



**Preparation for Worship:** King of my Heart

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Udg0rFG9XI>

Let the King of my heart  
Be the mountain where I run  
The fountain I drink from  
Oh, He is my Song

Let the King of my heart  
Be the shadow where I hide  
The ransom for my life  
Oh, He is my Song

You are good, good, oh  
You are good, good, oh  
You are good, good, oh  
You are good, good, oh

Let the King of my heart  
Be the wind inside my sails  
The anchor in the waves  
Oh, He is my Song

Let the King of my heart  
Be the fire inside my veins  
The echo of my days  
Oh, He is my Song

You are good, good, oh ...

You're never gonna let, never gonna let me down  
You're never gonna let, never gonna let me down  
You're never gonna let, never gonna let me down  
You're never gonna let, never gonna let me down

You are good, good, oh ...

When the night is holding on to me  
God is holding on  
And when the night is holding on to me  
God is holding on

*John Mark McMillan and Sarah McMillan © Meaux Jeux Music, Raucous Ruckus Publishing, Mcmillan, Sarah (admin. Capital CMG Publishing, McMillan, Sarah)*

### Call to Worship

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified ... for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6)*

Let us worship the God who never lets us down.

**Hymn:** Songs of Fellowship 2231 10,000 Reasons Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDQn9cWC4Yc>

*Bless the Lord oh my soul  
Oh my soul  
Worship His Holy name  
Sing like never before  
Oh my soul  
I'll worship Your Holy name*

The sun comes up  
It's a new day dawning  
It's time to sing Your song again  
Whatever may pass  
And whatever lies before me  
Let me be singing  
When the evening comes  
*Bless the Lord oh my soul ...*

You're rich in love  
And You're slow to anger  
Your name is great

And Your heart is kind  
For all Your goodness  
I will keep on singing  
Ten thousand reasons  
For my heart to find

*Bless the Lord oh my soul ...*

And on that day  
When my strength is failing  
The end draws near  
And my time has come  
Still my soul will  
Sing Your praise unending  
Ten thousand years  
And then forevermore  
Forevermore

*Bless the Lord oh my soul ...*

*Songwriters: Jonas Myrin / Matt Redman 10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord) lyrics © Capitol CMG Publishing*

## Prayer

Lord God, we bring you praise for this day and all that it contains. Maybe we are praying this as the sun is coming up and a new day actually is dawning. Maybe we are midway through the day or preparing for a night's rest. Whatever our situation, we worship you as the creator of this day and all that it contains.

We thank you that you are our heavenly father, as Jesus has taught us to pray to you. Our earthly parents may have been good or may have let us down but you are constant in your love and provision. As we sang, you're rich in love; slow to anger and with a heart full of kindness and goodness. As we think over our lives, there are so many reasons to praise your name but also for the very reason that we can call you father and freely enter your presence. We thank for making that possible by sending Jesus into our world. You knew that we would reject him. You knew that we would nail him to that cross. Yet you held nothing back in order that our sin might be dealt with and every obstacle that might stand between us and you might be removed.

Thank you for the gift of forgiveness, freely given through Jesus, and forgive us those times when we ignore that gift and go on sinning or when we think we need to earn your favour. Set us back on your paths and prepare us for that glorious time when we shall live with you forever. Our strength may be failing day by day; our end may be drawing ever nearer, but we praise you that death is defeated and is no barrier to you - or to us. Nothing can separate us from your love that we have already found and experienced in Jesus. We look forward to that day when our souls will sing unending praises to you for evermore. Amen

**Reading:** Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Listen! My beloved!

Look! Here he comes,  
leaping across the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.

9 My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look! There he stands behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
peering through the lattice.

10 My beloved spoke and said to me,  
"Arise, my darling,  
my beautiful one, come with me.

11 See! The winter is past;  
the rains are over and gone.

12 Flowers appear on the earth;  
the season of singing has come,  
the cooing of doves  
is heard in our land.

13 The fig tree forms its early fruit;  
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.  
Arise, come, my darling;  
my beautiful one, come with me."

**Hymn:** StF 355 Jesus, Lover of my Soul

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvluR3KbPDs>

Jesu, lover of my soul,  
Let me to Thy bosom fly,  
While the nearer waters roll,  
While the tempest still is high:  
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,  
Till the storm of life is past;  
Safe into the haven guide;  
O receive my soul at last.

Other refuge have I none,  
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;  
Leave, oh, leave me not alone,  
Still support and comfort me.  
All my trust on Thee is stayed,  
All my help from Thee I bring;  
Cover my defenceless head  
With the shadow of Thy wing.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;  
More than all in Thee I find;  
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,  
Heal the sick and lead the blind.  
Just and holy is Thy name,  
I am all unrighteousness;  
Vile and full of sin I am,  
Thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,  
Grace to cover all my sin;  
Let the healing streams abound;  
Make and keep me pure within.  
Thou of life the fountain art,  
Freely let me take of Thee;  
Spring Thou up within my heart,  
Rise to all eternity.

