—I mean, this music/these words—they are deeply moving.

Or you're bringing a life situation to a worship experience; and you know: “This is what the pastor is saying to me right now. That is exactly what I need to hear”; and it's deeply moving. It moves your emotions in a way that you couldn't even control/you couldn't try to conjure up.

We have these experiences in the Christian life that are the awakenings of passion. I don't know if I'd call it romance, exactly; I certainly would call it passion.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: It's interesting that you mention this in the book about how, when you look at your lover—and really look at her/look at him—you fall in love; you see. You talk about it in the book—it's mentioned, in Song of Solomon, as they describe one another, even physically. That happens in our relationship with God, as well, when we take time to block out—

I tell you what—this is crazy. This morning, I'm laying in bed, getting ready, looking at your book, getting ready for this interview. I look over and there's Ann in the bathroom, brushing her teeth—she doesn't even know this—and I just watch her brush her teeth. I'm just watching her with her little thing in there—you know, we've been married almost 39 years, and watching her, looking at her face in the mirror—she doesn't even know this—I'm falling in love again. It's one of those moments, where I'm like, “She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life,”—her character, her beauty—beyond physically. Again, I should have said this to her—

Ann: This isn't really good program right now. [Laughter]

Phil: You know, it's been fun to watch Ann's face here. At first, she's like, “Where is this going?” [Laughter] She's got a half smile and, then, she's a little embarrassed.
Dave: Now, if I was Solomon, I would have said these words, right then, to her: “Let me describe what I’m seeing right now”; but I'm saying it to you and others. It was that moment of being captured, again, in romantic love.

Bob: Delighting.

Dave: Delighting; and it's the same thing—you described this in the book—when you look at God again, afresh/aneu. Again, you're right—it isn't every day; but it's that moment that you're like: “I am so in love. This God is so amazing.”

Bob: Let me ask the question for the listener, who is thinking: “Okay; I live more often in the ordinariness of my relationship with God—the mundane. I have those moments, but I'd like to have more of those moments. Can I have more of those moments?”

Phil: So, first of all—I'll just say that I don't think we should be hard on ourselves if we have those moments rarely. I think there are a lot of ways that we communicate our love for God. It may be that passionate overflow of just praise and poetry even; but our love for God may look like daily, faithful obedience in a really tough situation. It doesn't seem to have a lot of romance, but we're faithful and we're consistent. Let's just recognize there are a lot of ways—you know, it's part of the beauty of a love relationship—there's so many different ways that you can express love for someone else.

I love what Dave said, actually, because he was talking about the focus—really looking and noticing. So, how are the ways that we look and notice who God is that may awaken a great love and a passion? Well, supremely, in God's Word. It's also if we are attentive in the sacraments of the church, which are witnesses, and symbols, and signs of God's grace. It's being attentive to God's work in our lives—like really noticing what God is doing/how He is answering our prayers.

I'll just give an example from married life. Sometimes—one thing I really appreciate that Lisa does for me—I'll mention something once—like, "Hey, it would really help me if we could get this at the store," or “…" And then, you notice that it's been done. Actually, the request/response—it leads to gratitude; it grows a relationship. I think prayer and answered prayer is another place where this passion grows.

Bob: I hope, as listeners hear this, the next time they open to the middle of the Bible and find, “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," they will think: “This is talking on two levels, and I need to read it on two levels. And I need to meditate on it on two levels—my relationship with my spouse but also my relationship with God—and ‘What does that teach me about that?’”

That's, frankly, why I think this book is going to be so helpful for so many people, who have gotten to that book and gone, “What do I do with this?”—especially like you said, Ann, with the guy who had 700 wives and 300 concubines—“How do I understand it?”
think this has been clarifying, and we’ve got copies of Dr. Ryken’s book in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. It's called The Love of Loves in the Song of Songs. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order a copy, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY to get your copy of the book. Again, our website is FamilyLifeToday.com; and our number is 1-800-FL-TODAY.

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I talk to couples, all the time, who say, “Yes, we’ve talked about doing that; we've never been to one of your getaways.” This is a great opportunity for you to invest in your marriage and invest in your legacy. That's what's so powerful here—you’re investing, not just in your marriage, but in your children's lives/in the legacy of your family by building a stronger, healthier marriage and looking at what God's Word has to say about how we're to love one another.

Go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information on when we are hosting a getaway in a city near where you live or a city you'd like to visit. Block out that weekend on your schedule this fall, and then sign up now so you save 50 percent off the regular registration fee, and join us for a Weekend to Remember. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to register, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY—that's 1-800-358-6329—1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and the word, “TODAY.” And then come join us at a Weekend to Remember this fall.

Now, tomorrow, we're going to talk more about what we can learn both about our marriage relationship and about God's love for us when we look at the Song of Songs. Dr. Phil Ryken will be with us again. I hope you can be with us, as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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