

The Song of Solomon

IGNATIUS CATHOLIC STUDY BIBLE QUESTIONS

Welcome

“You are approaching the ‘word of God’. But for thousands of years, ... the Word of God has been approaching you.”

The following guide is provided to enhance your reading of the Song of Solomon using the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*. If you are new to this resource or to reading the Bible, we recommend you read the general Introduction before you begin. It explains what it means that Scripture is the Word of God as well as how we understand and interpret it as Catholics. It also introduces the special features of the Study Bible and tells how they can enrich your reading and study. Additionally, the *Introduction to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* will provide valuable context for your reading.

A simple rhythm of prayer followed by reading and reflection is offered below to guide you through the book one chapter at a time. Questions draw attention to key footnotes and word studies to lead you into a deeper understanding of what you read and then prompt you to consider how to apply what you have learned. For a deeper dive, take advantage of additional features as you go: not just the other footnotes but also cross-references to Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* that are provided above the footnotes as well as any maps, charts, or essays that are not touched on in the questions.

Don't miss these helpful icons as you read! They highlight footnotes that pertain to the Church's criteria for interpreting Scripture (see CCC 112–14):



Be attentive to the content and unity of Scripture

Notes marked with a Bible icon connect Old Testament passages and New Testament mysteries, fostering appreciation for God's unified plan.



Read Scripture in light of the Church's living tradition

This icon marks notes drawn from the Holy Spirit's guidance of Church teaching and the spiritual senses of scripture. Here you'll find official teaching as well as interpretations from Fathers, Doctors, and saints of the Church.



Be attentive to the “analogy of faith”

Explore notes marked with an icon of keys to learn how the mysteries of faith, revealed in Scripture and defined by the Church, clarify and connect with one another in a unified, coherent way.

May God bless you as you read his word!

of God,* did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself,[†] taking the form of a servant,[‡] being born in the likeness of men.[§] And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.[¶] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,^{||} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,^{|||} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, obeyed, so now much more in salvation with f work in you, bo pleasure.
14 Do all th tioning,¹⁵ that y children of God crooked and per

2:9–11: Rom 10:9; 14:9; Eph 1:20–21. 2:13: 1 Cor 15:10. 2

2:7 emptied himself: The Greek verb *kenōō* means “empty out” or “render void”. The idea is, not that Christ divested himself of divinity when he united himself with humanity, but that he restricted his rightful exercise of certain divine abilities during his earthly life and accepted certain limitations of the human condition. In effect, the Son of God made himself poor in order to make us rich with his grace (2 Cor 8:9) (CCC 472). • Christ emptied himself by compressing the glory of his Godhead within our smallness. What he always was remained perfect and incomprehensible, but what he assumed was in proportion to the measure of our nature (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinarius*).

2:8 death on a cross: The ultimate indignity. Death by crucifixion was the most awful and degrading form of criminal execution in the ancient world. The Romans reserved it for slaves and insurrectionists. See note on Mk 15:24.

2:9 exalted him: By raising him from the dead, enthroning him in heaven, and clothing his humanity with divine glory. A similar destiny awaits all who humble themselves as Jesus did (3:21; Lk 14:11).

2:10 every knee should bow: An allusion to the divine oath in Is 45:23. • Yahweh swore that all peoples, to the very end of the earth, would acknowledge his Lordship and bow before him in homage. Paul moves Christ into the center of this prophecy as the divine Lord destined to be revered by all. **heaven ... earth ... under the earth:** The three principal realms in the world view of ancient Israel (Ex 20:4). Homage will come from all creatures great and small—the angels and saints above, the family of man and beasts spread over the earth, and the dead and the demons of the underworld.

2:11 confess: I.e., acknowledge. Included in this open dec

serious that we pur sense of awe at ser the prospect of sinn Encouragement con readers that God's g desire (intention) at 21; CCC 308) (CC “work”, he address and trembling”, he good deeds were th not boast of your g within you (St. Augu **2:15 pervers** • Deuterono poetic lawsuit that and ingratitude du

A Thing to Harpagmos (G in the Greek O Occurrences of “robbery”. Its considerable d the leading vi (1) Some, like “something sel

Prepare

Read the Introduction to the Song of Solomon, paying particular attention to the *Themes and Characteristics* of the book and the *Christian Perspective* on it. What one thing stands out to you, that you would like to remember?

