

THE ROSE OF SHARON

THE LILY OF THE VALLEYS

AN EXPOSITION ON THE SONG OF SOLOMON

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AN EXPOSITION ON THE SONG OF SOLOMON

B S POH



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Dedicated to my beloved sister,

POH BOON LIAN

who, happily, shares the same faith
in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Preface

The Song of Solomon is a book seldom preached on and little understood by most Christians. The book focuses on the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Saviour, who is “The Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valleys”. It deals with the relationship of the believer and his/her Lord and, by extension, of the church and the Saviour. It covers the growing relationship of the believer in his walk with the Lord, from the fumbling of spiritual infancy through the steadfast faith of spiritual adulthood, leading on to the deep communion which longs for nothing short of the final consummation with the Beloved in heaven.

This writer is aware that various approaches have been adopted by others in the study of the Song of Solomon. Conservative writers largely consider the book to be an allegory, while some see it as historical, i.e. a literal account of Solomon’s relationship with the Shulamite woman. All conservative writers attempt to avoid the extremism seen in each approach – the bizarre speculations of allegorizing, and the unedifying focus on sexuality of the literal approach. All of them attempt to put the emphasis on the relationship between Christ and His church – whether seen figuratively by allegory, or seen typically in the historical account. The allegorical approach has a history that stretches back to the days of the Jewish rabbis and early church fathers. Among the recent writers who adopt the allegorical approach are James Hudson Taylor (“Intimacy With Jesus: Understanding the Song of Solomon”), Watchman Nee (“The Song of Songs”), Richard Brooks (“Song of Songs”), and Peter Masters (“The Mutual Love of Christ and His People”). Those who have taken the historical approach include Stuart Olyott (“A Life Worth Living and A Lord Worth Loving”), and Tom Gledhill (“The Message of The Song of Songs”). The present writer joins the rank of those

who see this book as allegory.

Needless to say, the present book does not exhaust the riches to be found in the Song of Solomon. The reader will quickly realize that this is not a commentary. The substance originally were preached messages, which accounts for the style. The messages were preached in the Damansara Reformed Baptist Church, an urban church located on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Bible studies on the subject were conducted subsequently in the church and elsewhere. This book aims to edify the body of Christ, while serving to “jump start” the less experienced preachers who are seeking guidance for preaching from the otherwise “difficult” book of the Song of Solomon. The present book is written from a conservative, evangelical, and Reformed perspective.

Scripture verses are based on the New King James version of the Bible, copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. The author acknowledges with thanks the support of members of the Damansara Reformed Baptist Church and the many friends who have prayed for the ministry of the church. Wong May Leng and Ewilly Liew transcribed the preached messages, while Robyn Liew helped in proofreading the manuscript. The writer’s wife, Goody, and four sons Yeh Han, Yeh Tze, Yeh Chuin and Yeh Ern have been a source of comfort and strength.

May the Lord’s name be magnified as His people know something of the “joy inexpressible and full of glory” through reading this book.

B S Poh, October 2013

Part I

PREAMBLE

The Song of Solomon

1:1-17

1 The song of songs, which is Solomon's.

Shulamite

2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth –

For your **loves are** better than wine.

3 Because of the fragrance of your good ointments,

Your name *is* ointment poured forth;

Therefore the virgins love you.

4 Draw me away!

Daughters of Jerusalem to Solomon

We will run after you.

Shulamite

The king has brought me into his chambers.

Daughters of Jerusalem to Solomon

We will be glad and rejoice in you.

We will remember your **loves** more than wine.

The righteous ones love you.

Shulamite

5 I *am* dark, but lovely,

O daughters of Jerusalem,

Like the tents of Kedar,

Like the curtains of Solomon.

6 Do not look upon me, because I *am* dark,

Because the sun has tanned me.

My mother's sons were angry with me;

They made me the keeper of the vineyards,

But my own vineyard I have not kept.

Shulamite to Solomon

7 Tell me, O you whom I love,
Where you feed *your flock*,
Where you make *it* rest at noon.
For why should I be as one who veils herself
By the flocks of your companions?

Solomon to Shulamite

8 If you do not know, O fairest among women,
Follow in the footsteps of the flock
And feed your little goats
Beside the shepherds' tents.
9 I have compared you, my love,
To my filly among Pharaoh's chariots.
10 Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,
Your neck with chains *of gold*.

Daughters of Jerusalem to Shulamite

11 We will make you ornaments of gold
With studs of silver.

Shulamite

12 While the king *is* at his table,
My spikenard sends forth its fragrance.
13 A bundle of myrrh *is* my beloved to me,
That lies all night between my breasts.
14 My beloved is to me a cluster of henna *blooms*
In the vineyards of En Gedi.

Solomon to Shulamite

15 Behold, you *are* fair, my love!
Behold, you *are* fair!
You *have* dove's eyes.

Shulamite to Solomon

16 Behold, you *are* **fair**, my beloved!

Yes, pleasant!

Also our **couch** *is* green.

17 The beams of our houses *are* cedar,

And our rafters of fir.

2:1-17

Solomon

1 I *am* the rose of Sharon, *and* the lily of the valleys.

2 Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

Shulamite

3 Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods,

So *is* my beloved among the sons.

I sat down in his shade with great delight,

And his fruit *was* sweet to my taste.

4 He brought me to the banqueting house,

And his banner over me *was* love.

5 Sustain me with cakes of raisins,

Refresh me with apples,

For I *am* lovesick.

6 His left hand *is* under my head,

And his right hand embraces me.

Solomon

7 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,

By the gazelles or by the does of the field,

Do not stir up nor awaken **my** love until **she** pleases.

Shulamite

8 The voice of my beloved!

Behold he comes
Leaping upon the mountains,
Skipping upon the hills.

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

Behold, he stands behind our wall;
He is looking through the windows,
Showing through the lattice.

10 My beloved spoke, and said to me:

“Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.

11 For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over *and* gone.

12 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing
has come,

And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

13 The fig tree puts forth its green figs,

And the vines *with* the tender grapes
Give a good smell.

Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away!

Solomon to the Shulamite

14 “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,

In the secret *places* of the cliff,

Let me see your face,

Let me hear your voice;

For your voice *is* sweet,

And your face *is* lovely.”

15 Catch us the foxes,

The little foxes that spoil the vines,

For our vines *have* tender grapes.

Shulamite

16 My beloved *is* mine, and I *am* his.
He feeds *his* flock among the lilies.
17 Until the day breaks
And the shadows flee away,
Turn, my beloved,
And be like a gazelle
Or a young stag
Upon the mountains of **Separation**.

3:1-11

Shulamite

1 **Night** by night on my bed I sought the one I love;
I sought him, but I did not find him.
2 “I will rise now,” *I said*,
“And go about the city;
In the streets and in the squares
I will seek the one I love.”
I sought him, but I did not find him.
3 The watchmen who go about the city found me;
I said, “Have you seen the one I love?”
4 Scarcely had I passed by them,
When I found the one I love.
I held him and would not let him go,
Until I had brought him to the house of my mother,
And into the chamber of her who conceived me.

Solomon

5 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the does of the field,
Do not stir up nor awaken **my** love until **she** pleases.

Daughters of Jerusalem

- 6 Who is **she** coming out of the wilderness
Like pillars of smoke,
Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
With all the merchant's fragrant powders?
- 7 Behold, it is Solomon's couch,
With sixty valiant men around it,
Of the valiant of Israel.
- 8 They all hold swords,
Being expert in war.
Every man *has* his sword on his thigh
Because of fear in the night.

Shulamite

- 9 Of the wood of Lebanon
Solomon the King
Made himself a palanquin:
- 10 He made its pillars *of* silver,
Its support *of* gold,
Its seat *of* purple,
Its interior paved *with* love
For the daughters of Jerusalem.

Shulamite

- 11 Go forth, O daughters of Zion,
And see King Solomon with the crown
With which his mother crowned him
On the day of his **espousal**,
The day of the gladness of his heart.

4:1-16

Solomon to Shulamite

1 Behold, you *are* fair, my love!

Behold, you *are* fair!

You *have* dove's eyes behind your veil.

Your hair *is* like a flock of goats,

Going down from Mount Gilead.

2 Your teeth *are* like a flock of shorn sheep

Which have come up from the washing,

Every one of which bears twins,

And none *is* barren among them.

3 Your lips *are* like a strand of scarlet,

And your mouth is lovely.

Your temples behind your veil

Are like a piece of pomegranate.

