

The Song

Song of Songs 2:8-17; 3:1-4 · John 20:11-18

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers why the Church and her mystics have always heard the Song of Songs as the love song between God and the soul, and hears how the Church has long read Easter morning in the Song's own grammar of seeking and finding.

Catholic Touchstone. The nuptial covenant (CCC 796; CCC 1612-1617): the whole Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church, and the Song of Songs has fed the Church's prayer from the beginning.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study reads a book both Carmelite Doctors loved and modern readers avoid hardest. Prepare the room with a grin and a claim: the Song of Songs is in your Bible on purpose, the rabbis treasured it (an ancient tradition calls it the holy of holies among the Writings), and St. John of the Cross wrote his greatest poem, *The Spiritual Canticle*, as a re-composition of it, and, by the testimony of those present at his death, asked for the Song to be read to him as he died. If bridal love is the wrong way to talk about God, nobody told the saints, or the prophets.

Be clear about the interpretive method, because tonight's steelman is the strongest exegetical objection in the study. The Church does not deny that the Song is real Hebrew love poetry celebrating human eros; the literal sense is the foundation (CCC 116), and marriage needs no excuse to be sung. But Scripture reads Scripture: the prophets had already made marriage the master image of the covenant (Hosea, tonight's Session 5 verse included; Isaiah 62:5; Ezekiel 16), so Israel could not sing this Song without hearing overtones. The New Testament seals it: the Bridegroom is Jesus's own self-description (Mark 2:19-20), Paul calls marriage a great mystery referring to Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32), and the Bible ends at a wedding (Revelation 19:7, 21:2). The mystics are not allegorizing against the text; they are standing in its canonical current.

The pastoral freight: many people relate to God as employees, defendants, or fans. The Song's categories (sought, delighted in, missed when absent) heal something the courtroom categories cannot reach. Watch for the person tonight for whom being desired by God is the missing doctrine.

Latitude note, stated honestly if asked: the Church has never issued a definitive verse-by-verse interpretation of the Song; readings of particular lines (the soul, the Church, Our Lady) are the field of legitimate spiritual reading, not dogma. What stands firm is Scripture's covenantal-nuptial pattern itself, everywhere assumed from the prophets to Revelation; the Song's place inside that pattern is the Church's venerable and deeply rooted spiritual reading.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The Song gives the covenant its love-duet: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (2:16), which is the marriage-formula echo of the covenant formula "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." The seeking scene of 3:1-4 (sought him and found him not; rising to search the city; "I found him whom my soul loves") gives the mystics their map of longing, loss, and finding.

The prophets had already wedded God to Israel: "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5); "I will betroth you to me for ever" (Hosea 2:19, from Session 5); Ezekiel 16's covenant told as a marriage. The Song sings inside that established key.

The New Testament claims the role: "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (Mark 2:19); John the Baptist calls himself the friend of the Bridegroom (John 3:29); Paul names the great mystery (Ephesians 5:31-32); and Revelation ends history with "the marriage of the Lamb has come" (19:7).

Tonight's Gospel text, John 20:11-18, will let the group discover Easter morning written as the Song's garden scene.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John of the Cross

John's masterpiece opens with the bride's cry, in an adapted rendering: *Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning? You fled like the stag after wounding me; I went out calling you, and you were gone.* By the account of his early biographers, composed largely from memory of the Song of Songs in his Toledo cell, the Canticle then walks the whole road this study has walked: search, night, encounter, espousal, union. For John, the Song is not decoration on the spiritual life; it is its most exact grammar: the soul before God is first of all a beloved who has been wounded into seeking.

The Spiritual Canticle, stanza 1.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Teresa of Avila

Teresa wrote a small book of meditations on verses of the Song (a bold act for a woman in her century; an early confessor ordered one version burned, and she serenely wrote on). In it she teaches, in substance, that the Lord is not offended when a soul takes the bride's words on its own lips; he inspired them for that use. She lingers on the bride's security in the Beloved's affection and urges her sisters to ask boldly for the deep peace of his friendship. Where others blushed at the Song, Teresa saw the prayer book of holy audacity.

Summarized from her Meditations on the Song of Songs.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Paul II

In his catecheses on human love, St. John Paul II taught, in substance, that spousal love is stamped into the body and its meaning from the beginning, and that the Song of Songs stands in the canon as human eros bearing witness, in its truth, to the covenant: the language of self-gift. Marriage speaks of Christ and the Church (he loved to expound Ephesians 5), and consecrated virginity speaks of the same wedding by another road. Marriage and consecrated virginity alike, he taught, speak the one language of definitive self-gift to Love who gave himself first.

Summarized from his catecheses on human love (the Theology of the Body) and Mulieris Dignitatem.

Catechism Connection

CCC 116 anchors the method: the literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words and discovered by exegesis; all other senses of Scripture are based on the literal. The Song really celebrates human love; the spiritual reading stands on that floor, not instead of it.