Read the Outline of the Song of Solomon to get an overview of the book. What are its major divisions?

Pray

Use the following questions to guide your reading of the Song of Solomon, going at a pace that is comfortable to you. Before you begin each new section, pray simply for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit, open my heart to hear and receive these words as what they truly are, the Word of God. Enlighten my understanding and give me grace to put what I read into practice in my life. Amen.

Read and Reflect

Read and reflect on the Song of Solomon as follows:

- Pray before you read
- Read a section of biblical text by itself
- Read the text again, referring to the notes that accompany the text
- For deeper understanding and to aid in applying what you read, answer the questions that follow. The references at the top of each numbered question correspond to particular notes.

At the end of each chapter, review what you have written and linger where you feel drawn, asking the Lord to speak to your heart and into your life. What do you hear? Respond in prayer and ask his help to live what you hear in your attitudes and actions this week.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

For understanding

1. **1:1.** What does the expression “song of songs” mean? What does Scripture relate about Solomon?
2. **1:2–7.** Who is speaking in these verses? Are the lovers married or betrothed? For what is the metaphor of the Shepherd King used in the OT? in the NT?
3. **1:2.** What theme does the bride’s desire for a kiss introduce? According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, for what does the soul long? According to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, what do the mouth that kisses and the kiss itself stand for? How highly is the king’s affection treasured?
4. **1:5.** Why is the speaker’s skin dark? What does her sunbaked complexion reveal about her social status? According to St. Ambrose, what does “I am dark but lovely” mean? Who are the daughters of Jerusalem? What alternative meanings are provided for the phrase “curtains of Solomon”?

For application

1. **1:2.** What does the name of Jesus mean to you? What ideas come to mind as you meditate on it?
2. **1:5.** How confident are you that God loves you regardless of your sinfulness? How willing are you to believe that, despite sinfulness, you are beautiful to him?
3. **1:11.** Just as the bridegroom provides jewelry to enhance the bride’s natural beauty, so God provides grace to beautify the soul. What opportunities for grace is he providing for you today?
4. **1:15–16.** Read the notes for these verses, where the bridegroom and the bride admire each other’s beauty. How do you respond when someone compliments you for your appearance? Do you compliment others for theirs? Do you ever express admiration for the beauty of God? What effect would such an expression have on your affection for him?

Chapter 2

For understanding

1. **2:3.** What does the apple tree symbolize? What does the beloved’s shadow represent? According to St. Thomas of Villanova, what does Christ represent for us?
2. **2:6.** For what does the bride yearn by referring to the beloved’s left and right hands? According to St. Cyril of Alexandria, what does each hand represent?
3. **2:7.** To what do the words “I adjure you” refer? What does the reference to gazelles or deer in this verse sound like in Hebrew? What two things might the caution against awakening love mean?
4. **2:16.** To what might this verse’s language of mutual belonging refer? To what is the expression similar elsewhere in Scripture?

For application

1. **2:3.** The note for this verse describes the image of the Bridegroom’s shadow as a place of protection or security. Describe what that security means to you—for example, whether prayer gives you a sense of security and delight, and, if so, in what way. Where do you like to go for your personal prayer?
2. **2:5–6.** What was your first experience of falling in love like? Have you wished to have that feeling in relation to God? If lovesickness is not part of your spiritual experience or expectation, what shape does love for God take for you? What might God’s “embrace” mean for you?
3. **2:7.** Assuming that there are appropriate times for physical expressions of marital love, is the same ever true of one’s love for God? How “moderate” should one’s love of God be? If love should not be forced, what might help to awaken it freely?
4. **2:15.** What are some of the “little foxes” that pester your own religious life? What have you done to deal with them?