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

## Message:

Buckle up because we're about to go on a rather different kind of journey to normal as we visit The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon. This is the only time it appears in the entire three-year sweep of the lectionary and it's a strange book to find in the Bible. Firstly, because it doesn't mention God at all and, secondly, because it is written as a romance between a young man and a young woman. I say romance. Actually, some of the language is quite steamy and sexualised, so much so that one commentary I was reading in preparation felt the need to talk about the correct boundaries to put around love and sexual behaviour. The Hebrew text itself has no such caveats.

So, what to make of this book? Let's take a look at the passage set before us today by the lectionary. A young woman is pictured as being indoors, presumably in her family home. She is looking out through the window and sees her beloved coming towards her like a graceful and agile gazelle leaping across mountains and bounding over hills. He will be her gazelle and she will be his dove. The image is one of youthful energy and athleticism. But note also that the mountains and hills he is navigating are wilderness territory compared to the fruitful agricultural scene to which we will come shortly. If she goes away with him, she, like any young bride, will leave the family home that has been her safety and security up to this point and, now led by him, will venture into the unknown.

As she stands at the window looking outward at him, so he stands at looking in at her and, for the first time, makes his request to her. "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me."

In his poem, Locksley Hall, Alfred Lord Tennyson famously wrote:  
*In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove;  
In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.*

Maybe he had half an eye on Song of Songs because here, too, springtime and love are arriving together.

<i>See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come,</i>	<i>the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance."</i>
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New life is coming into the world and, against that background, the lover makes his request once again.  
*"Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me."*  
It is Spring and this is a young man whose thoughts have very much turned to love.

Through the years, preachers, teachers and Biblical commentators have struggled to work out how best to interpret this book. Some have met its erotic language head on and seen in this book a celebration of love and sex as part of God's wonderful creation. More often, though, people have sought to spiritualise the story and see its language as metaphorical - describing the relationship that God wants to have with us, his people. Seen in this light, we are the young woman and God is her beloved, the young man.

So, what does it mean for God to say to you: *"Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me."*?

I want to give you three quick thoughts.

Firstly, take note of the intensity of the passion. Here are two people who only have eyes for one another. There is a passion and intimacy in their language and behaviour. Does God show that same passion and intimacy?

Yes, and even more so! If, as the Bible tells us, God is love then God defines love and not the other way around. If the Bible teaches that God loves you and me, then that love is of a depth and quality that we can only begin to imagine. Honestly, it would put these young lovers into the shade.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul begins by celebrating a God who has chosen us and, through Jesus and his death on the cross, has done all that is necessary to remove any obstacles that stand between us and God. There is, therefore, no need to think that we are unworthy or undeserving of God's love. And then in Chapter 3 of Ephesians we have this wonderful prayer:

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

That is my prayer for you too that, way more than a young man and young woman who are courting, you may begin to know the wonderful love that God has for you that does, indeed, surpass our knowledge and understanding.

Secondly, note that seasons come and go. Karen and I recently had the privilege of a short break in Svalbard. It's halfway between the North Pole and the top of the Norwegian mainland and it's the Northernmost permanently inhabited place on earth. People ask whether we saw the Northern Lights to which the answer is 'no' because there was no night while we were there. We visited during the period of the year known as the Midnight Sun when the sun never dips below the horizon. That changed last Sunday and, for the next thirteen weeks, Svalbard will once again experience sunrises and sunsets before being pitched into Polar Night – weeks of darkness when the sun is never seen. Of course, across that timeframe our seasons will be changing too – just not as marked.

In our reading, springtime has come. It is that time when a young man's thoughts are turning to love. But we know that, after springtime, summer and autumn and winter will be waiting to take their place once again. Maybe you know that God loves you but you're not feeling like it's springtime in your life right now. That might be because of age. We're all a lot older than we once were! We feel things like love differently to when we were teenagers. Or it might be down to circumstances that you're going through. Rest assured. The promise of God's love isn't just for springtime. The bible tells us that his word stands in season and out of season. There is a constancy and faithfulness to God's promises, to God's love and, indeed, to God himself. God's love for you is always in season.

And, finally, take note of what is being asked here. The young man says to his beloved, "Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me." As we have said previously, this is an invitation to leave her comfort zone. She is being invited to leave the security of her family home and to trust the one who is expressing love towards her. Their journey together might take in the familiar picture laid out in the description of flowers, fig trees, vines and cooing doves. Or maybe not. It might take in the uncertainty of what looked like wilderness territory, in which the beloved appears equally at home. Either way she is being asked to trust herself to his love and care and provision.