CCC 128-130 explains typology: the Church reads the Old Testament in the light of Christ, discerning in God's works of the old covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in Christ; the two Testaments illuminate each other. The bridal chain (prophets to Bridegroom to Ephesians 5 to the wedding of the Lamb) is typology working exactly as described.

CCC 796 states the result: the unity of Christ and the Church, head and members, is also presented as the union of bridegroom and bride; the theme is prepared by the prophets, announced by John the Baptist, and claimed by the Lord who calls himself the Bridegroom. CCC 1612-1617 traces the same arc into marriage as sacrament of Christ and the Church.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Thread B ("Water to Flame"): one connective line tonight if wanted: the Song ends by declaring love

strong as death, its flashes "flashes of fire" (8:6); we read that verse in two weeks, when the water catches.

Thread A: hold. Session 11 approaches; do not spend the tailor early.

Tone watch: some laughter tonight is healthy; mockery or crude riffing is not. Set the register with your own unembarrassed reverence. Also watch for those whom bridal language touches painfully (the divorced, the lonely); the point for every state of life is the love itself, not marital status.

Session Goals

1. Read the Song aloud without embarrassment and locate it in the canonical marriage-current (prophets, Bridegroom, Ephesians 5, Revelation).
2. Discover the Song beneath John 20:11-18 by inductive comparison.
3. Answer the eisegesis objection with CCC 116 and 128-130: literal floor, typological house.
4. Let each person hear the Song's categories (sought, delighted in) as addressed to them.

Time note (75-90 min). Win 10 min; Build 50 min; Send and Live It 15 min. If pressed, trim Q2's sharing round and cut Q6; the John 20 discovery and the steelman are the session.

The Song

Song of Songs 2:8-17; 3:1-4 · John 20:11-18

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, you have loved your people with an everlasting love; you rejoice over us as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride. Give us tonight clean hearts and unembarrassed ears, to hear the Song you put in your own Scriptures, and to answer it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN

W1. Honestly: when you heard this session was on the Song of Songs, what was your first reaction, and why do you think that is?

W2. What difference does it make whether God tolerates you, employs you, or delights in you? Which one does your prayer actually assume?

BUILD

Q1. Read Song of Songs 2:8-17 aloud (choose a reader who will commit to it). List what the bride notices about the beloved and what he says to her. What is the emotional register of this passage: duty, fear, negotiation, or something else?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

She notices his voice, his leaping approach over the mountains, his gaze through the lattice (2:8-9); he speaks invitation: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away," for the winter is past and the singing has come (2:10-13); he calls her voice sweet and her face comely (2:14). The register is delight and desire: nothing here is owed, extracted, or feared. Then the mutual formula: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (2:16). Hold that verse up: it echoes the covenant formula ("I will be your God, and you shall be my people"), heard here in the key of love. This is the register the mystics claim for prayer.

Q2. Read Song 3:1-4: the seeking scene. Trace its movement (sought and not found; rising; searching the city; the watchmen; finding; holding). Where have you lived some version of this sequence with God, and which verse names where you are now?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The sequence: longing on the bed by night, seeking and not finding (3:1), rising to search streets and squares (3:2), the watchmen who cannot help (3:3), and then, "scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go" (3:4). Map it onto the study: Sessions 5 and 6 were verse 1; Session 4's discipline was verse 2's rising; tonight and the sessions ahead are verse 4. Let people place themselves without forcing resolution; some are honestly at 3:1, and the Song dignifies that verse by including it.

DISCOVERY MOMENT · Q3

Now read John 20:11-18 with the Song still open beside it. Mary Magdalene, before dawn, at a tomb in a garden. Have the group hunt the parallels between this scene and Song 3:1-4 (and 2:8-17): list every echo they can find: the time, the setting, the seeking, the questions, the turning, the recognition, the holding. Then ask: is John doing this on purpose?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The echoes: night and early dark (Song 3:1; John 20:1); seeking the missing beloved with tears; the "watchmen" encountered mid-search (Song 3:3; the two angels Mary meets mid-search, John 20:12-13); the question "Whom do you seek?" (John 20:15, and note 18:4 earlier); the garden setting (John 19:41; the Song is thick with gardens, 4:12-16, 6:2); recognition at a single word, her name, "Mary" (20:16; the shepherd-beloved who calls his own by name); and the holding: "I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go" (Song 3:4) against "Do not hold me" (John 20:17), where Jesus does not refuse her love but redirects it forward, to the ascended communion about to be given to all. Is it deliberate? Scholars debate that; John has certainly built his Gospel on temple, water, and shepherd typologies, and readers ancient and modern have heard the Song in this garden. What can be said with confidence: Easter morning can be read, fruitfully and reverently, in the Song's grammar, and read that way, the covenant love story reaches its wedding morning at the empty tomb.

BUILD, THEN PRESS: IS THE SPIRITUAL READING OF THE SONG JUST PIOUS EISEGESIS?