Chapter 3

For understanding

1. **3:1–5.** What is the bride doing in these verses? What are her words often thought to describe?
2. **3:1.** What does the maiden's reference to "him whom my soul loves" indicate? What does St. Bernard of Clairvaux attribute to the soul? What does it indicate about the Bridegroom and the type of love involved?
3. **3:6.** What do the words "coming up" and "column of smoke" suggest? How does St. Ambrose interpret the ascent, the smoke, and the aroma of incense?
4. **3:7.** What does the litter look like? What is the royal carriage called? Who are the "sixty mighty men"? How does Solomon's personal protection force compare with David's?

For application

1. **3:1.** What are some of the difficulties you have in prayer, such as dryness or distraction? What does "seeking" God mean to you? How do you go about it?
2. **3:2.** How difficult is it for you to profess love for God? How determined are you to continue seeking intimacy with God even if it seems that he does not answer?
3. **3:4.** Recall a conversion experience or a moment when you felt that God was especially near. How strong was the desire to "hang on" to the experience? How long did it last? How ready were you for the moment when the experience faded or ended?
4. **3:9–10.** These verses describe a richly ornamented litter used to carry the king, emblematic of an elaborately decorated monstrance used in eucharistic adoration. Do you find that such a vessel attracts your gaze to the Host in the center, or is it a distraction? How often do you take part in eucharistic adoration at Benediction, 40 Hours Devotion, or in a chapel? What is your prayer like at such times?

Chapter 4

For understanding

1. **4:1–15.** Who is speaking in these verses? What is he doing? How does St. Gregory the Great interpret these references to body parts?
2. **4:8.** Although the beloved refers to the maiden as his bride, how else might his reference to her bridal status possibly be understood? What are Amana and Senir, and what do they represent? What does the reference to lions and leopards mean?
3. **Word Study: My Sister.** For what is the Hebrew noun *ahoti* typically used? What do the prophets occasionally use the language of "sisters" to describe? Though referring to the bride as the bridegroom's sister is unusual, what do comparative studies show it to be? Beyond that, what does the designation "sister" reflect?
4. **4:12.** What does the metaphor of the bride as a garden depict? What does much of the imagery of the Song call to mind, particularly about married love? What does the figure of her as a *locked* and *sealed* garden represent? How does St. Cyprian apply this imagery to the Church? How does St. Peter Chrysologus apply it to Mary?

For application

1. **4:1–15.** Read the note for these verses. What does such erotic language suggest that God is trying to accomplish in us? How do you respond to such language?
2. **4:8.** God's mercy often leads us away from environments that are sinful, full of temptations, or merely spiritually counterproductive. Has he ever done that for you? How can you recognize situations, circumstances, or relationships that do you no spiritual good? What can you do to come away from them?
3. **4:9.** Read the word study on the word "sister" in this verse. How might it be beneficial to a marital relationship for the spouses to regard each other as brother and sister? Why might God use such a term of you, or you of him? (Compare your answer with Mt 12:48–50.)
4. **4:12.** The image of an enclosed (or locked) garden is often treated by spiritual writers as representing a chaste soul open only to God. What does the image suggest about yourself—about your spiritual chastity and your availability to the Holy Spirit?

Chapter 5

For understanding

1. **5:2–8.** What is the bride doing in these verses? How do many interpret the account that opens with the maiden sleeping? What does the scenario resemble?
2. **5:2.** What does the allusion to this passage in Rev 3:20 say about Christ? How does St. Bede apply this passage to the Church? Why is the bridegroom's head wet with dew?
3. **5:10–16.** How does the bride describe the bridegroom? What do her words evoke?
4. **5:10.** How is David, the father of Solomon, described in 1 Samuel? According to St. Bede, why is the beloved Bridegroom radiant?

For application

1. **5:2–3.** In your own spiritual life, have you ever missed spiritual opportunities when they were presented to you? Have you ever made excuses for not responding to the invitation of God to come deeper? If so, what were they?
2. **5:6.** Have you ever realized that you missed an opportunity to draw closer to God? What did you do when you realized it?
3. **5:9.** Have friends or family members questioned your devotion or your faith? What were some of their questions?
4. **5:10–16.** Following on the previous question, what answers did you give to those who questioned or took issue with your devotion or your faith? If you avoided giving an answer, what motivated you to do so?

