

HE CALLS YOU *Beautiful*

HEARING *the* VOICE *of* JESUS
in the SONG *of* SONGS



DEE BRESTIN

Bestselling author of *The Friendships of Women*

Praise for
He Calls You Beautiful

“Dee Brestin has a lovely, lyrical writing voice, perfectly suited to the Song of Songs. Verse by verse, she engages each of our five senses to help us truly experience the breathtaking love of God. The resources and questions she offers for Bible studies are exceptional. And her sheer passion for Him captures our hearts and minds until we too are swept up in His divine dance. *He Calls You Beautiful* is just that—*beautiful*. I learned so much and loved every word!”

—LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, best-selling author
of *31 Verses to Write on Your Heart*

“Every woman’s heart longs for her own personal love story in which she is desired, pursued, and cherished. As I read Dee’s new book, *He Calls You Beautiful*, I wept again and again at the depth of love God has for me and for you. I underlined whole paragraphs so I could go back and read them again. If you long for your faith to move out of your head and into your heart, savor this book. You will feel undeniably loved.”

—LESLIE VERNICK, Christian counselor, relationship
coach, speaker, and author of numerous books including
The Emotionally Destructive Marriage

“Dee Brestin joyfully leads readers through the enigmatic book of Song of Songs, causing our hearts to melt with the beauty of Christ and making us long for more intimacy with Christ.”

—NANCY GUTHRIE, author of the Seeing Jesus
in the Old Testament Bible study series

“Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most beloved and influential writers of the Middle Ages, believed he could interpret the entire Bible through one book, the Song of Songs. Imagine seeing not the Gospels or Galatians or Romans but the Song of Songs as the best lens for understanding all of God’s heart in all of God’s Word. This seems strange to those of us who might approach this book of the Bible with detached curiosity and lingering questions. Yet drawing on trusted resources and relentlessly pointing her readers back to communion with Christ, Dee Brestin

similarly navigates between the false choices of romantic love poem or simple allegory to help readers embrace the modern-day relevance of this ancient song.”

—RANKIN WILBOURNE, pastor and author of *Union with Christ*

“In *He Calls You Beautiful*, Dee Brestin poignantly weaves together story and biblical truths to illustrate God’s enraptured heart for His people. Several times as I read these pages, it was almost as if His breath was on the back of my neck. I had chills, feeling this nearness that Dee extracts so aptly from the Song of Songs. Just one chapter into this book and I was already making a list of friends with whom to share it. This is an excellent read for the hungry believer.”

—SARA HAGERTY, author of *Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet*

“Dee Brestin’s fine books always strike me as deeply human, *personal* in the very best sense. This one is supremely so. Dee has done her homework. Taking the Song of Songs as a living picture of an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus, she traces the relationship from before its beginning to its death-defeating end. Even those Bible students who do not follow all the parallels she sees will be greatly enriched by letting her help them dig into this Old Testament illustration of Christ and His bride, the church.”

—GREG R. SCHARF, professor of homiletics and chair
of the department of pastoral theology, Trinity Evangelical
Divinity School, and author of *Relational Preaching:
Knowing God, His Word, and Your Hearers*

“My years of ministry to women struggling with relational and sexual brokenness have shown me how often they find it difficult to understand the depths of Jesus’s tender love for us and how He actually can transform our lives! People all around us have distorted views of sexuality and feel trapped in patterns of disordered desires. Now in *He Calls You Beautiful*, I have a resource to offer that plumbs the beauty and wonder of intimate love with God, and the glory of His design for sexuality within marriage. I highly commend this book to the single and married, younger and older, because it will guide you through the Song of Solomon, a book often misunderstood or avoided, into the spacious place of intimacy with Christ!”

—ELLEN MARY DYKAS, women’s ministry director
at Harvest USA and author of *Sexual Sanity for Women*

HE CALLS
YOU
Beautiful

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The Friendships of Women

Idol Lies

The God of All Comfort

Falling in Love with Jesus (coauthored with Kathy Troccoli)

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A full list of Dee's books can be found on her website: DeeBrestin.com

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Bestselling author of *The Friendships of Women*



MULTNOMAH

HE CALLS YOU BEAUTIFUL

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Dedicated to Linda Strom.



