

An Orthodox Bible Study I Am Wounded

with Love

The Song of Songs and the Soul's Ascent to God

Τετρωμένη ἀγάπης ἐγώ · “*I am wounded with love*”

Song of Songs 2:5, Septuagint

Six sessions on the strangest and holiest book of the Old Covenant: the love song the Church placed at the heart of her Scriptures, sang over her martyrs and monastics, wove into the hymns of the Theotokos, and read aloud in the darkest nights of Holy Week. A study of divine eros, the Bridegroom Christ, the wound of longing, the darkness where He hides, and the ascent that never ends.

Read with the Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa · Maximus the Confessor
Dionysius the Areopagite · John Chrysostom · Cyril of Jerusalem

Prologue

Why This Book?

How to use this study, and why almost no one teaches it

Most Bible studies avoid the Song of Songs. It is the only book of Scripture that never once names God. It contains no commandments, no prophecy, no doctrine stated outright. It is, on its surface, simply a love poem: a bride and a bridegroom seeking each other, losing each other, praising each other in language so frank that the ancient rabbis debated whether young men should be permitted to read it at all. And yet the Church did not merely tolerate this book. She placed it among the Scriptures, and her greatest theologians returned to it more often than to almost any other text when they wanted to speak of the highest things: of what it is like, finally, to love God.

That is why this study exists, and why it rewards slow reading. The Orthodox tradition does not read the Song as an embarrassment to be spiritualized away, nor as a mere manual of romance. It reads the Song as the Holy Spirit's own poetry about the love between Christ and His Church, between Christ and the Theotokos, and between Christ and every soul who seeks Him. Your own loves and your journey toward the font are not two separate subjects here. The Song holds them in one hand.

How to Use This Study

Take one session per week, slowly and unhurried. Begin with the opening prayer. Read the Scripture aloud; the Song was written to be heard, not skimmed. Read the reflection and the Fathers slowly. Then talk through the questions honestly, and keep the week's practice. Scripture follows the Septuagint, the Old Testament of the Church; Psalms are numbered by the LXX with English numbering in brackets.

Before Each Session

O Lord Jesus Christ, Bridegroom of every soul that seeks You, who loved Your Church and gave Yourself up for her: kindle in us the love that is strong as death, which many waters cannot quench. Open to us the Song You inspired, that we may hear Your voice in it and follow where You call, ever deeper, ever higher, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

The Holy of Holies

Why a love poem is in the Bible, and the council that defended it

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine, and the fragrance of your anointing oils is above all spices. Your name is oil poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you; we will run in the fragrance of your oils. The King has brought me into his chambers.

Song of Songs 1:1–4 (LXX)

Begin with the scandal, because the scandal is the door. Among the Jewish sages there was real dispute over this book, and it was Rabbi Akiva, in the generation after the apostles, who defended it with a sentence the Church would never forget: all the Writings are holy, he said, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. Notice what that image claims. The Holy of Holies is the innermost chamber, the place of the immediate presence of God, entered rarely and with fear. Akiva was saying that this poem, which never names God, is where God is most intimately found.

The Church received the Song the same way. Origen of Alexandria wrote a vast commentary on it in the third century and warned that it should be kept for the mature, not because it is unholy but because it is too holy: the reader who has not yet learned to order his desires will hear only the surface. Origen himself is a figure you already know how to hold rightly. His speculative system was condemned in the sixth-century Origenist crises, and Orthodoxy does not receive his errors. But his exegesis of the Song passed, purified, into the hands of the Fathers the Church does canonize, above all St. Gregory of Nyssa, whose fifteen homilies on the Song, preached for the deaconess Olympias, are the summit of patristic commentary on this book.

Gregory tells his hearers that they must enter this book the way Israel entered the sanctuary: having washed. The one who brings passionate, possessive desire to the text will find only flesh; but the one who comes purified will find that the words of longing are a ladder, and that the bride's desire for the bridegroom is the truest picture Scripture gives of the soul's desire for God.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Song of Songs (opening homily), summarized

And here is the part almost no one teaches: the Song's spiritual reading was defended by an Ecumenical Council. Theodore of Mopsuestia, the great Antiochene teacher, treated the Song as nothing more than a human love poem of Solomon, unworthy of theological reading. At the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553, Theodore and his writings were condemned, and among the charges pressed against him was precisely his degradation of this book. The conciliar mind of the Church judged that to strip the Song of Christ is to misread it. That is not a private opinion, a theologoumenon; it is the Church speaking about how her own Scripture breathes.