4 Your neck *is* like the tower of David,

Built for an armory,

On which hang a thousand bucklers,

All shields of mighty men.

5 Your two breasts *are* like two fawns,

Twins of a gazelle,

Which feed among the lilies.

Shulamite

6 Until the day breaks

And the shadows flee away,

I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh

And to the hill of frankincense.

Solomon to the Shulamite

7 You *are* all fair, my love,

And *there is* no spot in you.

8 Come with me from Lebanon, *my* spouse,

With me from Lebanon.

Look from the top of Amana,

From the top of Senir and Hermon,

From the lions' dens,

From the mountains of the leopards.

9 You have ravished my heart,

My sister, *my* spouse,

You have ravished my heart

With one *look* of your eyes,

With one link of your necklace.

10 How fair is your love,

My sister, *my* spouse!

How much better than wine is your love,

And the scent of your perfumes

Than all spices!

11 Your lips, O *my* spouse,

Drip as the honeycomb;

Honey and milk *are* under your tongue;

And the fragrance of your garments

Is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

- 12 A garden enclosed
 Is my sister, *my* spouse,
 A spring shut up,
 A fountain sealed.
- 13 Your plants *are* an orchard of pomegranates
 With pleasant fruits,
 Fragrant henna with spikenard,
- 14 Spikenard and saffron,
 Calamus and cinnamon,
 With all trees of frankincense,
 Myrrh and aloes,
 With all the chief spices –
- 15 A fountain of gardens,
 A well of living waters,
 And streams from Lebanon.

Shulamite

- 16 Awake, O north *wind*,
 And come, O south!
 Blow upon my garden,
 That its spices may flow out.
 Let my beloved come to his garden
 And eat its pleasant fruits.

5:1-16

Solomon

- 1 I have come to my garden, my sister, *my* spouse;
 I have gathered my myrrh with my spice;
 I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey;
 I have drunk my wine with my milk.

Eat, O friends!
Drink, yes, drink deeply,
O beloved ones!

Shulamite

- 2 I sleep, but my heart is awake;
 It is the voice of my beloved!
 He knocks, *saying*,
 “Open for me, my sister, my love,
 My dove, my perfect one;
 For my head is covered with dew,
 My locks with the drops of the night.”
- 3 I have taken off my robe;
 How can I put it on *again*?
 I have washed my feet;
 How can I defile them?
- 4 My beloved put his hand
 By the latch *of the door*;
 And my heart yearned for him.
- 5 I arose to open for my beloved,
 And my hands dripped *with* myrrh,
 My fingers with liquid myrrh,
 On the handles of the lock.
- 6 I opened for my beloved,
 But my beloved had turned away *and* was gone.
 My heart leaped up when he spoke.
 I sought him, but I could not find him;
 I called him, but he gave me no answer.
- 7 The watchmen who went about the city found me.
 They struck me, they wounded me;
 The keepers of the walls
 Took my veil away from me.
- 8 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
 If you find my beloved,
 That you tell him I *am* lovesick!

Daughters of Jerusalem

- 9 What is your beloved
More than *another* beloved,
O fairest among women?
What is your beloved
More than *another* beloved,
That you so charge us?

Shulamite

- 10 My beloved is white and ruddy,
Chief among ten thousand.
11 His head is *like* the finest gold;
His locks are wavy,
And black as a raven.
12 His eyes are like doves
By the rivers of waters,
Washed with milk,
And fitly set.
13 His cheeks are like a bed of spices,
Banks of scented herbs.
His lips are lilies,
Dripping liquid myrrh.
14 His hands are rods of gold
Set with beryl.
His belly is carved ivory
Inlaid with sapphires.
15 His legs are pillars of marble
Set on bases of fine gold.
His countenance is like Lebanon,
Excellent as the cedars.
16 His mouth is most sweet,
Yes, he is altogether lovely.
This is my beloved,
And this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem!

6:1-13

Daughters of Jerusalem

- 1 Where has your beloved gone,
O fairest among women?
Where has your beloved turned aside,
That we may seek him with you?

Shulamite

- 2 My beloved has gone to his garden,
To the beds of spices,
To feed *his flock* in the gardens,
And to gather lilies.
3 I am my beloved's,
And my beloved *is* mine.
He feeds *his flock* among the lilies.

Solomon

- 4 O my love, you *are as* beautiful as Tirzah,
Lovely as Jerusalem,
Awesome as *an army* with banners!
5 Turn your eyes away from me,
For they have overcome me.
Your hair *is* like a flock of goats
Going down from Gilead.
6 Your teeth *are* like a flock of sheep
Which have come up from the washing;
Every one bears twins,
And none *is* barren among them.
7 Like a piece of pomegranate
Are your temples behind your veil.

8 There are sixty queens
And eighty concubines,
And virgins without number.

9 My dove, my perfect one,
Is the only one,
The only one of her mother,
The favorite of the one who bore her.
The daughters saw her
And called her blessed,
The queens and the concubines,
And they praised her.

Daughters of Jerusalem

10 Who is she who looks forth as the morning,
Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
Awesome as *an army* with banners?

Shulamite

11 I went down to the garden of nuts
To see the verdure of the valley,
To see whether the vine had budded
And the pomegranates had bloomed.
12 Before I was even aware,
My soul had made me
As the chariots of my **willing** people.

Daughters of Jerusalem

13 Return, return, O Shulamite;
Return, return, that we may look upon you

Solomon

What would you see in the Shulamite –
As it were, the **company** of the two **armies**?

7:1-13

Solomon

- 1 How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
O prince's daughter!
The curves of your thighs *are* like jewels,
The work of the hands of a skillful workman.
- 2 Your navel *is* a rounded goblet;
It lacks no blended beverage.
Your waist *is* a heap of wheat
Set about with lilies.
- 3 Your two breasts *are* like two fawns,
Twins of a gazelle.
- 4 Your neck *is* like an ivory tower,
Your eyes *like* the pools in Heshbon
By the gate of Bath Rabbim.
Your nose *is* like the tower of Lebanon
Which looks toward Damascus.
- 5 Your head *crowns* you like *Mount Carmel*,
And the hair of your head *is* like purple;
A king *is* held captive by *your* tresses.
- 6 How fair and how pleasant you are,
O love, with your delights!
- 7 This stature of yours is like a palm tree,
And your breasts *like* its clusters.
- 8 I said, "I will go up to the palm tree,
I will take hold of its branches."
Let now your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
The fragrance of your breath like apples,
- 9 And the roof of your mouth like the best wine.

Shulamite

- 9 *The wine* goes down smoothly for my beloved,
Moving gently the lips of sleepers.
- 10 I *am* my beloved's,
And his desire *is* toward me.

- 11 Come, my beloved,
Let us go forth to the field;
Let us lodge in the villages.
- 12 Let us get up early to the vineyards;
Let us see if the vine has budded,
Whether the grape blossoms are open,
And the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.
- 13 The mandrakes give off a fragrance,
And at our gates *are* pleasant *fruits*,
All manner, new and old,
Which I have laid up for you, my beloved.

8:1-14

Shulamite to Solomon

- 1 Oh, that you were like my brother,
Who nursed at my mother's breasts!
If I should find you outside,
I would kiss you;
I would not be despised.
- 2 I would lead you *and* bring you
Into the house of my mother,
She *who* used to instruct me.
I would cause you to drink of spiced wine,
Of the juice of my pomegranate.

Shulamite to the daughters of Jerusalem

- 3 His left hand *is* under my head,
And his right hand embraces me.

Solomon

- 4 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
Do not stir up nor awaken **my** love
Until **she** pleases.

Daughters of Jerusalem

5 Who is this coming up from the wilderness,
Leaning upon her beloved?

Solomon

I awakened you under the apple tree.
There your mother brought you forth;
There she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.

Shulamite

6 Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love *is as* strong as death,
Jealousy *as* **unyielding** as the grave;
Its flames *are* flames of fire,
A **flame of Jehovah**.

7 Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love
All the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised.

Shulamite's brothers

8 We have a little sister,
And she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister
In the day when she is spoken for?
9 If she *is* a wall,
We will build upon her
A battlement of silver;
And if she *is* a door,
We will enclose her
With boards of cedar.

Shulamite

- 10 I *am* a wall,
 And my breasts like towers;
 Then I became in his eyes
 As one who found peace.
- 11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon;
 He leased the vineyard to keepers;
 Everyone was to bring for its fruit
 A thousand silver *coins*.
- 12 My own vineyard is before me.
 You, O Solomon, *may have* a thousand,
 And those who tend its fruit two hundred.