*How radiant you are as you look to Him,
“beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun.”
You and your vast team of prison volunteers are
“awesome as an army with banners.”
—Song of Songs 6:10*

Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

—John Donne, “Holy Sonnets: Batter My Heart,
Three-Person’d God”

Contents

How to Use This Book	1
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Overture: YES, JESUS LOVES ME!

1 The Best Song of All	5
<i>Why God Put a Love Story in the Heart of His Word</i>	
Lesson 1: Song of Songs 1–8	12
2 Poetry to Penetrate Our Hearts	17
<i>How to Read the Song of Songs</i>	
Lesson 2: Song of Songs 1–8	32

First Love: AND CAN IT BE?

3 Kiss Me	39
<i>A Refrain of Desire</i>	
Lesson 3: Song of Songs 1:2–4	50
4 Dark, but Lovely	54
<i>The Gospel According to the Song of Songs</i>	
Lesson 4: Song of Songs 1:5–8	64
5 The Apple Tree and the Lily	69
<i>Cultivating Intimacy with God</i>	
Lesson 5: Song of Songs 1:9–2:7	83
6 Come Away, My Love!	88
<i>Cleaving to Him Alone</i>	
Lesson 6: Song of Songs 2:8–17	103

Wilderness Love: PRONE TO WANDER

7 I Sought the One My Soul Loves	111
<i>The Pain and Purpose of the Wilderness</i>	
Lesson 7: Song of Songs 3:1–11	123

8	An Oasis in the Wilderness	127
	<i>The Spiritual Meaning of Sex</i>	
	<i>Lesson 8: Song of Songs 4:1–16</i>	138
9	The Lukewarm Bride	142
	<i>When the Honeymoon Is Over</i>	
	<i>Lesson 9: Song of Songs 5:1–9</i>	153

Invincible Love: IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

10	The Fairest of Ten Thousand	161
	<i>How Worship Brings Us Out of the Wilderness</i>	
	<i>Lesson 10: Song of Songs 5:8–6:10</i>	170
11	The Dancing Shulammitte	174
	<i>Bringing Peace and Good News</i>	
	<i>Lesson 11: Song of Songs 6:11–7:13</i>	184
12	The Best Is Yet to Come	189
	<i>The Song's Final Crescendo</i>	
	<i>Lesson 12: Song of Songs 8:1–14</i>	201

FACILITATOR RESOURCES

Hints for Group Facilitators	209
Get-Acquainted Lesson	211
Lesson-by-Lesson Leader Notes	214
Memory Work: Song of Songs 2:10–17	219
Acknowledgments	220
Notes	222

How to Use This Book

Welcome to what I pray will be a book that stirs your wonder at the depth of Christ's love for you.

Following each chapter of this book is a Bible study so that your small group (or you alone) can hear the voice of Jesus in the Song of Songs. It is one thing to read what I have to say about Jesus in the Song, but it is quite another to discover Him there yourself!

The Song of Songs is too rich a study for you to come to your small group unprepared. Because the Song is all about developing intimacy with the Lord, I encourage you to do a little reading and study each day so that you develop the habit of spending time with the One who calls to you, "Come away, my love."

To interest your friends in this study, you can e-mail them this link to a two-minute overview: www.deebrestin.com/hecallsyoubeautiful. (This link also has all the songs, videos, and mp3 sermons in case they won't work on the Internet.) Let your friends know this women's study is for both singles and marrieds, for you will be focusing on Jesus's love for His bride and her responsive love to Him.