That, too, is the invitation that God holds out to us. The God who loves us, calls us to go with him and be led into the journey he has planned for us. That means being prepared to step beyond our comfort zones and any earthly things in which we place our security. But we do so, knowing that this is the God of love; this is the Good Shepherd who leads and watches over his flock and this is the God who loves us every one of us so personally, with a love that goes way beyond anything we could ever imagine.

The calendar is changing in Svalbard and so it is in Methodism. Today marks the beginning of a new Methodist year. Everything we've spoken about today holds true for our churches and our circuit just as much as it does for us as individuals. So let me finish by praying for each of our churches and for our circuit and, if you're watching this from somewhere else, for you and your church wherever that might be.

Lord God, I pray that, both as churches and individuals, we may know the depth of love that you have for us and may that relationship of love may be the foundation on which everything else is built. I pray that, whatever season we may feel we're in, we may realise that your love and your promises and your invitation to us, all have a constancy that transcends seasons. You will always be there for us. Every time is your time. And finally, I pray that we may truly take up your invitation to come away with you and be led by you. Are there comfort zones and security blankets that we need to leave behind? If there are, I pray that you will give us the strength to do so and to follow wherever the journey might lead. Amen.

**Hymn:** StF 673 Will you come and follow me?

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uu7ihXeTsmQ>

Will you come and follow me  
if I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know  
and never be the same?  
Will you let my love be shown,  
will you let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown  
in you and you in me?

Will you leave your self behind

if I but call your name?  
Will you care for cruel and kind  
and never be the same?  
Will you risk the hostile stare  
should your life attract or scare,  
will you let me answer prayer  
in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see  
if I but call your name?

Will you set the prisoners free  
and never be the same?  
Will you kiss the leper clean  
and do such as this unseen,  
and admit to what I mean  
in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide  
if I but call your name?  
Will you quell the fear inside  
and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found

to reshape the world around  
through my sight and touch and sound  
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true  
when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you  
and never be the same.  
In your company I'll go  
where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll move and live and grow  
in you and you in me.

John Bell

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## Prayer

*See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.*

We have been reflecting upon these verses from today's reading. Now, let's use them to provide pointers for prayer.

- We pray for the fruitfulness of our planet and for all those who play a part in bringing food and sustenance to our global population;
- In particular, we pray for those facing famine conditions. May God give us greater desire to see better and more equitable ways of sharing the world's resources;
- We pray for those forced from their homes by war or the fear of conflict and whose land lies untended. Bring peace, we pray, where there is conflict, and provision and compassion for those living as refugees. Empower those who are in a position to be peacemakers in whatever way that might be;
- We pray for the correct functioning of the world; its seasons and weather systems. Inspire those prophetic voices seeking to reverse environmental damage and for courage on the part of world leaders to take necessary steps.
- And let's praise God for the wonderful diversity of plants and animals we see around us with all of their colours and sounds; tastes and smells.

*Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me.*

- We thank God for how he sees us. We are all the children of God's creation, seen by him as beautiful and beloved. The God of love has created us for relationship and has done all that is necessary to bring us back into relationship with him. Soak in the fact that God sees you as special and precious.
- Pray for those struggling with self-image at this time. May they see themselves through God's eyes and know how truly special they really are;
- Pray for those struggling within relationships. God has designed us for relationship, giving and receiving love from one another. Pray that people might find strength to work at their relationships and find reconciliation and restoration where it is possible
- The invitation is to trust the beloved in order that we might be led by him and live under his care and provision. That is God's invitation to us. We bring before God all those whose present need for provision is for healing whether that be in body, mind or spirit. May God's healing hand be upon them and may they know God's presence with them every step of the way;
- Continue to pray for our churches and circuit as we seek to trust God and follow him. Pray that God will give us the provision that we need and show us, step by step, the way to go;
- Pray for Christians around the world and particularly those who have 'arisen' and 'come' to God but who now face persecution as a result of that decision. Pray that God will strengthen them and hold them protected in their relationship with him.

Allow space to bring your own prayers to God for personal, local or global concerns before praying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray ...

## The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be your name;  
your kingdom come;  
your will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For yours is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

**Hymn:** STF 503 Love Divine

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPbD2G3i-7Y>

Love divine, all loves excelling,  
joy of heav'n to earth come down,  
fix in us Thy humble dwelling;  
all Thy faithful mercies crown!  
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,  
pure, unbounded love Thou art;  
visit us with Thy salvation;  
enter every trembling heart.

Come, Almighty to deliver;  
let us all Thy life receive;  
suddenly return and never,  
nevermore Thy temples leave.

Thee we would be always blessing,  
serve Thee as Thy hosts above;  
pray, and praise Thee without ceasing,  
glory in Thy perfect love.

Finish then, Thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be;  
let us see Thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in Thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
till in heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

**Postscript:** An alternative interpretation of 'Jesus, Lover of my soul'

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKGbVT9Uz5E&t=239s>

Charles Wesley/Chris Eaton

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