Solomon

- 13 You who dwell in the gardens,
 The companions listen to your voice –
 Let me hear it!

Shulamite

- 14 Make haste, my beloved,
 And be like a gazelle
 Or a young stag
 On the mountains of spices.

One

An Introduction

The Song of Solomon is a book that is seldom preached on. This is understandable because of the many challenges posed to most preachers. Since the book is part of God's word, it has to be preached some time in the ministry of any preacher. We may have to wait till we are more confident before preaching it, but we cannot wait forever. It will do us spiritual good to hear it expounded. Although seldom preached on, it has nevertheless uplifted and enraptured many of God's people in times past. Here, we shall provide an introduction to the book, followed by a discussion of the interpretation of the book.

1.1 The Book

The author

Who wrote this book? The first verse of the book tells us that it is "the song of songs, which is Solomon's." In the Bible, there is only one Solomon, who was the king of Israel for forty years. You might not realise it, but the name always applies to this particular person every time it is found in the Bible. He was the son of David, who built up the kingdom of Israel. Solomon extended the borders of Israel and, under his reign, the kingdom reached the height of its glory. After Solomon, the kingdom split into two and never recovered its former glory. In the book, many places are mentioned – including Lebanon, Carmel, Mount Gilead, Hermon, and Tirzah – all of which

were in the territory of the one nation during the rule of Solomon. It was during his reign that horses from elsewhere were sold to Egypt, and chariots were introduced into Israel from Egypt. We are not surprised, therefore, to read in Chapter 1, verse 9, “I have compared you, my love, to my filly (or horses) among Pharaoh’s chariots.”

Date of writing

In the original text, there is a large number of foreign words – Egyptian, Syrian, and Arabic. This shows that Solomon had established widespread contact with the surrounding nations. We know that Solomon had trade ties with Egypt in the south, and Tyre in the north. The timber and workmen for the building of the temple in Jerusalem came from Tyre. The Queen of Sheba came from afar to visit Solomon. Ships were sent to distant lands in trade. The Bible scholars tell us that the book was most likely written in 965 BC, which was the time when Solomon began building the temple.

The style

What can we say about the style of the book? It is actually a love poem, written in parts, that was intended to be sung. The different parts were probably sung to different tunes. The tunes are not indicated, nor preserved. We, therefore, take it that the Holy Spirit intended the book to be part of Scripture, to teach us doctrine. We know that the book of Psalms was originally compiled to be sung, and many of the tunes are mentioned. For example, we have “The Lilies”, “Jeduthun”, and “Death of the Son”, which are names of the tunes used but the tunes are not recorded for us. God’s intention is that we study the Psalms as part of Scripture, although they were originally songs.

We know from 1 Kings 4:32 that Solomon, in his lifetime, wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. Not all his proverbs are included in the book of Proverbs, and not all his songs are included in the book of Psalms. Only Psalm 72 and Psalm 127 are attributed to Solomon, while most of the psalms were by King David. Some of the psalms were by men like Asaph and the sons of Korah, while a number of them are unattributed. Solomon probably contributed to many of these unattributed psalms. Solomon realised that much of what he wrote was not intended by God to be part of His word and therefore did not include them. He was a man submitted to God. His book,

“The Song of Songs”, however, was intended to be part of Scripture, as was his other books, “Ecclesiastes” and “Proverbs”. We see that Solomon was a man well capable of writing “The Song of Songs”.

The purpose

This book is structured as a drama that unfolds in different parts. The story revolves around two characters, namely Solomon himself and the Shulamite woman. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Solomon caught a glimpse of the future glory of God’s kingdom in which the Messiah would come to save His people. The Song portrays the relationship of love between the Lord and His people.

1.2 The Interpretation

Three views

Let us now say something about the interpretation of this book. There are three main views concerning the book. First, there is the literal view which treats the book as a poetic description of Solomon’s real courtship and marriage with his first wife. Second, there is the typological view which accepts the historical reality of the contents but claims that the book ultimately portrays Christ’s love for His church. The third is the allegorical view which considers the book as a spiritual allegory, the contents of which are made up and have no historical basis, and is intended to teach deeper spiritual truths. It depicts God’s love for Israel and, by extension, Christ’s love for the church.

The allegorical view has been held by the Jews even before the time of Christ. Those below thirty years of age were not permitted to study the book for fear that they might not have the spiritual maturity to grasp its message and would be stumbled instead by carnal imaginations arising from its contents. The book was read during the Feast of the Passover, to commemorate the redemption of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses. To the Jews, the book portrays the special relationship between God and His chosen people, Israel. Many Christian commentators and preachers hold to the allegorical view as well. The well-known Old Testament scholar, E. J. Young, favoured the typological view but admitted that the dominant view among Christians is the allegorical one. The well-known commentators, Matthew Poole and Matthew Henry, both held to the

allegorical view. The well-known Particular Baptist preacher, John Gill, also held to the allegorical view, and so did C. H. Spurgeon – “the prince of preachers”. Hudson Taylor, the well-known missionary to China, also held to the allegorical view. Dr. Peter Masters, of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, has in recent days produced a helpful book on the Song of Solomon which also upholds the allegorical view.

The allegorical view

We must now give the reasons why we adopt the allegorical view, and reject the literal and the typological views. The first reason is that the title of the book, as given in the first verse, shows that it is the best of all songs. It is called “the song of songs” just as we have the expressions, “the King of kings”, and “the Lord of lords”, in the Bible. Solomon composed many songs, and this is regarded as the best. Furthermore, this song is included as part of Scripture. We would expect this book to contain lofty, spiritual, contents that are glorifying to God and edifying to men. If this book is based on the real marriage of Solomon to his first wife, as claimed in the literal and typological views, we would face with the difficulty of accepting a betrayed marriage as a model. We are told in 1 Kings 11:3-4, “And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.” Surely, we cannot accept a failed marriage as the basis of “the best of all songs” in the Bible.

The second reason why we reject the contents as historical is the absurd and inappropriate use of words to describe people. In Chapter 4, verses 1 to 4, for example, we have the beauty of the bride described in the most amazing way: “Your hair *is* like a flock of goats, going down Mount Gilead”; “Your teeth *are* like a flock of shorn *sheep* which have come up from the washing”; “Your neck *is* like the tower of David, built for an armoury”. Which lady would like to be described like that? Another example is found in Chapter 7, verses 2 to 4: “Your navel *is* a rounded goblet ... Your waist *is* a heap of wheat set about with lilies”; “Your neck *is* like an ivory tower, your eyes *like* the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim”. Imagine a beautiful lady being described as having a waist like a heap of

wheat, and her eyes like pools, or fish ponds! These words would not be absurd if they are used allegorically, in which the objects used in the comparison symbolize some spiritual qualities. Then, look at Chapter 2, verse 1, “*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys*”. These are the words of the groom, represented by Solomon. If Solomon were to be literally saying these words of himself, it would be nothing but self-praise. Can the word of God be encouraging us to praise ourselves? However, if the groom is seen as symbolizing the Lord Jesus Christ, these words are wholly appropriate to be used by Him. The Lord is beautiful and perfect in His character, and He reveals Himself to us as such so that we may trust in Him as our Saviour.

Thirdly, there is a glaring absence of any description of a wedding feast or a ceremony. The bride is brought to the banqueting house in Chapter 2, verse 4, but that is about the sustenance of the bride by the groom, and not about a wedding banquet. Even the description of Solomon coming in a procession in Chapter 3:6ff., apparently to see the bride, stops short of describing a wedding ceremony. It says in Chapter 3, verse 11, “Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day of gladness of his heart.” The word translated as “wedding” is better rendered as “espousal”. The passage is actually describing the betrothal of the couple which, according to Jewish custom, is more binding than the engagement that we have today. The couple became husband and wife legally, but were not allowed to live together until their actual wedding day. The Jewish betrothal is used in Scripture to portray the relationship between Christ and the church. The church is betrothed to Christ, who has gone to heaven to prepare a place for His people. He would one day return to take the bride to be with Himself. There would then be the “marriage supper of the Lamb”, mentioned in Revelation 19:9.