If you are the small-group facilitator, be sure to look each week at the section at the back of this book designed especially to help you prepare to lead your group through the study. If your group has the books before your first gathering, simply assign the first chapter to read and the first lesson to complete before you meet. But if they are not able to get the books until the first meeting or if your group is new and needs to get acquainted, instead begin that first week with the Get-Acquainted Lesson at the back of the book. That can be done on the spot without the participants doing any preparation. Then for the following week, assign the first chapter and the first lesson.

I'm excited to think of you beginning this journey of experiencing God's love. How I pray His Spirit will help you hear and respond to your Beloved.

—Dee

Overture

Yes, Jesus Loves Me!



The Best Song of All

Why God Put a Love Story in the Heart of His Word

I am now utterly convinced that on Judgment Day, the Lord Jesus is going to ask each of us one question, and only one question: “Did you believe that I love you?”

—Brennan Manning

*W*omen’s prisons are my favorite places to speak. There I see a thirst for God that I seldom see outside prison walls, at least in our wealthy Western world. In prisons I see parched hearts soaking up the truth of the Bible. I see *life* sprouting before my eyes—life where there has been *no* life. Flinty faces soften, tearless eyes moisten.

I always leave the prison amazed. The God of the Bible is still opening blind eyes and transforming hearts. He is still coming to the outsider, the one whom the world does not value.

In a women’s prison near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, God took my breath away with something only He could orchestrate. Fifty of the women at this correctional institute had completed one of my video Bible studies. Now I was going to speak to them. When I walked in, they gave me a royal welcome: jumping, clapping, and cheering. I laughed—how I wished we were allowed to hug! There is no bond like the bond of Christ. The light we recognized in one another’s eyes was the same light: the light of Jesus, the light that overcame our darkness.

I opened by asking these precious women to share ways Jesus had met them in the study they had just completed. One woman said, “I didn’t want to come to this study, but my cellmate kept bugging me. I told her to shut up, because there was no way I’d be caught at a group of Holy Rollers. One day she tossed her copy of your book on my bunk and said, ‘Just look at it. If you come and hate it, I promise I’ll never bug you again.’” She paused, overcome with emotion. Then she looked up, whispering, “I’m so glad I came.”

We all exchanged smiles of understanding. Her story was ours, too. Each of us had resisted God. But He had persisted, ambushing us with His love.

As I began the study I’d planned for that night, I did so with trepidation. As I had prepared for the gathering, I sensed that God wanted me to show them His love for them as revealed in the Song of Songs, one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. But as I was driving to Milwaukee, I began to wonder if I had indeed heard from the Lord.

What am I doing presenting such a challenging book to them? I thought. They’ll go back to their cells and read this very passionate love story and think, What in the world? What is this doing in the Bible? What could this possibly have to do with God and me?

Yet I knew how badly they needed this message. Many of these women in prison had never experienced earthly love, either from parents or husbands. A very high percentage of them had experienced horrific physical or sexual abuse. They also made choices that landed them in prison and filled them with shame. Even after they came to Christ, believing that He died to pay their debt in full, they struggled to hold on to the truth that they had been cleansed and were beautiful in His eyes.

And so I plunged ahead, pleading for God’s Spirit to move. I asked them to open their Bibles to the Song of Songs, a small book in the Old Testament.

“This book has been captivating hearts for thousands of years,” I told them. “Sometimes it’s called ‘The Song of Solomon.’ But like ‘King of kings’ or ‘Lord of lords,’ the title ‘Song of Songs’ implies this song is the very best song of all. And what is that? It is always the love song of Jesus.”

I told them that it was an earthly love story, a song of love between a man and a woman, but that it was intended to help them understand a much deeper love story: the love between Christ and His bride.

I explained, “God uses many metaphors in Scripture to show us that Christianity is not rules or ritual but relationship. The Lord compares Himself to a friend who is closer than a brother, to a father who cherishes his child, and finally, the most intimate metaphor of all, to a bridegroom who rejoices over his bride.

“When God brought Eve to Adam to be his wife, Adam erupted in praise, and God said, ‘A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’ (Genesis 2:24). This excitement that Adam felt for Eve is the same joy God feels for His bride, for Isaiah tells us, ‘As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you’ (Isaiah 62:5).”