Give the objection its full scholarly weight: "Read honestly, the Song of Songs is ancient Near Eastern love poetry: two human lovers, frank about the body, with God unmentioned in the entire book (a single possible flicker at 8:6). The allegorical tradition arose because embarrassed readers could not believe eros belonged in the canon, so they translated every kiss into theology, a method with no controls, by which the text can mean anything. Tellingly, the New Testament never once quotes the Song. Modern Catholic scholarship itself insists on the literal sense as primary (your own CCC 116). Let the Song be what it is, a celebration of married love, and stop making it carry mystical freight it never asked for."

This is the strongest exegetical steelman of the study; do not caricature it.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede its floor gladly, because the Church already has: the literal sense is primary (CCC 116), the Song really is unashamed love poetry, and any allegory that despises the body or treats eros as embarrassment refutes itself (and slanders the God of Genesis 2). The Catholic claim is not literal-or-spiritual but literal-therefore-spiritual, and it rests on controls the objection overlooks. First, the canonical context: Israel received this Song inside a Scripture where marriage was already the established master image of the covenant (Hosea 2:19-20; Isaiah 62:5; Ezekiel 16); the prophetic marriage imagery gave the Song a canonical context in which Jewish and Christian readers alike could hear covenant overtones, the way a national anthem is more than a tune to those who know the country. Second, the New Testament, while not quoting the Song, canonizes its frame: Jesus names himself the Bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20), Paul calls the one-flesh union "a great mystery... Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32, quoting Genesis 2:24, which shows typology reaching back into precisely this kind of text), and Revelation ends at the wedding (19:7). Third, typology is not an anything-goes method: it reads God's consistent pattern across the two Testaments (CCC 128-130), and the bridal pattern is among the best-attested in the whole Bible. The spiritual reading does not replace the lovers; it discovers what their love was always an image of, which is also why it honors marriage more, not less, than the objection does. And John 20, as the group just found, suggests the evangelist himself read Easter through the Song's garden. The mystics stand in a current that starts inside Scripture.

DIG DEEPER: DODI: MY BELOVED

The bride's word for the beloved throughout the Song is the Hebrew *dodi*, "my beloved," an intimate possessive that occurs over twenty times in this short book. Isaiah opens his vineyard song "for my beloved" (Isaiah 5:1) with the same Hebrew root; at the Jordan the Father's voice declares "You are my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11), Greek now (*agapetos*), a different tongue carrying the same theme of

belovedness. Ask: what changes in prayer if the Father's word over Jesus, beloved, is the word the Song teaches the soul to say back?

Q4. Teresa was ordered to burn a book of meditations on the Song and calmly kept teaching from it; John asked for the Song on his deathbed. What did they know that makes this book worth that kind of loyalty? What would it take for you to pray one line of the Song as your own this week?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Draw the answer from the evening itself: they knew that the deepest truth about a soul before God is not employee, defendant, or fan but beloved; that the Song supplies words for desire, absence, seeking, and finding that no other register carries; and that these words are inspired, given by God for our use (Teresa's point exactly). Practical close: choose one line as the week's aspiration, for example "My beloved is mine and I am his" (2:16) or "I found him whom my soul loves" (3:4), and let the group say their chosen line aloud if willing.

SEND

S1. Which category have you been living toward God (employee, defendant, fan, stranger), and what would change this week if "beloved" replaced it?

S2. Mary was sent from the garden with a message ("go to my brethren," John 20:17). Being loved like this is never a private luxury: whom is your Easter-garden joy for?

Live It This Week

- Pray your chosen Song line as a repeated aspiration each day this week (at red lights, in queues, before sleep), alongside the fifteen-minute appointment.
- Read John 20:1-18 once mid-week, slowly, placing yourself in the garden. Let him say your name at verse 16.
- If you are married: pray once this week in thanksgiving for your spouse as a living sign of this mystery (Ephesians 5:31-32). If you are not: pray Isaiah 62:5 over your own life and state of life.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, Bridegroom of the Church, you sought us before we sought you, and on Easter morning you called your seeking one by name. Speak our names too. Teach us to answer with the Song you gave us: my beloved is mine and I am his. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE · SONG OF SONGS 2:16

"My beloved is mine and I am his."

The Song

Every passage used, in order

Passage	Where it is used
Song 2:8-17	Q1: the beloved's approach and invitation; the mutual formula (2:16)
Song 3:1-4	Q2 and Discovery: the seeking scene
John 20:11-18	Discovery: Easter morning in the Song's grammar
John 19:41; John 18:4	Discovery answer: the garden; whom do you seek
Hos 2:19-20; Isa 62:5; Ezek 16	OT Roots and steelman answer: the prophetic marriage
Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29	Steelman answer: the Bridegroom self-claim
Eph 5:31-32; Rev 19:7	Steelman answer: the great mystery; the wedding of the Lamb
Isa 5:1; Mark 1:11	Dig Deeper: dodi and the beloved Son