That leads us to the fourth reason why we regard the book as an allegory concerning the relationship between Christ and His church. The Bible is full of teaching that God is the husband, and His people the bride. We see this in Isaiah 54:5, “For your Maker *is* your husband, the LORD of hosts *is* His name; and your Redeemer *is* the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth.” The same can be seen in Isaiah 65:5 and Hosea 2:16, 19-20. In the New Tes-

tament, Christ is portrayed as the groom and the church His bride. We see that in the parables of the Lord, such as in Matthew 9:15 and John 3:29. We see that also in the epistles, such as in 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:23, and Revelation 19:7, 21:2 and 22:17. This is a fact that is well-known to us. In the last passage for example, i.e. in Revelation 22:17, it says, 'And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.'

The fifth reason why we look upon the Song of Solomon as an allegory is that the Bible itself is full of allegories, and this book in the Bible is not unique in this respect. Remember that an allegory is a made-up story which is not historically true. The story is deliberately made up to act as a vehicle for conveying deeper spiritual truths. An example of allegory is found in Judges 9; where verses 7 to 9 say,

Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them: "Listen to me, you men of Shechem, that God may listen to you! The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!' But the olive tree said to them, 'Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honor God and men, and go to sway over trees?'"

From this we see what an allegory is like. Trees don't talk, and trees don't rule. This is a story that is made up. Some versions of the Bible wrongly give this passage the heading, "The parable of the trees", when it is actually an allegory. A parable is a story based on real-life events, the purpose of which is to convey one main truth. The Lord used many parables in His teaching. When we interpret a parable, we must be careful not to read too much into the details of the story but focus only on the main point of the story. We note, however, that there are some parables which are mixed with allegorical elements. For example, in the Parable of the Sower, there are allegorical elements in which the seeds sown are used to symbolize the word of God, and the birds to the air that take away the seeds represent the devil who prevents the word from taking root in the heart of the hearers. These are allegorical elements, and must be recognised as such, but the whole story is a parable and we must

not lose sight of the main point of the story, namely that we must take heed how we hear the word of God. In a pure parable, the main point of the story must be noted.

We come back to discuss the allegories of the Bible. In Romans 11, the apostle Paul describes the relationship of physical Israel with the church, which is spiritual Israel. He says that the natural olive branches are trimmed off, and the wild olive branches are grafted in. That is an allegory. Another is found in Revelation 12. The woman, which represents the church, is about to give birth to the male Child. The fiery red dragon attempts to swallow up the Child but God takes Him away. The dragon becomes furious and turns his fury on the woman, and then on the other children of the woman. We know that the male Child is the Lord Jesus Christ, for He alone rules all the nations with a rod of iron. We are told of His power over the devil in the subsequent verses. We see, then, that allegories abound in the Bible and we should not think it a strange thing that the Song of Solomon is an allegory.

We consider the sixth reason why this book is regarded as an allegory: Solomon was obviously conscious that he was writing under divine inspiration, with himself as a type of Christ. This point must be grasped. In terms of raw talent, Solomon was well capable of writing this song. We have no doubt about that. We have seen that he had written 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. The question we want to ask is, "Was he conscious that he was writing under inspiration things concerning the future Messiah?" We answer in the affirmative because of many indications to this effect. First, we note that Solomon's name is mentioned seven times in this book, a number which in biblical prophecy symbolizes God's perfection. Is this just a coincidence, or is there a significance in the number seven?

Second, we note that in Genesis 49:10, when Jacob was near death, he uttered the prophecy concerning Judah, "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes." This was a prophecy concerning the power of rule resting in Judah until a mysterious Person, or event, called "Shiloh" comes. Solomon was from the tribe of Judah, and he would have known of this prophecy. The word "Shiloh" means "Peace", and the name of Solomon in the Hebrew language is "Shelomoh", while his bride in this story is "Shulamith", both of which are derived from the word "Shiloh". The word "Shelomoth" is masculine, and its feminine

form is “Shulamith”. It seems that Solomon was conscious that he was a type of the coming Saviour – a Ruler who is a King of Peace. Over two hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah was to refer to the coming Saviour as the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Third, we are told this about Solomon in 2 Samuel 12:24-25, “Then David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in to her and lay with her. So she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. Now the LORD loved him, and He sent *word* by the hand of Nathan the prophet: So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD.” The name “Jedidiah” actually means “Beloved of the LORD”. You would remember that when the Lord Jesus Christ was on earth, the voice from heaven came, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” David spoke of the coming of the Saviour who would rule over all His enemies, in Psalm 110:1. The Jews have always understood that a son of David would be the Saviour. The Lord Jesus Christ applied the prophecy of Psalm 110:1 to Himself, in Matthew 22:41-45, for He was a descendant of David. Solomon would have known of his other name, “Jedidiah”, and the unusual circumstances of his birth. He would have known that God had chosen him to be a type of the coming Saviour.

Fourth, when Solomon asked for wisdom from God, it was in order that he might judge God’s “great people” (1 Kings 2:9). When the temple was dedicated, he prayed that God would hear the supplication of His people Israel whenever they called to Him. We read in 1 Kings 8:53, “For You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth *to be* Your inheritance, as You spoke to your servant Moses, when You brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD.” God responded by saying, in 1 Kings 9:3, “I have consecrated this house which you have built to put My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually.” We know that the land of Israel foreshadowed the kingdom of Christ, the nation of Israel foreshadowed the church, and the temple foreshadowed Christ’s body which would be laid down as the perfect sacrifice to redeem the church, His spiritual body. The church, will be gathered in perfection as the heavenly temple on the last day. Solomon was conscious that Israel was God’s covenant people, a people that foreshadowed the covenant people of God in the New Testament age. He was conscious of being appointed as king in a nation specially chosen by God.

Four reasons have been given why we believe Solomon was consciously writing the inspired word of God, with himself as a type of the coming Saviour. Six reasons have been given why this book should be treated as an allegory foretelling the coming of the Messiah and a new age. Solomon was consciously writing this book of Song as an allegory to convey lofty spiritual truths pertaining to the future. The prophets of the Old Testament, like Jeremiah and Daniel, knew that they were writing God's word (Jer. 36:27-28, 32; Dan. 12:4). The apostles in the New Testament knew that they were writing God's word (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 3:15-16). We should not be surprised that Solomon knew he was writing God's word.

Apparent problems

We have covered the reasons why this book must be regarded as a spiritual allegory. I must confess that for a long while in the ministry I was not prepared to preach from the book for three main reasons. Firstly, I was troubled by the unusual language used. If we take the book literally, we end up with a lot of problems, as we have discussed earlier. The literal approach certainly posed a problem to me.

Secondly, I was reluctant to treat the book as allegory because allegorizing has been a big problem with preachers. Some of those who like allegorizing tend to read too much into any Bible passage, to the extent of being ridiculous. I was much inclined to adopt the typological approach, although that has its accompanying problems. What swung me to the allegorical view was the realization that treating the book as allegory is different from applying the so-called "allegorical method of interpretation" to the book. I hope you see the difference between the two matters. The Roman Catholics favour a method of interpreting the Bible called the allegorical method, in which each passage of Scripture is seen as having three or four meanings – the literal meaning, the moral meaning, the spiritual meaning, and the mystical meaning. In their view, the task of the preacher is to determine the three or four levels of meaning from any passage of Scripture. We do not believe there are three or four meanings to any passage of Scripture. We believe that every passage of Scripture contains one spiritual meaning which God intends us to know. The task of the preacher is to understand the passage by applying the correct rules of interpretation so that the intended meaning becomes clear and then apply that meaning to our various

circumstances and needs. The many *applications* must not be confused with the one *meaning* of that passage. To determine the one correct meaning of the passage, the normal historical-grammatical-theological approach of interpretation must be used. We would study the historical background; we would study the words, grammar, tenses and sentence construction; we would take the text in context and compare it with other Scriptures. You see now that treating the Song of Solomon as allegory is different from interpreting it by what is called the “allegorical method of interpretation”.

Thirdly, my initial difficulty with the allegorical approach was that while accepting Solomon’s ability to write such a love poem, I had not seen the truth that Solomon was conscious of being inspired by the Holy Spirit to write such an allegory. Writing a spiritual allegory requires the writer to consciously use it as a vehicle to convey deeper spiritual truths. Was Solomon consciously writing deeper spiritual truths? As we have already seen, Solomon was well aware that he was an instrument of God in writing the book. Just as the prophets and apostles were conscious that they were writing Scriptures, Solomon was conscious that he was writing Scriptures. He not only wrote this book, but also the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and composed a number of the Psalms.