The women were listening intently. I saw both hope and doubt flicker across faces. *Could it be true?*

“This verse about a man leaving his father and mother and holding fast to his wife is repeated three more times in Scripture. It culminates in Ephesians when, after it appears the fourth time, a secret is revealed: ‘A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church’ (Ephesians 5:31–32).”

The church, I explained, means the bride of Christ, true believers. The beauty of marriage as God intended it is meant to illuminate His mysterious relationship with us. “Your Maker,” the Bible tells us, “is your husband” (Isaiah 54:5).

I knew some of these women would struggle with this picture, in the same way that some struggled with the picture of God as their Father. Just as many had been abused as children, many had been abused as wives. Instead of terms of endearment, they’d been called cruel names, “rash words,” which Proverbs 12:18 says “are like sword thrusts.” Instead of feeling cherished in the marriage bed, they’d felt used. Instead of knowing faithfulness, they’d experienced treachery as their husbands walked out on them and their young children. Instead of being encouraged to be the women God created them to be, they’d been drawn into addictions and crimes.

I looked at Lila, remembering her story. She’d told me earlier that though now her security was in Jesus, it used to be in her husband. She’d been the getaway driver for his bank robberies. Now they both had long prison sentences and their children were in foster care.

I took a deep breath and said, “I know this is hard for so many of you. Many of you have never been loved like this by an earthly husband. But a beautiful earthly

marriage is possible in Christ, and that is the picture in the Song.” I saw the longing in their eyes. “But even if God never gives you a godly husband or turns your husband into a godly man, you have a Bridegroom who absolutely cherishes you like the bridegroom in the Song.”

“That’s the truth,” one woman said. “Jesus will never walk out on me.”

I nodded. “That’s right. *Never* will He leave you.”

Then I gave them a thumbnail sketch of the Cinderella story of the Song. “A great shepherd-king falls in love with a peasant girl who works in one of his vineyards. He chooses her, loves her, leads her through the wilderness, and goes away, but he will come back for her. She is transformed in this story because of his cherishing of her. Do you see? This is a pointer to the greatest love story, the *true* love story that has the power to melt our hearts.”

I showed them how the book begins with the peasant girl saying, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (Song 1:2).

I asked, “Have you ever had the experience of a verse in the Bible jumping out at you, giving you just what you need? Or of God’s still small voice whispering to you? Or of the Lord absolutely surprising you with circumstances that show you how mindful He is of you?”

They were all nodding, smiling.

I said, “When that happens, you’ve been kissed by the King.”

“Oh!” they chorused.

How I loved showing these women the gospel in the Song—the great good news of how loved they are.

“At first,” I continued, “when the peasant girl comes into the presence of this great shepherd-king she feels unworthy. She says, ‘Do not gaze at me because I am dark’ (Song 1:6).” I looked out at their faces, all the beautiful colors of our Creator’s paint box. I wanted to be very clear. “This is not a reference to race. She says she’s been working all day in the vineyard, darkened by the sun. She also feels unclean and unattractive. She compares herself to the dirty, weathered tents of a tribe called Kedar. You probably can identify, for you work at manual labor all day in your prison uniforms, without air conditioning and without deodorant.”

“Uh-huh, sister, you got it.”

All that these women had to make themselves presentable was a sliver of soap. No flattering clothes, shampoo, deodorant, makeup, and not even a decent comb,

as it could be used as a weapon. (At Christmastime, if allowed, our prison ministry gives each of them deodorant and shampoo. The women are as ecstatic as if we'd given them diamond necklaces.)

"But what she says about her outward appearance is really an expression of the uncleanness she feels in her soul. The unworthiness. That is how we are when we first get close to a holy God. Like Peter, who said, 'Go away from me!' (Luke 5:8, NRSV). Or Isaiah, when he said, 'Woe is me! . . . I am a man of unclean lips' (Isaiah 6:5)."