Septuagint Note · “Your love” or “your breasts”? (1:2)

The Hebrew consonants *ddyk* in 1:2 can be vocalized *dodekha*, “your loves,” or *dadekha*, “your breasts.” The Septuagint, translated centuries before the Masoretic vowel points were fixed, read *μαστοί σου*, and the Fathers received the bolder image: the bride drinks nourishment from the Bridegroom Himself, as the Church drinks the Mysteries from Christ. The LXX here is not a softening of the text but a witness to the older reading, and a small proof of a larger point: the Church’s canon and text are her own inheritance, not a later reconstruction.

For Reflection

1. Be honest: what has been your instinctive reaction to this book? Where did you first learn that reaction?
2. Akiva called the Song the Holy of Holies. What changes in you if you approach it as a sanctuary rather than a curiosity?
3. Theodore read the Song without Christ and the Council said no. Where else are we tempted to read Scripture, or our own love story, without Christ?

This Week’s Practice

Once this week, read Song of Songs chapter 1 aloud, slowly and unhurried, and then sit in silence for two minutes before speaking. Let the words be prayer before they are discussion.

Behold the Bridegroom

The Nymphios of Holy Week and the midnight of the heart

I sleep, but my heart is awake. The voice of my beloved! He knocks at the door: Open to me, my sister, my companion, my dove, my perfect one.

And at midnight there was a cry: Behold, the bridegroom comes; go out to meet him.

Song of Songs 5:2 (LXX) · Matthew 25:6

If anyone tells you the nuptial reading of the Song is a strained allegory, take them to church during the first days of Holy Week. There the Church sings the services of the Bridegroom, the Nymphios. The icon set out for veneration shows Christ crowned with thorns, robed in mockery, holding the reed: and the Church calls this image, of all things, the Bridegroom. At Matins she sings that the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He finds watching. The Church took the Song's midnight knock and the parable of the ten virgins and fused them into her most solemn week of the year. The nuptial reading is not a gloss on the Gospel; it is the Gospel's own grammar.

Why is the suffering Christ the Bridegroom? Because in Scripture marriage is sealed in covenant, and covenant is sealed in blood. St. John the Forerunner names himself only the friend of the Bridegroom who rejoices to hear His voice; the first sign at Cana turns water to wine at a wedding; and St. Paul, quoting Genesis on the union of husband and wife, says plainly: this mystery is great, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church. The Cross is the bride-price. The pierced side from which blood and water flowed is, for the Fathers, the birth of the Bride herself, as Eve was taken from the side of the sleeping Adam.

Chrysostom marvels that Christ did not find His Bride beautiful and then love her; He loved her while she was disfigured, and by loving her made her beautiful. Human eros is awakened by beauty already present; divine eros creates the beauty it loves. This, Chrysostom says, is the pattern given to every husband, who is commanded to love as Christ loved: first, and at cost.

St. John Chrysostom, on the union of Christ and the Church, summarized

"I sleep, but my heart is awake" is the catechumen's verse. There is a drowsiness of the not-yet-baptized life, and even of the long-baptized life: the world's low hum, the old habits, the half-attention. But underneath, the heart keeps vigil, because it has heard a voice it cannot unhear. The whole of Orthodox ascetical life, vigils, fasting, the midnight office, is simply the Church refusing to let the heart fall asleep before the knock comes.

For Reflection

1. The Nymphios icon shows the Bridegroom at the moment of His humiliation. What does it mean that this is what divine love looks like at full strength?
2. Chrysostom says divine love creates beauty rather than merely responding to it. Where have you seen that pattern in how God has dealt with you? How could it shape the way you love others?
3. Where are you “asleep with a waking heart” right now: hearing the knock but slow to open?

This Week's Practice

Pray Psalm 44 [45], the wedding psalm of the King, once this week, ideally in the evening with a lit candle before an icon of Christ. It is the psalm the Church sings of the Bridegroom and His Bride.