1.3 Conclusion

Once you are sure that this book must be treated as a spiritual allegory, it will yield bountiful benefits. We will see “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” in the book. We will be raised to great heights of ecstasy as the beauty of the Saviour and His love for His church are unveiled. We will be searched to the depths of our being concerning our fickleness, our ingratitude, and our inconsistencies. We will be melted with gratitude as we realize the great condescension of our Saviour towards undeserving sinners in coming to save them, to transform them, and to give them a new status before God. This book will stir up your love for the Lord. It will restore cold-hearted and backslidden Christians. It will give a new sense of direction and perspective to your lives.

Prophecies of Christ abound, with rich views of the bride’s destiny. Our hearts will be lifted up to look forward to that great day

when our Saviour will return for His precious bride. You will come to realize that nothing in all creation matters more than to belong to God and His Son. You will want to worship the Lord, and sing praise to Him for all eternity. The book ends with the words, “Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.” This echoes the words found at the end of the book of Revelation, ‘He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!’

May the Lord bless this book to our souls!

Part II

**COMMUNION WITH
CHRIST**

1:1-7

1 The song of songs, which is Solomon's.

Shulamite

2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth –

For your **loves are** better than wine.

3 Because of the fragrance of your good ointments,

Your name *is* ointment poured forth;

Therefore the virgins love you.

4 Draw me away!

Daughters of Jerusalem to Solomon

We will run after you.

Shulamite

The king has brought me into his chambers.

Daughters of Jerusalem to Solomon

We will be glad and rejoice in you.

We will remember your **loves** more than wine.

The righteous ones love you.

Shulamite

5 I *am* dark, but lovely,

O daughters of Jerusalem,

Like the tents of Kedar,

Like the curtains of Solomon.

6 Do not look upon me, because I *am* dark,

Because the sun has tanned me.

My mother's sons were angry with me;

They made me the keeper of the vineyards,

But my own vineyard I have not kept.

Shulamite to Solomon

7 Tell me, O you whom I love,
Where you feed *your flock*,
Where you make it rest at noon.
For why should I be as one who veils herself
By the flocks of your companions?

Two

Desiring Christ

We come to Song 1:1-7, which shows what it means to desire after the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 1 tells us that it is “the song of songs, which *is* Solomon’s.” It is the greatest and most sublime of songs. Those who are song writers and singers may have your own ideas of which is the greatest and most sublime of songs, but the Scripture declares this song as the most sublime and greatest. We must see in this description spiritual things to be learned which are beyond our human ability to compose or write.

We accept this book as a spiritual allegory written by King Solomon, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to teach us lofty, spiritual, lessons. From the present passage, we learn how Christians should desire after Christ, and why we should desire Him. There are, therefore, two sections to this message, under each of which are three main points.

2.1 How To Desire After Christ (vv. 2-4)

Arises from Christ’s love for us

In the first section, we consider how Christians should desire after Christ. We learn, first of all, that our desire for Christ should arise from Christ’s love for us. We are told in verse 2, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love *is* better than wine.” These words express one’s desire for the love of Christ, not the love that one has for Christ. They are about Christ’s love for His people,

not His people's love for Him. As Christ's people, we desire more of His love. These are words of the Shulamite woman directed to the groom. There are two words we wish to take note of, namely, "kisses" and "love".

Kisses are expressions of love in the heart. There must be love in the heart for there to be expressions of love. We know that Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss although he had no love for Him. But, here, we are dealing with expressions of love which arise from true love in the heart. The Lord Jesus Christ has shown His love for His people, and His people want more of the expressions of His love. The desire for more kisses from Him is the desire for more of the expressions of His love.

We recognize the fact that Christ is the One who loves us first before we could love Him. We are told in 1 John 4:19 that we love God because He first loved us. Similarly, we are able to love the Lord Jesus Christ because He first loved us. Left to ourselves, we would have been lost in our sins. We would have gone far away in the ways of the world. But the Lord has come to look for His sheep. He has laid down His life to save them. In recognition of His initiative to save us, in love, we ask for more expressions of His love to us. We want to experience more of His presence because we love Him, and are grateful for the salvation He has given to us. We appreciate His love for us, and want more of the expressions of His love. No mother will begrudge her son wanting more of the wonderful food she has cooked. The Lord is pleased when we show our appreciation for His love by wanting more.

Then, we consider the word "love". In the original language, the word translated as "love" is in the plural. It is a reference to the many blessings of God upon His people, through Jesus Christ. God shows His love by His many blessings to His people. A grandmother pours forth her love upon her grandchild. A lover pours forth his love upon the one he loves. God showed His love for His people by choosing them from eternity to be saved. He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for His people. Jesus Christ willingly laid down His life for His people because of His eternal love for them. In Christ, we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings. These are the "loves" of God, His blessings, showered upon His people.

Let us compare the spiritual blessings of the Lord with the wine of the world. The worldling wants only the power, fame, riches,

and enjoyments the world offers. He does not want salvation, communion with God, fellowship with God's people, much less Christ Himself. We were once like that – we had no desire for spiritual things, until God met with us, convicted us of our sins, and gave us salvation in His Son Jesus Christ. But we must constantly check ourselves, lest we are drawn away by the ways of the world. Have you been drawn away by the world? Every time we walk into one of the modern shopping malls, we can't help feeling that we are entering the "vanity fair" that is described in John Bunyan's book, "Pilgrim's Progress". The place is crowded with shoppers, who are constantly tempted by the wares on display. They are bombarded by the loud music and exposed to the blinking lights, which are intended to control the emotions. The beats of the music are such that they make you move, they make you act, they make you want to buy, and to buy more. I am not saying that all who go to the shopping mall are sinning. I am not saying that Christians should never go to such shopping malls. And I am not saying that you should feel guilty every time you are in one. I am only asking you to be careful, and to be aware of the ways of the world. When we were first converted, we loved the Lord above all else in the world. We were prepared to give our all to the Lord. He was most precious to us. We were prepared to forego everything for Him. Have you forgotten that? But where is that love for the Lord today? This passage, if it does nothing else, should at least awaken you to consider afresh your first love. Beware of being drawn away by the world! We must regain our first love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Focused on His person

The second point is that our desire for Christ should be focussed upon His person. We are told in verse 3, "Because of the fragrance of your good ointments, your name is ointment poured forth ..." In the Bible, ointments perform many beneficial functions. First, it is for healing. A wound heals well when the right ointment is applied. The Bible speaks of "the balm of Gilead", which was for healing. Second, ointments soothe those who are bruised and wounded. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, oil and wine were applied on the wounded person, to soothe his pain as much as to help in the healing of the wounds. Third, ointments refresh people. In the Gospels, we read of the Lord being anointed with fragrant oil on the head and

feet. Such ointments refreshed the person who was applied with them, and the fragrance also refreshed those around him. These, then are the functions of fragrant ointments – they heal, they soothe and they refresh.

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are healed of the wounds inflicted by sins. Sins caused us so much trouble, wounding us in every way, and troubled our conscience. We struggled over our sins until we finally came to find rest in the Lord Jesus Christ. The hymn writers like to portray Jesus Christ as the One who heals us of our wounds by His blood, which was shed on the cross of Calvary. For example, we sing:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Loose all their guilty stains.
(William Cowper, 1731-1800)*

This, of course, does not mean that we become completely free from sins. It simply means we are forgiven of all our sins and we can draw strength from Christ to fight against remaining sins.

Then, secondly, Christ soothes us in our pain when we are persecuted for our faith. If we are not outrightly persecuted, we often have to exercise self-denial for the Lord's sake, which causes us to smart and shed tears in secret. We deny ourselves willingly, and give up our rights for the good of others, in Christ's name. This is when we realize that the Lord "put our tears in His bottle", as the Psalmist says (Ps. 56:8). He knows that we do all these for His sake. It is because our hearts are overflowing with gratitude for the salvation found in Him. Mary Magdalene showed forth her gratitude to the Lord by anointing Him with fragrant oil. She wept tears of gratitude and love. We know that nothing we do can make up for the salvation given to us in Christ, but we would still deny ourselves for the Lord's sake. Do we still have that love for the Lord? We do not want our hearts to grow cold.

Then, thirdly, remember that our Lord often refreshes us spiritually so that we are strengthened and made able to bear up with trials. There are trials that come to us because of our faith. There are also trials that we share in common with the fallen human race. Just

as others suffer because of tsunami, earthquakes, economic crises, or accidents of various kinds, so too we suffer with them due to our common humanity. The Lord will draw near to His people and strengthen them in the midst of such trials. He fulfills His promise never to leave His people or to forsake them. His word, in the Bible, refreshes our souls.

