

Love Stories



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:21–25, Exod. 20:5, Isa. 43:4, 62:5, Song of Songs, John 2:1–11.*

Memory Text: “The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’ ” (*Jeremiah 31:3, NKJV*).

Key Thought: How are we to understand the loving side of God?

Love is, perhaps, the most readily recalled attribute of God. And, indeed, we cannot overestimate God's love, nor exhaust the depth of it. But perhaps there is one aspect of His deep love that is not duly regarded; that is, God as a romantic.

To get a proper perspective on God's romantic nature, we need to remind ourselves, first of all, of the time frame exhibited in the Bible. This book covers thousands of years of human history. And like all history books, the Bible as a whole contains records of kings and queens, wars and battle plans, and political intrigue.

No history book, though, records everything. The same is true of Scripture. One does not find an exhaustive historical record in the broad scope of time that the Bible covers. A lot of things are skipped over. Most interestingly, though, is that God includes tender romances within the historical record He inspired the prophets to write. The question is, Why would the Lord include these kinds of love stories, stories of romance, in what is so much a history book? Does that tell us something about His own nature and how importantly He views romance? This week we'll look at why these accounts are included and what we can learn from them.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 24.*

The First Romance

“And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (*Gen. 2:23*).

We need to begin with the initial chapters of Genesis for the first romance in Scripture, that of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are special creations of God. Both male and female reflect His image (*Gen. 1:26, 27*). Both Adam and Eve receive their life as a result of God’s incredible creative power. The complexity of our physical bodies remains one of the most powerful testimonies to the wisdom and might of our Creator.

Read the biblical account of the creation of Eve (*Gen. 2:21–25*). How would you describe the kind of relationship between them as depicted in this account?

Perhaps the most obvious point from this account is just how intimately and closely tied together these two are. God creates the woman out of the body of the man; they are, literally, of the same flesh and blood.

Adam then breaks out into what has been called the Bible’s first “love song” or “love poem,” in which he openly acknowledges just how closely tied each is to the other. In Hebrew, the word for “man” that he uses in verse 23 is *ish*; the word he uses for “woman” is *ishah*, again showing just how closely tied they are.

In verse 24, the Bible says that a man will leave his parents and cleave unto his wife, and they shall be “one flesh,” another powerful indicator of the intimacy meant for them. (Some have wondered, What parents is the Bible talking about here, because there were none then? The point is, Moses wrote this account many centuries after it happened, and he used the story of their creation to explain in more detail what marriage meant.)

Finally, their nakedness also revealed the intense closeness and intimacy between this first couple.

Whatever else their relationship originally entailed, romantic love was certainly a major part of it. God is not against romance. On the contrary, He created us as beings capable of experiencing it. In fact, that seems to be one of the basic elements He created in us.

Romantic love is such a wonderful, God-given gift to humanity. If you are in a proper romantic relationship, what things can you do to protect it from all that can go wrong?

Biblical Romances

Although the Bible covers a lot of history, it has made time to depict some romances. There was a strong, affectionate bond between Abraham and Sarah. He doesn't desert her during her long years of barrenness. In fact, it is only at Sarah's urging that Abraham takes Hagar as a surrogate wife. The ties of love between Abraham and Sarah are strong. (See *Genesis 16*.)

It takes a lengthy chapter in Genesis to record Abraham's servant's long trip to find Isaac a wife. Upon his return with Rebecca, the inspired account includes another love story. (See *Genesis 24*.)

Another romance given a lot of time in the Bible is the one between Jacob and Rachel. In quick strokes, the picture is painted of Jacob's impulsive and warm response to Rachel. Apart from the Song of Songs, there isn't another example in Scripture of a man and a woman kissing, certainly not before marriage. And if we recall that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and through His inspiration the book of Genesis was written, we are reminded that God is a romantic, because He includes this love story and this kiss in the Bible. (See *Genesis 29*.) (If you were writing a history book spanning thousands of years, covering the creation of humankind and its Fall, why would you include this romantic detail?) In the historical period enclosed within the book of Genesis, there must be many time gaps. Yet, God inspired the inclusion of these warm love stories.

Go back over the stories of these romances. Whatever the love that existed, these accounts are in many ways similar to romance and love stories all over the world; that is, these people faced many challenges and suffered from the mistakes of one or both parties. What were some of the things done wrong that brought so much pain and suffering to these relationships? Most important, how can we learn from their mistakes?

Unfortunately, many have made similar mistakes, or even worse. The good news is that God not only forgives, He heals. Whatever romantic mistakes you have made, how can you learn to seek the forgiveness and healing that come from the Cross?

God's Love

Genesis shows, right from the start, that romance was to be a basic part of the human experience. One man with one woman, period. That was God's ideal, the biblical prototype that models what romantic love was to be about.