The Wound of Love

Divine eros, the arrow of the Bridegroom, and desire made deiform

Bring me into the house of wine; set love in order within me. Strengthen me with perfumes, refresh me with apples, for I am wounded with love.

Song of Songs 2:4–5 (LXX)

Septuagint Note · Wounded, not sick (2:5)

The Hebrew text reads *cholat ahavah*, “sick with love.” The Septuagint reads τετραμένη ἀγάπης ἐγώ, “I am wounded with love,” the language not of illness but of an arrow that has found its mark. The entire patristic theology of the wound of divine love grows from this LXX reading. Note also 2:4: where English Bibles say “his banner over me was love,” the LXX prays π’ μ π, “set love in order within me,” the very definition of chastity in the patristic tradition: not the absence of desire, but desire rightly ordered.

Here the study reaches its provocation. Can the word eros, desiring love, yearning love, be used of God? Much Western piety says no: God’s love is agape, disinterested benevolence, and eros is the suspect human thing. The Orthodox mystical tradition answers otherwise, with care. St. Dionysius the Areopagite, in the Divine Names, dares to call God Himself eros, and says that the divine eros is ecstatic: it makes the lover go out of himself to belong to the beloved. This is why the Son did not remain impassibly distant but came out of Himself, so to speak, into flesh, into hunger, into the Cross. Ecstasy, ekstasis, standing outside oneself, is first of all something God did toward us.

Gregory reads the bride’s wound through Psalm 44 [45]: the Bridegroom is also an archer, and His arrows are sharp. The soul praises the archer for His aim: she has been struck, and the arrow is love itself. Gregory even glimpses the Trinity in the image: the arrow of divine love is the Son, sent from the bow, its point anointed by the Spirit, loosed by the Father. To be wounded by this arrow is not to be harmed but to be opened; the wound is the place where God enters, and the bride’s glory is that she did not dodge.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Song of Songs, on 2:5, summarized

St. Maximus the Confessor completes the thought. For Maximus, desire is not the enemy of the spiritual life; it is its engine. The passions are not alien forces to be amputated but powers of the soul disordered from their true object, and salvation includes their healing and redirection, not their destruction. The measure of the saints is not that they desire less than other men, but that they desire more, and rightly: the whole force of eros gathered and aimed at God, and from God flowing back out toward every creature in love. This is desire made deiform. Within the essence-energies grammar you already hold, we can say it precisely: the wound of love is a real participation in the divine energies, God’s own love actively at work in the soul, while the divine essence remains forever beyond reach, which is exactly why the wound never closes and the longing never

ends.

For Reflection

1. "Set love in order within me." If chastity is ordered desire rather than dead desire, what is one desire in your own life that needs reordering rather than suppressing?
2. Dionysius says love is ecstatic: it moves you out of yourself. Where has loving another person already forced you out of your old self? Where is God doing the same?
3. Does it change your picture of holiness to hear that the saints desire more, not less? What would it look like to want God with the energy you currently spend wanting lesser things?

This Week's Practice

Each day this week, pray one sentence with total honesty: "Lord, wound my heart with longing for You." At week's end, write down what happened when you prayed it, even if the answer is "nothing yet."

Seeking Him in the Night

The Bridegroom who hides, and the luminous darkness

On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him and found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the markets and in the streets, and I will seek him whom my soul loves.

I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone. My soul went out at his word. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he did not answer me.

Song of Songs 3:1–2 · 5:6 (LXX)

The Song is honest about something most devotional literature hides: the Beloved withdraws. Twice the bride seeks and does not find. Once she hesitates at the door, and by the time she opens it, He is gone, and her seeking costs her wounds from the watchmen. Any teaching on the love of God that cannot account for His felt absence is not yet the Church's teaching. You know this terrain already, from the psalms of the hidden face; the Song gives that terrain its map and its meaning.