We see now these three ways by which the Lord helps us in difficult circumstances – like the fragrance of various ointments, He heals our wounds, soothes our pain, and refreshes our weariness. Note, however, that there is one ointment that is singled out for mention, namely His name. Let us consider the name of Jesus Christ. A name conjures up the person of that name. It reminds us of who he is, what he is like, and what he means to us. When we think of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are actually thinking of who He is and what He is like. We remember that He is the Son of God who had come to the world by taking upon Himself perfect human nature. We think of His attributes such as His eternity, His power, and His glory. We remember that He is holy, righteous, just, and pure. We remember that He loves His people and had come to give of Himself to them.

Then, we are reminded that His name speaks of His authority and fame. Before His ascension, the Lord declared that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him (Matt. 28:18). He laid down His life voluntarily for His people, and He took it up again. We know that He is risen from the dead and is seated down “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3), an expression which speaks of His power and His glory. Do you know where the Lord is now, and what He is doing? The Scripture tells us that He is in heaven, interceding for His people on earth. He rules over the universe, even though the world fails to recognize Him as Lord. The day will come when everyone will bow his knees to Jesus Christ and acknowledge that He is Lord and God. That day will certainly come!

You see how “the name of the Lord” speaks of His power and His fame. In the Old Testament time, Moses was given fame by God such that the pagan nations feared him and his God. At the mere mention of Moses’s name, the nations trembled and were as good as conquered, even before the Israelites arrived to attack them (Deut. 2:25). The same happened to Joshua when he took over the leadership from Moses. God gave Joshua fame such that the Amorite tribes were disarmed by fear even before he arrived (Josh. 6:27;

9:9). David was similarly feared by the enemies (Ps. 18:43-45). The same thing is happening today – the nations of the world fear the name of Jesus Christ. Before the fall of communism in Russia, the authorities persecuted the Christians severely. They hated the Christians, and they feared the name of Christ. The same thing happened in China, and continues to an extent. The Muslim nations are particularly fearful of the spread of the Christian faith in their midst. The orthodox Jews in Israel are fiercely antagonistic toward the Christians. Even the so-called free countries of the West are agitating for the removal and exclusion of any Christian values and teaching in the public schools and other institutions.

Christ is feared by the nations! He is the captain of our salvation. He leads us into spiritual battles, to overcome sins in our lives, and to conquer the strongholds of Satan by the preaching of the gospel. The Lord is building His church, and the gates of Hades cannot prevail against it. With Christ leading us in the battles, we are sure of victory. Every time we are faced with apparent setbacks, let us remember that we are serving in the army of the Lord. You see now that the name of Jesus Christ conjures up these ideas in our mind. It speaks to us of His person, His attributes, His authority and His fame. So, when we desire Christ, that desire is focused upon His person.

Based on His redemptive work

The third point is that our desire for Christ is based on His redemptive work. In verse 4, the bride says, “Draw me away!” She recognizes that the groom must draw her; otherwise she will not come. The maids-in-waiting respond to the bride by saying, in verse 4, “We will run after you.” The “you” here is in the masculine singular sense, referring to the groom. This means that all Christians, and those who are attached to the church, will be drawn to Christ only if they are drawn by Him. Do you find this doctrine strange? You shouldn’t, because this is part-and-parcel of the gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ says, in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him ...” Also, in John 12:32, we have, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself.” This shows that God must draw us, otherwise we will not come to Him. Christ must call us, otherwise we will not follow Him. Our sinful nature has such a hold on us that we are unable, of ourselves, to desire the

things of God, much less to desire God Himself. And we certainly are not able to repent and believe in Christ for salvation. God must enable us by the power of His Spirit, as we hear His word, so that we are drawn to Christ for salvation. We recognize the truth that salvation is totally of the Lord. We also realize that God does not save us by forcing us into His kingdom. Instead, He draws by transforming us, by the power of His Spirit, so that we willingly come to Him.

This “drawing” is not only unto salvation, but also to communion with Christ. In the Old Testament, no one could enter “the holiest of holy” in the temple, which was cut off from the inner court of worship by the heavy curtain, or veil. Only the high priest could enter it once a year, after making atonement for his own sins by offering up animal sacrifices. The holiest of holy was the place where God was symbolically present. Human beings were too impure to be allowed into the holy presence of God. When the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, the veil in the temple of Jerusalem was torn into two, from top to bottom. This was a way of declaring that sinners who trust in Jesus Christ may now come directly into the presence of God, for Christ has made that possible. By His death on the cross, He paid for the punishment of sins that should rightly have fallen on us. By faith in Christ, we are reckoned to be righteous so that God accepts us as His children. We are therefore encouraged to draw near to our Father in heaven, in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ. We draw near to God in prayer, knowing that we will be accepted by Him because Christ makes intercession for us in heaven as our High Priest. Ye, we draw near, not just to the Father, but to Christ, both in prayer and in the reading of Scriptures, knowing that Christ loves His people and delights in them!

We read further, “The king has brought me into his chambers. We will be glad and rejoice in you.” Since the Lord delights in His people, He draws us near to Him. The believer may come to Christ directly, without the need to go through human priests, or angels, or men as intermediaries. We can go right into His presence without fear of rejection, and without fear of punishment. Remember how Queen Esther once made bold to enter into the presence of the king without his prior consent. She risked being rejected, and being punished with death, until the king stretched forth his scepter to her to indicate his acceptance of her. In Christ, we have been made clean, and we are clothed in His righteousness. He treats us as precious

children, and draws us near to Himself.

The “you” in this verse is in the feminine singular, showing that it is a reference to the bride. The maids-in-waiting are happy for the bride and recognize how privileged she is to be able to draw near to the groom. In the same way, many people acknowledge how blessed Christians are although they would not come to Christ, at least not at the moment. We know of people who would encourage others to go to church because they can see the good in Christians. Many non-Christian parents encourage their sons and daughters to seek for life partners in church, realizing that Christians make good husbands and wives. We know that that is going to church for the wrong reason, but it is nevertheless true that the blessedness of Christians are noticed by non-believers and those who are seeking the truth. So, here, we have the maids-in-waiting – representing the friends and relatives we bring to church, the seekers after the truth, and the new believers we have been helping – admiring the work of God in our lives.

We might mistakenly think that, in this passage, only the bride draws near to the groom, while the maids-in-waiting observe from a distance. The next two sentences show us the true situation: “We will remember your love more than wine. Rightly do they love you.” Here, the words “your” and “you” are in the masculine singular, showing that they are references to the groom, and therefore to Christ. The maids-in-waiting share in the love of the groom. The bride is not alone with the groom, but is accompanied by the maids-in-waiting. As she seeks the groom, she brings her friends to him, introducing him to them, so that they, too, benefit from him. This is the picture of the believer seeking communion with Christ and in the process, bringing others to know Him and to share in His blessings.

Note another thing, namely that the word “love” is in the plural, as in verse 2. It is a reference to the many blessings that come to us from the Lord – the blessings of love, joy, peace, hope, comfort, help, and much more! Just as a parent is indulgent towards his or her child, Christ wants to bless us with abundance of blessings. He will not spoil us, but He gives us all good gifts for our good. In contrast to “wine”, which symbolizes the pleasures and attractions of the world, the believer values the blessings of Christ far more.

Finally, note that the word “rightly” should be translated as “the righteous” or “the upright”. The sentence should read, “The righ-

teous ones love you.” Check this out in the original language, and you will see that this is true. Put all these facts together, and you will find that those who understand the passage as teaching the physical love relationship between the bride and the groom have missed the point all together. The passage is teaching us spiritual truths that are consistent with the overall teaching of the Bible. Jesus Christ died for His people. By the preaching and hearing of the gospel, He draws people to Himself. Those who are His draw near to Him to commune with Him and to enjoy His many spiritual blessings.

We see, in summary, how Christians should desire Christ. We desire Christ because of His love for us. We desire Christ for who He is. We also desire Christ based on His redemptive work. Loving Christ, and desiring Him, is not mere sentimentalism. If you claim to love Christ, do you seek to commune with Him? Is your love intelligent? Is it based on truth?