Chapter 6

For understanding

1. **6:4.** What is Tirzah? What did King Omri have to do with it? What does the word “terrible” mean in this context?
2. **Topical Essay: The Song of Solomon and the Spiritual Life.** What reason, by and large, is given for the staggering number of books written about the Song of Solomon, and what two factors play into it? How does one Jewish tradition connect Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon to the three stages of Solomon's life? How does the different approach taken by Christian tradition explain the order of these three books? What level of spiritual maturity is needed to read these three books profitably?
3. **6:9.** How do the descriptions of the bride in this verse apply to the holy Virgin, according to St. Francis de Sales? To whom does the Hebrew word for “maidens” appear to refer?
4. **6:13.** How do the prophets use the language of “return”? What various interpretations of the term “Shulammitte” have been offered? What does the Hebrew word *mahanaim* mean? What is the meaning of the bride's question?

For application

1. **6:3.** Whether you are a professed religious or not, can you honestly take the bride's statement as your own? If so, what does it mean to you? If not, what prevents you?
2. **6:9–10.** These verses are often applied to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is uniquely flawless among human beings. What is your relationship with Mary? What (if any) Marian devotional practices do you have?
3. **6:10.** Do you have access to any sort of spiritual direction? If so, how fruitful has it been? If not, what prevents you from finding a spiritual director or spiritual mentor?

Chapter 7

For understanding

1. **7:1–9.** Who is speaking in these verses? In which direction is his gaze moving?
2. **7:5.** What and where is Carmel? What does the color purple denote? Who is the only personality given a royal title in the Song?
3. **Word Study: Desire.** What does the Hebrew word *teshuqah* mean? How often does it appear in the OT? How is the word used in Gen 3:16 of Eve? About what does God warn Cain in Gen 4:7? About what does the Bride rejoice in the Song of Solomon, and how is that different from the references to desire in Genesis?
4. **7:13.** What are mandrakes thought to symbolize? What is the likely meaning of the reference to fruits?

For application

1. **7:1–5.** Contemplation is described as a “mental gaze”, a way of simply looking at and appreciating something or someone without analytical thought. Describe a time when you contemplated someone by letting your gaze roam over interesting features. How hard would it be to put into words your response to the object of your gaze? How does one contemplate God?
2. **7:10.** What is your response to the realization that someone you love loves you? What effect does that realization have on your love for that person? How do you respond when reminded that God loves you?
3. **7:11–12.** What kinds of enjoyment do you get from going on outings with your spouse or a close friend? How do such outings enhance relationships?

Chapter 8

For understanding

1. **8:1.** Why does the bride wish the bridegroom were like a brother? How does St. Athanasius apply her wish to Jesus Christ?
2. **8:2.** Where does the bride want to consummate her love for the bridegroom? According to St. Germanus of Constantinople, where does the Mother of God reverently receive her immortal Bridegroom?
3. **8:6.** What is the seal mentioned here? How is Christ a seal? Though death has a relentless appetite for human life, in what way is love more persistent? In what ways, according to St. Augustine, is love as strong as death? How else can the expression “most vehement flame” be translated, and at what does it hint? What are the “many waters” often considered to mean?
4. **8:8–10.** Who is speaking in these verses? What is the bride disputing with reference to her brothers’ decision regarding her?

For application

1. **8:1.** How hesitant are you to display elements of your faith in public; for example, by making the sign of the cross in a restaurant or reading a Bible on a bus? What embarrasses you about your faith or causes you to want to hide or disguise it?
2. **8:3.** What kinds of spiritual experiences have you dreamed of enjoying? What are the realities of spiritual life for you? Why do you think certain mystics like John of the Cross (who did enjoy such things as ecstasies) would teach that such experiences are not important? On the other hand, what should you do if God grants them? (Compare your answer with CCC 800.)
3. **8:6.** Read the note for this verse. If the practice of the Christian faith were curtailed or outlawed, how far would you be willing to go to continue in it? For what would you be willing to die?
4. **8:7–10.** We live in an era when physical virginity and sexual chastity are utterly scorned. What are some *religious* reasons why virginity is so highly prized in the Catholic Church? If physical virginity is lost through sexual sin, what can repair the loss?