It's fascinating, too, how often the Bible uses imagery of love, of marriage, to depict the kind of love relationship God seeks with His people. Nothing is to be more intimate than a husband and a wife—except, perhaps, a person's individual relationship with God.

Read Exodus 20:5. What word in there reveals God's feelings toward His people? How are we to understand that word in the context of God?

Many times God expresses His jealousy over His people. (*See also Exod. 34:14, Deut. 4:24, Joel 2:18.*) Jealousy is a feeling lovers get when they think that their beloved is not faithful to them. God is not a distant, nonfeeling, impersonal benign "force." He is a personal Being with profound affection for the human family. However hard it is for us to grasp, God does love us and, like any lover, He is pained by our unfaithfulness.

Look up the following texts. What are they saying? How do they help us to understand God's feelings toward us? *Isa. 43:4, 62:5, Ezek. 16:1–15, Jer. 31:3, Rev. 21:9.*

The Bible openly teaches that God deeply loves individual human beings. This is not an easy concept to grasp, only because the concept of God, the Creator of the universe, isn't an easy concept to grasp. After all, we can barely understand the universe as a whole; how much less, then, the One who created it? At the same time, though, God has not only declared His love for us, He has shown it to us in many powerful ways. The greatest, of course, is the Cross and what happened there. What more proof do we need of God's love for us than what we have been given at Calvary?

Think what it would mean were God to hate us or to be indifferent to us or to merely like us. But the Bible says that God loves us. What does that mean to you, personally, and how does this amazing idea (that God loves us) influence how you live?

A Book of Romance

Libraries could be filled with books that deal with the difficult question of human suffering, difficult especially for those who believe in a loving and all-powerful God (for the atheist, suffering is merely part of what it means to live in a godless and meaningless universe and thus doesn't present the difficult philosophical questions it does for Christians). However, without an understanding of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, most of those books don't make much headway (even with an understanding of the cosmic drama, the question of suffering is, indeed, difficult enough).

And although the question of human suffering touches all aspects of life, we mustn't forget life's pleasures either. Why does food taste so good? Why do so many taste buds perfectly match to sense the many appealing flavors in food? Why are there so many shades of color? Why is the human eye able to connect with, and revel in, all the vivid colors? Why the joy of married sexuality? Reproduction certainly doesn't require the kind of pleasure that sexual activity offers. Some forms of life simply split in half to reproduce. Imagine if that were what we went through in order to reproduce. Even now, humans occasionally use methods of artificial insemination that don't involve pleasure. Why do we have the exact nerve endings needed to enjoy sensory pleasure, even sexual pleasure?

The answer to all these questions is the same: it's because God has made us that way. God created humans as physical beings who are intended to enjoy physical pleasures.

No book of the Bible deals with this topic better than the Song of Songs. Why is that book in the Bible? It is a book of sheer romantic pleasure. All the sexual pleasures included in the book have no connection to child-bearing. The book explicitly reminds us of the specific pleasures God designed and intended for husbands and wives. The effervescent springs of romantic love can be traced to their source in God.

Skim through the Song of Solomon. What does the book say to you about how God views the pleasures of the flesh in the right context?

Of course, compared to many of the crude and licentious practices of our surrounding culture, Christian ideas about sex, marriage, and physical pleasures, in general, can seem outdated, prudish, and restrictive. But these principles come from the One who created our physical pleasures, the One who knows how they can best be enjoyed. Who alone but God can even begin to assess the pain and suffering caused by the abuse of these wonderful gifts? Who hasn't been impacted in one way or another by their abuse?

Jesus and Romance

Read John 2:1–11. What does this tell us about Jesus' attitude toward marriage and romantic love? What does it mean that He gave His blessing to such boisterous and long, drawn-out affairs as Jewish weddings were in that day and age?

Jesus had just returned from the wilderness of temptation, where He Himself had drunk the cup of woe. But from there He came forth to give the human family the cup of blessing and to consecrate the warm relationships of human life. Jesus, who officiated at the first wedding in the Garden of Eden, now performs His first miracle. Where? At a wedding meal.

A Jewish wedding in biblical times was an impressive occasion. A marriage in the small village of Cana in Galilee might have been the event of the year. The partying went on for days. Rabbis and students would stop studying. Everyone brought presents and, in return, the hosting family was expected to keep guests well supplied with food, drink, and merrymaking.

The running out of drink was, then, more than a minor disappointment. It was a catastrophe, and the mother of Jesus comes to describe the emergency to Him. She suggests nothing, nor is she passive. She speaks to the servants of the household and urges, "Whatever He tells you, do it."

Jesus then tells the servants to fill six water pots. Archaeologists say that at that time a storage jar could hold 15–25 gallons. At a minimum then, we are talking about at least ninety gallons. Some scholars suggest at least one hundred twenty gallons.