2.2 Why Desire For Christ (vv. 5-7)

Christ has made us righteous

We have covered verses 1 to 4, from which we learn how Christians should desire after Christ. We come now to the second section of the message, covering verses 5 to 7, from which we learn why Christians should desire for Christ. Again, we shall draw out three main points. The first reason why we should desire Christ is that He has made us righteous. We read in verse 5, “I *am* dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.” We must note from the outset that this has nothing to do with ethnicity. It is a happy fact that the Bible makes it very clear salvation is offered to all, regardless of ethnic background. What we have here is the description of the bride who is sun-tanned to such an extent that she appears dark and weather-beaten. This is made clear by the first part of verse 6, which reads, “Do not look upon me, because I *am* dark, because the sun has tanned me.” Those who are born and raised in urban areas might not grasp this immediately, but those in rural settings, who have to be out under the sun much, will appreciate this straightaway. Rural folk, who have to be in the farm much, are often darker than what they otherwise would be and their skins are often rough and thick – of the texture we would describe as weather-

beaten. Often, at first glance, you would think them older than what they actually are.

Here, then, is the description of the bride of herself. She is conscious of her darkness, but also aware of her natural beauty. That beauty would have been overlooked by many, but Solomon had spotted it when he found her. Now that she has come to know Solomon, and been betrothed to him, she is able to look her best despite the lingering darkness of her skin. She is recounting her recent past, and explaining her present blessedness. It is the picture of the sinner who is found by Christ, and has come to believe in Him. He is by nature sinful and unrighteous, with nothing to commend before God. Yet, the Lord has come to search for him, wooed him by the gospel, and won his love so that he willingly follows Him. Such a believer knows that he is loved by God, and made lovely by the righteousness of Christ imputed to him.

While the world fails to see anything beautiful or attractive in the Christian, the Lord loves him and has made him beautiful in God's sight. By and large, the world sees only the ugly side of the church, although we do come across those who admire the beauty of character in Christians, as we have noted earlier. Occasionally, they may acknowledge that Christians have many admirable qualities, but they would still shy away from them for fear of being won over to their faith. Or, more accurately, they love their sinful ways of life and find it hard to follow after Christ. When the tsunami occurred in Asia in recent years, followed by a series of earthquakes, Christians had been among the first to give tangible aid to the victims. Christians gave generously and were involved in practical ways, to help in the disaster areas. While many non-governmental organizations and the local authorities have largely withdrawn from providing aid, churches are still doing so. Despite this, the world at large forgets quickly and would prefer to look upon the church as ugly. But what does it matter if God loves us and regards us as beautiful? Yes, we are not yet made perfect while on earth, but we are a people being prepared for heaven. The world sees the church as rough and dark as "the tents of Kedar", which were made with goat-skins, but God looks upon her as beautiful and attractive, like the curtains that adorned Solomon's palace.

The blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us of all our filth, and we stand righteous in God's sight. We are regarded as holy by God, and

are well-loved by our Lord.

Christ has redeemed us from bondage

The second reason why we should desire the Lord is that He has redeemed us from the bondage of sin. The bride in this story had been exploited by her half-brothers, who sent her out into the fields, under the hot sun, to tend their vineyards. It appears that the siblings had been distributed their respective plots of land since the death of their father, and each had to take care of his own vineyard. The half-brothers of the bride, however, hated her and made her take care of their plots of land. She had been unable to take care of her own vineyard, much less her well-being and her looks. Before our conversion, we were with the people of the world, engaged in worldly pursuits. We harmed ourselves and neglected our own interests, failing to cultivate good values and good character. We were drawn away by the forces of the world. That was what we were like. When converted, we discovered there are remaining sins that trouble us from within, at the same time that the world jeers and taunts us from without.

The struggle with remaining sins is described in Romans 7:15, “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.” Then, in verses 21 to 24, “I find then a law, that evil is present within me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” This is the cry of a converted person. He is struggling with remaining sins. He wants to live a holy life. Before conversion, there was no such desire in him but now things are different. He has been forgiven all his sins, and he has peace with God. The new nature in him causes him to desire to live in a way that is pleasing to God. But while in this world, he has to struggle with remaining sins. He will be made perfect only when he arrives in heaven. Remaining sins may have the occasional victory but, overall, the believer is able to put to death those sins. In other words, sin no longer reigns over his life. Although he cries out, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” he can also say truthfully, “I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 7:25)!”

Apart from struggling with sins within us, there are the trials and temptations from without. This is where we must be careful. We are redeemed from bondage to sin, and we need not succumb to sins anymore. Yet, the danger of falling back into the ways of the world is there. The people of the world treated you as a friend only when you were one with them – sharing in their liberal values and godless way of life. But when converted, you became the butt of their jokes and the object of their hatred. Their patronizing respect and flattering words can hardly hide their disdain for you. We are not taken in by the hypocrisy of the world. There are believers who have not been careful, and along the way have become weary of holding up the faith. It is as though the constant taunt and temptation of the world have worn them out. They decide to give in to the ways of the world and, in fact, begin to relish in their past ways of life. We are not saying that Christians have to live a stoic and joyless life, for there are legitimate enjoyments that God has given to us. “The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Ps. 24:1).” But that is quite different from enjoying the world in an ungodly way. You know what that is. If you have succumbed, you will not be a happy person. You are made for better things. You will regain peace of mind, and joy in the Spirit, only when you repent from your backsliding. Do not allow the pressures of the world make you conform to it. Do not be drawn away by its allurements. Do not be the keeper of the world’s vineyard, and your own vineyard you do not keep.

Christ has transformed us

We must move on to the third, and last, point – we should desire the Lord because He has transformed us into new people. The picture before us changes so that the groom, who was earlier portrayed as a king, is now portrayed as a shepherd. He has many under-shepherds – his “companions” – working for him. The under-shepherds take care of the many flocks of sheep, yet all the sheep may be regarded as one flock, for they belong to the groom alone. Sheep needs green pasture, and they need shade when the sun is up. The shepherds who work under the chief shepherd, who is the groom, will ensure that all the sheep have ample to eat and drink. They will also ensure that no sheep is exposed to the discomfort of the hot sun, and possibly die. It would seem that the bride was herself a shepherdess,

having to take care of her brothers' sheep. We are told, in any case, in verse 8, that she had some young goats with her. So, apart from tending their vineyards, she also had to tend their sheep. She had to veil herself, out of modesty, but also to protect herself from the sun. Here, she expresses her desire to be close to the groom, and to bring her flock of sheep to feed together with his sheep, and find shelter together with them. She does not want to struggle on her own, by the fringes of the flocks taken care of by the under-shepherds, as a virtual stranger.

This is the desire of converted people – they want to be where the Lord is, and they want to be among His sheep. They know that in the Lord's presence, and in the midst of His sheep, there is abundance of food. This speaks of the blessing of hearing God's word preached, and being refreshed by the fellowship of the saints. Believers also know that they are safe when they keep close to the Lord. They feel comforted by His presence, even if the sun is blazing hot. We are referring to persecution and trials that come to Christians. You would remember how the three friends of the prophet Daniel were thrown into the fiery furnace, and a fourth character appeared in the furnace to sustain them. When the king called out to them, they came out of the furnace unharmed. But where was the fourth character? He had disappeared. Who was he? He was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ! The Lord had appeared as Man on many occasions in the Old Testament times. He continues to come near His people to protect them and to comfort them in the heat of persecution. It may not be His will that everyone of His children remain unharmed in any persecution, but He will certainly be close to them to comfort and strengthen them, even in the face of death.

You see now why believers desire to be near to Christ. It is because they have been transformed into sheep. They are no more goats. Their nature is being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. They delight in the things of God, in the company of God's people, and the hearing of God's word. They do not want to remain on the fringes of God's people, seeing them enjoy the Lord's presence and the abundance of His blessing, while missing out on these themselves. They do not want to be in a church where sentimental music and carnal entertainment have replaced the rich pasture of God's word. And they certainly would not choose the company of worldly people instead of God's people. Why choose

to remain at the door when you can come into the banquet hall? Why see fellow Christians enjoy the blessings of the Lord while you nurse your imagined wounds and sulk in loneliness? Come to the Lord! Come into the presence of His people! Don't go hungry and remain lonely when there is abundance of food and fellowship to be enjoyed.