Gregory traces three stages in Moses. God appears first in light, at the burning bush; then in the cloud, on the road; and at last Moses enters the thick darkness where God is. The order is deliberate and shocking: darkness is not the beginner's stage but the summit. The closer the soul draws to the infinite God, the more it knows that He exceeds every concept, every image, every felt sweetness; and this unknowing is not distance but the deepest nearness. So too the bride seeks by night: the night is not the Bridegroom's absence but the overwhelming excess of His presence, which no faculty of hers can hold.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the divine darkness, summarized from Homily 11 on the Song and The Life of Moses

This is the apophatic heart of Orthodoxy, and the Song teaches it not as philosophy but as love story. Why does the Beloved withdraw? Gregory's answer: to draw the bride further than she would otherwise go. Every finding of God is real, and every finding is partial, and the withdrawal of the felt presence is the Bridegroom's severe mercy, refusing to let her mistake the last consolation for Himself. She rises from her bed. She goes about the city. The seeking itself is the finding, because the seeking is love in motion.

Be gentle and practical with this, because for most of us it is not theoretical. Dry prayer, silent heavens, the season when the services feel like standing in an empty room: the Song does not treat these as failure, and neither may you, toward yourself or toward anyone else. The bride who seeks in the night is not the Song's cautionary figure. She is its heroine.

For Reflection

1. Describe, as concretely as you can, a season when you sought and did not find. What did you conclude about God then? What might Gregory say you should have concluded?
2. The bride is wounded by the watchmen while seeking (5:7). Sometimes seeking God costs something, even from religious people. Has that happened to you? How do you keep seeking anyway?
3. How can you tell the difference between the night that is God's deepening work and simple neglect of prayer? What would a spiritual father ask you?

This Week's Practice

Keep ten minutes of silence before God one evening this week, no music, no phones, no words: a small vigil in the night. End with the Jesus Prayer said aloud twelve times, slowly and deliberately.

A Garden Enclosed

The Theotokos, the guarded spring, and the soul as paradise

A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits... a fountain of gardens, a well of living water, flowing in streams from Lebanon.

Song of Songs 4:12–15 (LXX)

Stand in almost any Orthodox church and the Song is on the walls, because it is in the hymns of the Mother of God. The Church heard “a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed” and recognized the Virgin: the one whose whole self was kept for God alone, and from whom the Living Water nevertheless flowed out to the world. The hymnography of her feasts calls her the sealed fountain, the closed gate Ezekiel saw through which the Lord alone passed, the paradise in whom grew the Tree of Life. This is the Orthodox logic of typology at full strength: the bride of the Song is the Church, is the Theotokos, is the soul, not by competition but by concentric fulfillment. Mary is what the Church is called to be, and the Church is what every soul is called to be.

The catechists of the early Church loved the garden. Baptism, they taught, is a return to paradise: the font is planted like Eden, and the newly illumined are trees set by streams of water. But paradise had a wall and a keeper, and so must the soul. What is enclosed is not imprisoned; it is protected, cultivated, and made fruitful. An unfenced garden is not freer than a fenced one. It is simply eaten.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem and the catechetical tradition, summarized

Here the Song speaks directly into the life of anyone on the way to the font. “Enclosed” and “sealed” are consecration words. A love that is for everyone in general is for no one in particular; the bride’s glory is that she is kept, and keeps herself, for one. So with the soul: the ascetic disciplines, the guarding of the senses, the fasts, the rule of prayer, are not the Church walling you out of life but walling a garden in, so that something can actually grow. And note the paradox the Fathers never tired of: the sealed fountain is the one that becomes a well of living water for others. Consecration is not sterility. The Theotokos, most enclosed of all, is the most fruitful human being who has ever lived.

For Reflection

1. What are the actual walls of your garden right now: the practices and boundaries that protect what is growing between you and God? Which wall is broken and needs repair?
2. The world hears “enclosed” as repression. How would you explain, to someone you love from a non-Orthodox background, why consecration produces fruitfulness rather than preventing it?
3. In what way is the Theotokos a living answer to that objection? What is one concrete way for you to draw nearer to her this month?

This Week's Practice

Choose one small enclosure to build for yourself this week: a fixed evening prayer time, a fast kept faithfully on Wednesday and Friday, or an agreed limit that guards your evenings. Name it plainly to yourself as a garden wall, not a rule for its own sake.

Arise, Come Away

Epektasis: the ascent that never ends

My beloved answers and says to me: Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove. For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of pruning has come; the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land... Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove.

Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Song of Songs 2:10–13 (LXX) · Philippians 3:13–14

Read chapter 2 again and notice something strange: the Bridegroom says “Arise, come away” at the beginning of the passage and again at its end. The bride has already risen, already come, and the call sounds again as if for the first time. Gregory of Nyssa built his whole doctrine of the spiritual life on this repetition. Because God is infinite, the soul’s participation in Him can never be completed; every arrival is a beginning, every summit reveals a higher one, and the call “arise, come” will sound forever, each time new. Gregory took the word from St. Paul: epektasis, the perpetual stretching-forward. Perfection, he dared to say, is not a state you reach but a direction you never stop moving in: the very definition of perfection is endless growth in the good.

The bride, Gregory says, never stands still. Having been wounded, she seeks; having found, she is called further; and even in the age to come this motion does not cease, for the well of living water has no bottom. Nor is this restlessness a torment. Desire that ends in boredom belongs to finite goods; but God is the beauty that is always beyond, and so the blessedness of the saints is precisely that their love keeps increasing, world without end. Satiety, koros, the surfeit that Origen thought could make even souls in glory fall, is impossible: one can never have too much of the Infinite.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the bride’s endless ascent, summarized

This is where the Song quietly answers the question every convert from Evangelical soil carries: am I saved? You have already worked through the three tenses of salvation; epektasis is their inner logic. Salvation is not a transaction completed at a past moment of decision but a marriage: covenantally sealed, yes, and then lived, deepened, and consummated without end. No one asks a bride on her wedding day whether she has “finished” being married. The font toward which you are walking is a wedding, not a graduation.

And it is why St. Paul can say of Genesis 2:24, “this mystery is great; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.” Your own loves, if you will let them be what God intends, are icons: small, real, daily images of the ecstatic, faithful, pursuing, garden-keeping, never-satiated love between the Bridegroom and His Bride. Icons are not the reality; they open onto it. Let your love keep opening onto His.

For Reflection

1. "Perfection is a direction, not a state." What does that free you from? And what does it demand of you?
2. Where are you tempted to treat some past spiritual arrival as an ending: a decision, an insight, even the approaching baptism itself?
3. If your loves are meant to be an icon of the Song, what is one thing that must change for the image to be truthful?

This Week's Practice

At the end of this study, write one sentence beginning "Arise, come away" addressed to yourself from Christ: the next step you believe He is calling you to. Keep the sentence somewhere you will find it, and revisit it at Pascha.

Set Me as a Seal upon Your Heart

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy as hard as Hades; its wings are wings of fire, its flames are flames of fire. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can rivers drown it.

Song of Songs 8:6–7 (LXX)

The Song ends where the Gospel ends: love and death face each other, and love does not lose. “Strong as death” was the Song’s boldest hope; the empty tomb made it an understatement. The Bridegroom went into death for His Bride and trampled it down, and the seal He asks for is the one you are preparing to receive: the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, pressed like a signet on the heart at chrismation. Everything this study has traced, the wound, the night, the garden, the endless call, is sealed there.

A Prayer for the Seeker

O Christ our God, Bridegroom of the Church, who loved us first and loved us to the end: set us as a seal upon Your heart, and set Your seal upon ours. Wound us with the arrow of Your love, and let the wound never close. When You hide Your face, teach us to seek You in the night without despair; when You call, give us feet quick to arise. Enclose the garden of our life, and make its sealed fountain a well of living water for those You send us. Grant us to love one another as You love Your Church, and to ascend from glory to glory, never sated, never ending, until we see You face to face; through the intercessions of Your most pure Mother, the garden enclosed, and of all the saints. Amen.

A Note on Sources

Scripture in this study is rendered from the Septuagint, with Psalms numbered by the LXX and English [bracketed]. Patristic passages marked “summarized” are faithful digests of each Father’s teaching in the works named, written for pastoral use; as with the other studies in this series, verify exact wording against a critical translation (for Gregory of Nyssa’s Homilies on the Song, the Norris translation; for the Divine Names, Luibheid) before quoting them as citations in academic or catechetical settings. Origen and Theodore of Mopsuestia appear as historical witnesses, not as authorities: the one’s speculations and the other’s exegesis were judged by the conciliar Church, which is itself part of the lesson.