The women nodded again. I didn't need to explain to them what it was like to feel unworthy.

I continued, "I want you to understand how the king sees this peasant girl—how the King sees you and me! He has cleansed her, made her as clean as the newly fallen snow and as pure as a lily. So he reassures her, as God does each of us, 'Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful' (Song 1:15)."

Julia, a slim blonde sitting next to me, began to tremble. I continued, saying that the bride's beauty is a refrain of the Song of Songs: "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you" (Song 4:7).

Now Julia was weeping. A woman across the circle jumped up to bring her a roll of toilet paper—a staple in prison Bible studies. I didn't want to embarrass Julia by drawing attention to her, so I taught a little longer, but soon she was shaking with great heaving sobs. I paused, looked at her, and asked, "Julia, do you want to share what's going on?"

She nodded vigorously and then took a moment to compose herself. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath.

"I've always been searching for love, for the sense that I was beautiful to someone. I lost so many mother figures as a child. At eleven I turned to alcohol and then to men. I was willing to do whatever, just to get that feeling of being loved, of being thought of as beautiful. The men pretended to love me so they could use me. I did things of which I am so ashamed. Shortly after I was incarcerated, I looked in the mirror and screamed, 'I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!'"

I saw the women nodding. They identified with Julia's story, with the self-hatred and condemnation. They were listening intently as she continued.

"It is only when Christ found me that I discovered what real love is. I have been so helped by the Christian volunteers in this prison and by being assured of Christ's

love and forgiveness. Just this morning, when I was walking around the track, I was overcome with gratitude and cried, ‘Lord, You are so beautiful.’

“Then I thought I heard Him whisper within me, ‘Julia, *you* are beautiful.’ I stopped! Then I wondered if I’d imagined it. So I pleaded, ‘Say it again!’ But there was only silence.” She started weeping again. “And then you come in here, open the Bible, tell us that God sings us a love song and keeps saying, ‘Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful’ (Song 1:15).”

She stopped, tears welling up, and then whispered, “He said it again!”

We all sat there in holy silence.

Finally, I whispered, “Julia, you have just been kissed by the King.”

In fact, the King had kissed us all at that moment. We each were reminded once again that our God is mindful of us and loves us. We do not worship a statue or a far-off force but a God who became bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh, who dwelt among us, and who is love itself. He loves us not as we should be but as we are. This is the recurring melody of the Song: As the bridegroom loves the bride, she flourishes. As she adores him in return, she becomes increasingly beautiful, reflecting him as the moon reflects the sun.

I will never forget that night in prison when God came running to kiss His beloved. I prayed that when the women went back to their cells and pored over the Song, as I knew they would, that the Spirit would show them not just the earthly love story but Jesus Himself. And indeed, He has! When I’ve gone back to this facility and other prisons where I have taught the Song, the women come to me quoting verses with radiant faces, telling me how the Song has penetrated their hearts with the width, depth, and breadth of God’s love.

It’s not just women behind bars who need this reminder of God’s deep love. As I’ve led this study online with women around the world, I’ve heard again and again the power of the Song to bring women a deeper awareness of God’s love. Here are a few of the comments I’ve received:

Does Jesus love me? I have been contemplating this question as my “sorrows like sea billows roll,” and I have come to see that this question is key. Do I believe that He loves me even when suffering does not make sense? The Song of Songs keeps telling me He does.

—Diane from Canada

God has used the Song of Songs to lift a veil and help me see His love in a whole new light. He calls me to come away with Him, to come away from idols, from the safety blankets I have clung to for so long.

—Staci from the Netherlands

If you desire greater intimacy with Christ, read and study the Song of Songs. It viscerally reaches places that might otherwise go untouched for a lifetime.

—Jackie from Delaware

I'm so eager for you to find refreshment and delight in the Song! This book you're reading also includes a Bible study at the end of each chapter. When we dig out truth for ourselves, we experience much greater spiritual growth. And if you have the opportunity to do this in a group, you will learn even more, for as with iron sharpening iron, the sparks will fly among you!