The next thing we hear is the steward's exuberant exclamation to the bridegroom, congratulating him: "' Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!' " (*John 2:10, NKJV*).

If there are four quarts to a gallon and each quart yields six glasses, the size generally used at wedding receptions, that amount is a minimum total of 2,160 glasses. This means, then, 2,160 servings of the finest drink for one little wedding party in a backwater village of Galilee. Jesus, at a wedding, pours out the best that anyone had ever tasted.

In this miracle we can see God's creative power, the same power that created our world. And, in Jesus' earthly ministry this creative power is first expressed in the context of a wedding.

Romantic love and marriage are, indeed, wonderful gifts from God. We must remember, too, that Jesus was never married, and thus He leaves an example that shows that not everyone has to get married. Single people can live full and productive and joyful lives as well as married people can.

Further Study: In both the Old and the New Testament, marriage is utilized to represent the tender and sacred union that exists between Christ and His people. To the mind of Jesus, the gladness of wedding festivities pointed forward to the rejoicing of that day when He shall bring home His bride to the Father's house, and the redeemed with the Redeemer shall sit down to the marriage supper of the Lamb. He says, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (*Isa. 62:5, NKJV*). "You shall no longer be termed Forsaken" (*vs. 4, NKJV*). "But you will be called, 'My Delight' . . . for the Lord delights in you.' . . . God will rejoice over you" (*vs. 4, 5, NASB*). "He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing" (*Zeph. 3:17, NKJV*).

Scripture concludes with this same glorious theme. When the vision of heavenly things was granted to John the apostle, he wrote, "I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright. . . . 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb! . . . These are the true sayings of God'" (*Rev. 19:6–9, NKJV*).

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Which practices in your society and culture could easily lead to the abuse of the physical pleasures that God has given us? How can you help educate others, especially young people, about the dangers of abusing these gifts? How can you show them that by following the principles and laws that God has given us, people will be in a much better situation to enjoy life than they would be if they followed the customs and practices of society that go contrary to the principles in God's Word?
- ❷ In the civil laws God gave Israel, there is another reminder of God's romantic nature. What kind of honeymoon does God suggest for a newly married couple? *Deut. 24:5*. What do we make of that time frame given them?

Summary: For many moderns, God has dwindled into a noble "example." Or He has been diluted into a concept useful for organizing world peace. He's not, however, seen as a Personality for whom we can feel any love. But Scripture insists that God is a passionate lover. Reflect on the difference that this concept makes for the various doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jeremiah 31:3*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review examples of romantic love and intimacy that are portrayed in biblical stories as symbols of the relationship God wants with us.

Feel: Sense the closeness and intimacy that God longs for us to have in marriage and in our relationship with Him.

Do: Foster the development of romance and intimacy in appropriate contexts.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: A Romantic God

A Which Bible stories reveal the value that God places on romantic love and marriage?

B How does God describe the culmination of His efforts to romance and win His people into spiritual intimacy with Him?

II. Feel: Garden of Love

A How does the Song of Solomon describe the physical and emotional pleasures and intimacies of a healthy marital relationship?

B How does this description translate into the intimacy that God desires to experience with us?

C In what ways can single people fulfill their desires and needs for intimacy?

III. Do: Grow Intimacy

A What kinds of activities and attitudes promote the development of emotional and physical intimacy?

B What are the contexts in which healthy intimacy occurs? What abuses of intimacy are possible, and how can we guard against these problems?

► **Summary:** From the first marriage in the Garden of Eden to the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation and many stories in between, the Scriptures reveal the sacredness and beauty of romance, love, and intimacy in healthy relationships.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God created human beings as individuals who have an immense ability to give and receive love.

Just for Teachers: Because the lesson is primarily about the romantic love between husband and wife, it is important to be sensitive to class members who may be single or in a broken or dysfunctional relationship. Focus on love as an integral part of any healthy relationship, rather than on specifics. Below are two options with which to begin.

Opening Activity 1: Ask the students to describe, in one word, their strongest and healthiest relationship with another person. Write these adjectives on a board, if possible, where they may be visible for the remainder of the class. Referring to the compiled list on the board, introduce the lesson:

Imagine what it would be like if you could take the strengths of all the relationships represented here today and infuse them all into one relationship between you and somebody special. Even more wonderful would be if you could seal that relationship with some tamper-proof glue to keep out all negative influences. Imagine the supreme state of bliss and contentment that you would enjoy.

