

Old-fashioned love song

Song of Songs is a forgotten book, hidden away between pragmatic Ecclesiastes and monumental Isaiah, but if you look, you'll find it, shining with summer's golden light.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

It is autumn again, and life is speeding up. Students are back in school, classes are beginning and the fall programs of churches are in full swing. Wouldn't it be good to find a spiritual discipline for these days that would remind us of the pace and the blessings of summer?

Now is a good time to open our Bibles just left of center and read the Song of Songs. It's a forgotten book, hidden away between pragmatic Ecclesiastes and monumental Isaiah, but if you look, you'll find it, shining with summer's golden light.

In its current state of neglect, it is difficult to remember that the Song of Songs was once viewed as a key capable of unlocking the whole of scripture. Readers found in its pages a garden in which one might meet God walking in the cool of the day, a pool of meaning in which one might swim and swim and never sound the bottom, a window through which one might see the glory of God. This book of love poetry, in which no body part is left uncelebrated, no fragrance or taste undescribed, was once a devotional text par excellence. This book, which nowhere mentions God, once functioned as a cherished path to profound intimacy with God.

For Christians these days, the Song functions as quarry for wedding readings and not much else. Why have we forgotten it? Without the structure of allegory to give shape to our readings, are we made so uncomfortable by its frank eroticism that we'd rather ignore it?

There's a long history of anxiety about the Song. In the third century, Origen of Alexandria, one of the Song's greatest interpreters, warned that the Song was such

powerful stuff that it should not be read at all until one had conquered one's passions. But fear did not drive Origen's reading; love did. Even as he worried about its unpredictable erotic power, he recommended that we pray the Song of Songs and make its words our own. "Join with the Bride in saying what she says," he advises, "so that you may also hear what she heard."

If we are to recover the Song of Songs as a text of devotion in our day, it will be by taking Origen's words to heart. If we are to find in the Song a path to intimacy with God, it will be by joining the lovers in saying what they say so that we may also hear what they heard.

Try this: take 1:15-16 and make it your prayer for a day or two. See how the world looks with these words in your heart. In these verses, we hear the voices of two lovers so enraptured with each other that all they can do is breathe in and breathe out the word *beautiful*.

The man says to the woman: Ah, you are beautiful, my love, ah, you are beautiful.

And the woman replies: Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely.

The whole orientation of the Song of Songs is captured in these few words, its posture toward the world: Ah, you are beautiful, my love, ah, you are beautiful.

What will we hear if we spend time noticing and praising the beauty all around us, breathing it in and breathing it out? What will we hear if we make the words of the Song our own? This is a prayer we can pray anywhere: at work, at home, turning over in our sleep. When we are stuck in traffic, when we are jostling through a crowd of people we do not know, when we are sharing a meal with people we do:

Ah, you are beautiful, my love, ah, you are beautiful.

Breathing this prayer may illuminate beauty in unexpected places: in crowded places, in the broken places of our lives, in busy moments. Lift up your head and look about you, as the lovers do. Ah, you are beautiful.

The lovers in the Song of Songs find beauty everywhere they look: in each other's bodies, in the fields where they pasture their sheep, in the rooms and orchards where they make love, in the turning of the seasons, in the animals and trees and hills all around them. Like King Solomon, who 1 Kings says gave the same poetic attention to the hyssop that grows in the walls that he gave to the cedars of

Lebanon, they know that no beautiful thing is too small to be adored. They let no beauty go unnoticed, uncelebrated, unpraised. Every time they exhale their reverence and adoration—ah, you are beautiful—they bind themselves ever more deeply to the life of the world that God created and called good.

As the autumn busyness intensifies, try following in the footsteps of these lovers, imitating their way of receiving the world with love and awe and praise. Let's enter into their dialogue and begin a dialogue of our own with God, with others, with the world all around.