But I want you to get your bearings first. The Song is a deep pool of water, and I don't want anyone drowning. Let's do a short swimming lesson before we dive in.

LESSON 1: SONG OF SONGS 1–8



Icebreaker

Share your name and then answer these questions: In what ways might falling and staying in love with an earthly spouse be similar to falling and staying in love with Jesus? How are they different?



Watch

Watch “Enjoying Christ Constantly,” the thirteen-minute online video from evangelical theologian and author Mike Reeves.¹ (See the endnotes for the direct link. If you have trouble with a link, these videos can also be found at www.deebrestin.com/hecallsyoubeautiful.) When you gather as a group, share what stood out to you. (If you already did the optional Get-Acquainted Lesson in the back, you can skip this part.)



Read Chapter 1 of *He Calls You Beautiful*

1. What stood out to you in this chapter and why? What insight into the Song of Songs did you gain?
2. What do you think Julia’s heart desire was? Can you identify with that in any way? If so, explain.
3. God uses many metaphors to show us that Christianity, unlike other religions, is not rules and rituals but relationship. Find the metaphor the Bible

gives in each of the following passages and comment on what it teaches you about God. What picture does God give of Himself, and what does this teach you about Him?

a. Psalm 23

b. John 15:15

c. 1 John 3:1

d. Isaiah 62:5

4. Explain how each of the above metaphors is an escalation in intimacy. What is it about marriage that gives it the potential to be the most intimate earthly relationship of all?

5. God's plan for marriage is stated at the first marriage in Genesis 2:24 and then is repeated four times in Scripture, culminating in Ephesians 5:31–32. Read Genesis 2:20–24 and explain why you think Adam rejoiced over Eve. How does Adam's response foreshadow God's response to His bride? How does it make you feel to realize God rejoices over you?

*6. In Ephesians 5:31–32, what mystery do we learn about marriage?

7. In some ways, the Song is a mysterious puzzle! To do a puzzle well, it helps to look at the whole picture on the box before trying to put the pieces together. That's what we're going to do with the Song. Read all eight chapters of the Song as if the Song were a play. You can also listen to it read in about twenty minutes on an audio Bible.² This has the advantage of helping you understand who is speaking. What are your initial impressions after reading or listening to the Song?

8. *First Love*. In Song 1:1–2:14, the couple is experiencing the euphoria of new love. Describe the emotions these verses suggest.

- a. Have you ever fallen in love with someone? What did it feel like?

- *b. Do you remember when you first fell in love with Jesus? Or do you remember a time when His love became very real to you? If so, share what it felt like.

9. *Wilderness Love.* For most of the Song (2:15–8:4), the Shulammite woman wanders in and out of the wilderness, as we do with our relationship with God.

- a. Describe how the woman refuses the bridegroom in Song 5:2–8 and the pain that ensues.

- *b. Have you had times when you resisted the Lord and then experienced a loss of intimacy with Him? If so, share.

- c. In Song 5:8, the friends see her persisting in looking for the bridegroom despite persecution and pain. What question does that lead them to ask (see Song 5:9)?

10. *Invincible Love*. This is the stage where you know your love is here to stay. We see this in Song 8:5–14. Find phrases in that passage that show the permanency of this kind of love.

- *11. What is your takeaway (what you will remember) from this lesson and discussion and why?

Prayer Time

If your group is bigger than six or seven people, divide into smaller groups of three or four. Share brief prayer requests based on either what you have learned in this lesson or a need in your own life (not in Uncle Hank's neighbor's life—keep it personal). Appoint a facilitator for each group to introduce topics.

For example, the facilitator would begin, "Let's thank the Lord for something we learned about Him today." *A few give thanks. Then there is a pause.*

"Let's pray for Vicki." *A few give sentence prayers for Vicki.*

"Let's pray for Marcella." *A few give sentence prayers for Marcella.*

Facilitator closes in prayer.

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