Opening Activity 2: Ask the class to identify characteristics of positive, healthy relationships in the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Paul and Timothy, Naomi and Ruth, Jacob and Rachel, and so forth. Then discuss the ways that a healthy relationship enhances life.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Present life as a cluster of relationships in which interactions are more than acts of civility and tolerance. Life is about building connections between one another in a spirit of support and intimacy. God created human beings with the ability to love, to some degree, as He loves. When we practice God's kind of love, we enrich one another and God's church.

Bible Commentary

I. Created for Love (*Read Genesis 1:27 with your class.*)

There is a thread of dependency, responsibility, and nurture that connects all creation—plant to animal, animal to human, human to human. This shows that isolation is not God’s idea of existence. On the last day of Creation, God went a step beyond codependency when He created man and woman. They were similar, yet so different: two beings who complemented and connected to each other on a level that other creatures were not capable of reaching. The love that the man and the woman had for each other was a replication of God’s love for them. It was a feeling that thrived and grew because both Adam and Eve nurtured and respected their relationship. In other words, man and woman were given to each other to take care of each other, to complement each other.

So integral is love to human relationships that it still existed in the human heart even after sin made its entrance. Love left the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and, ever since, has kept the human race from completely destroying itself. No matter how much evil there is in this world, there’s often enough goodness to help us to appreciate life.

Dependency on one another, support during periods of pain, empathy and sympathy—all are expressions of love, not just between human beings but between God and humankind. God created humanity in His own image, to be and to do like God. And even when humankind sinned, God did not strip away their godlikeness. What greater expression of love could He have bestowed upon humans who had sinned than to leave love in their hearts?

Consider This: Satan is well aware of the importance of love in our lives. He strives to disrupt loving relationships and promote a selfish existence. What are some of the circumstances you’ve had to overcome in order to show love when you really didn’t feel like loving at all? Why is it important to understand love as a principle and not just as a feeling?

II. Called to Be Loving (*Read Genesis 2:23 with your class.*)

Life really is a string of relationships and connections, between you and a spouse, a child, a parent, God, a job, a friend, or a pet. And the stronger and healthier your relationships, the more content your life.

Therefore, love, in some form or another, is at the crux of a fulfilling life. Jesus emphasized this when He said, “ ‘Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is similar: “Love your neighbor as yourself” ’ ” (*Matt. 22:37–39, NIV*). Jesus couldn’t make it any simpler. He says that building and maintaining good relationships should be a priority of every Christian.

Consider This: God created Adam first, and, upon seeing that he needed a mate, He then created Eve. Why do you think God, in His omniscience, didn’t create them together? Did creating Eve after Adam help to foster their love? If so, how?

III. Chosen as Beloved (*Read Isaiah 62:5 with your class.*)

When communicating with John about His plans and His passion for His church, God used the imagery of a perfect marriage to describe His relationship with His people. God knows that because of our natural, innate longing to love and be loved, we would understand this analogy and be able to more clearly appreciate the characteristics of God.

More important, God then takes the imagery a step further. He says that His love is like that of a groom for his bride—not his wife of many “rote” years (one can grow cold), but his bride. This is the first glow of love that is eager to please, glad to forgive, quick to overlook mistakes. God says He has a forever-honeymoon kind of love for us—every day, all the time. Imagine that. It’s not a relationship of tolerance or compromise, or even one of mutual benefits; it’s a relationship of deep intimacy with care and love for each other.

God longs to restore a love relationship with us. He already loves us. The question is, what about our love for Him?

Consider This: This week we learned that we are a people created for love, called to be loving and chosen as beloved. How can you better reflect God’s love with your family? Your coworkers? Your church?

■ *God calls the church His bride. What are some ways in which we can maintain the same type of enthusiasm and love for our God?*

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use this portion of the lesson to encourage the class to discover relationship principles and strategies from the Bible. Divide the class into two groups to study the following passages. Come together to discuss their findings.

A Adam's soliloquy at his first sight of Eve (*Gen. 2:18–25*) was made when he was a sinless being, when he most reflected his Creator God. In that pure, selfless state he was able to spontaneously reflect on all the positive characteristics of his union with Eve. What lessons can we glean from this verse that will strengthen our personal relationships? How can having a closer relationship with Jesus enrich our personal relationships?

B Read Matthew 26:6–13. These verses describe an incident in which Jesus seemingly approves of love being expressed with abandon and a complete lack of common sense. What could be the explanation for Jesus' reaction? What are the types of situations in which such extravagant gestures of love are appropriate?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: This is an opportunity for your class to explore practical ways in which to implement concepts learned from the lesson.

Activity: Ask the class to come up with ways to strengthen personal relationships within the congregation. Here are some examples:

A Date Night Program: On a scheduled evening, the church provides free babysitting in order to allow couples to spend some quality time together.

B Social Club for Singles: Create a committee under the church's administration to coordinate group events on a regular basis.

C Father/Son and Mother/Daughter Events: Find ways to encourage family bonding.