2.3 Conclusion

We must now summarize what we have learned. In the first section, we learn how Christians should desire Christ. Our desire for Christ should arise from His love for us, be focussed on His person, and be based on His redemptive work. In the second section, we learn why Christians should desire Christ. We should desire Him because He has made us righteous, redeemed us from our sins, and transformed us into new people. Now that these have been made clear, we ask, "Should we not desire Christ more in our lives?" Imagine a stream that flows to become a river. Trace the river to its source and you will discover that it begins with trickles of water that gather together more and more to form streams. The streams join so that the water flows faster and faster, cascading down the rapids to become a fast-flowing river. As the river moves into the valley, it slows down and become calmer. The volume of water, however, is bigger and the depth of the river is greater. This is like our Christian life. When first converted, we taste the Lord's goodness and begin to appreciate His love. There is more zeal and excitement, as we learn and grow in the spiritual life. We then pass through the midstream of faith, when we are tested, sometimes severely, while we become more productive and effective in our service to God. Then, we arrive at the sunset years of our lives. Our zeal may appear to be less, but it is compensated by the greater depth and appreciation of spiritual experience. We certainly do not want to go astray, as has happened to some in the later years of their lives. There is no need for us to go astray. We want to stay close to our Lord. We want to know Him better, and we desire Him above all else.

How may we stay close to the Lord, and remain fresh in our relationship with Him? First, resolve to want Christ above all else. Second, remember with gratitude what we are now compared to

what we were when unconverted. Third, reach out for Him – in faith, in prayer, and in His word – to know Him more deeply.

1:7-17

Shulamite to Solomon

7 Tell me, O you whom I love,
Where you feed *your flock*,
Where you make *it* rest at noon.
For why should I be as one who veils herself
By the flocks of your companions?

Solomon to Shulamite

8 If you do not know, O fairest among women,
Follow in the footsteps of the flock
And feed your little goats
Beside the shepherds' tents.
9 I have compared you, my love,
To my filly among Pharaoh's chariots.
10 Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,
Your neck with chains of *gold*.

Daughters of Jerusalem to Shulamite

11 We will make you ornaments of gold
With studs of silver.

Shulamite

12 While the king *is* at his table,
My spikenard sends forth its fragrance.
13 A bundle of myrrh *is* my beloved to me,
That lies all night between my breasts.
14 My beloved is to me a cluster of henna *blooms*
In the vineyards of En Gedi.

Solomon to Shulamite

15 Behold, you *are* fair, my love!
Behold, you *are* fair!
You *have* dove's eyes.

Shulamite to Solomon

16 Behold, you *are* **fair**, my beloved!

Yes, pleasant!

Also our **couch** *is* green.

17 The beams of our houses *are* cedar,

And our rafters of fir.

Three

Longing For Christ

We have studied the first seven verses of Chapter 1 of the Song of Solomon, under the title, “Desiring Christ.” The church, or the believer, desires Christ above all the attractions – above the “wine” – of the world. We have learned that the desire of the believer for Christ arises from the love of Christ for him; that it is focussed on Christ’s person; and that it is based on His redemptive work. We have also learned why we should desire Christ. There are three reasons – first, it is because Christ has made us righteous; second, it is because Christ has redeemed us from the bondage of sin; and third, it is because Christ has transformed us into new people.

We wish to develop this last point – as a transformed people, we long for Christ, who has gone to heaven to prepare a place for His people. Remember that we are betrothed to Christ and, as His bride, we await His return to take us to be with Him. Meanwhile, we long for Him, knowing that He loves us and we have been enabled to love Him. Here, we consider our longing for Christ, under two sections, each of which consisting of three main points.

3.1 Seeking Communion With Christ (vv. 7-8)

Seeking Christ in His word

In the first section, covering verse 7-8, we have “seeking communion with Christ”. A true believer would seek communion with Jesus Christ. He wants to be with Christ, to talk to Him, and to hear what

He has to say. This arises from love for Christ, who has first loved him. Christ laid down His life to save unworthy and unlovely people. He took our punishment upon Himself so that we may be spared the wrath of God. He died in the place of His people in order that they may have eternal life. We who have been spared eternal damnation from God, who have been forgiven all our sins, who have been reckoned righteous in God's sight, love our Lord because He has given of Himself to us. We seek fellowship with Christ out of love for Him, even though we know that our love is so imperfect.

This, in fact, is a test of whether or not you are a true Christian. Often, we are asked, "Don't you think I am a Christian?" The question shows uncertainty in the person, quite apart from the tone of defensiveness. That often arises from a wrong understanding of what it means to be a Christian. True Christianity is not about going to church, carrying a Bible on you, or using "Christian language". True Christianity is not about what you must do, or what you must not do. Christians do behave in a certain way but, from the point of principles, that is a secondary matter. The primary thing is that he has been transformed by the power of God and, for that reason, he lives in a certain way. His behaviour is motivated by love for Jesus Christ, his Lord and Saviour. You may know whether you are a true Christian by asking if you love Jesus Christ out of a living relationship with Him. Are you trusting in Christ for acceptance before God? Are your sins forgiven by God? Are you grateful to Christ for what He has done for you? True believers love Christ because they are grateful to Him for His love. They, therefore, seek communion with Christ.

How would a Christian seek communion with Christ? Verse 7 says, "Tell me, O you whom I love, where you feed *your flock*, where you make *it* rest at noon. For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of your companions?" These are the words of the bride. She knows that the groom is the chief shepherd, who has many under-shepherds working for him. She would like to take her goats to feed with his flock, for she knows that he feeds his flock well, in the place of green pasture. This is the picture of the believer desiring the word of God. It is as we feed on God's word that we are nourished spiritually. It is as we come to His word that we meet with our Saviour and have sweet communion with Him. A person who is born again would desire the word of God, in the same way

that a baby would take to milk. This is one test of your love for the Lord. Do you seek Him in His word? Do you seek out His people who feed upon His word? A person who is in love will want to be near to the one he or she loves, so that the beloved's words may be heard. We love the Lord. We desire to hear His voice. We, therefore, seek out the church where the Bible is faithfully preached. His word strengthens and comforts us.

Seeking Christ in the company of His people

Next, the believer would show forth his love for the Lord by seeking Him in the company of His people. When we find His people, we want to be with them, and be part of them. We do not want to remain on the fringes, without joining the flock. The bride expresses this truth by saying, "For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of your companions?" A Christian may have many good friends who are unconverted. We value their friendship and would not despise our friends. But our ultimate company is with God's people. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are the ones who share with us the same faith in Christ, who love His word, who have the same values. Many benefits accrue from being with God's people. Fellowship strengthens our faith. Fellowship shields us from dangers which tend to befall individuals. We are able to do more in fellowship with God's people, compared to serving God alone. Let us consider each of these benefits in turn.

Fellowship edifies us. No one can live on his own for long. You may think that you have been able to live alone when, in reality, you have gone out to interact with others occasionally. In Asian cultures, a woman who has given birth to a baby is kept confined to her room for a month. Such confinement is hard to bear, let alone isolation from other people. It is even harder for one who is detained under one of those repressive laws still found in many countries. In such solitary confinement, you are deprived of contact with anyone, except to be taken out occasionally, at odd hours, to be interrogated. You have no access to the news, no reading or writing material, and no means of telling the time, except from the meals brought to you. Those are the tactics calculated to disorientate you and to break you down psychologically so that it is easier to extract information from you. Human beings need people around them. Those who keep to themselves are unhappy people. We are not saying that everything

will be fine if you interact with people. Indeed, problems often arise, causing us much stress, heartaches and disappointments. However, as a general rule, human beings are happier when they interact with others. The person who keeps to himself will appear grim, become unhappy, and turn bitter in the heart. Conversely, fellowship between believers edifies the soul, what more with the blessing of God upon it!

Fellowship also shields us from dangers that tend to come to individuals who keep to themselves. The devil's temptation is strongly felt when one is left alone for long. It is almost like a pack of harmless zebra being hunted by a pride of lions. The lions would chase after the pack, isolate the straggling zebra, and finally pounce to kill. It is not God's will for you to live the life of faith in isolation from other believers. We are saved individually when the gospel came to us but once saved, we are meant to integrate with a local church. Otherwise, there will be no one to admonish you when you begin to go astray. You will not be able to sustain a warm zeal for the Lord for long. Like a piece of burning amber, you need others to be around you in order to burn well. David was alone when he fell into sin (2 Sam. 11:2).

Then, fellowship helps us to accomplish more in our service to God. The Bible compares the church with the human body, which is made up of many parts – the arms, the legs, the eyes and ears. We need one another. This is especially true in an age when so many things require specialized knowledge. It is impossible to do everything well just by yourself. Even if you are very talented, you will not be able to accomplish quite as much as when you work together with others in the church. So, fellowship is essential not only for your own good, and not only for your own protection, but it is also in order to be positively useful. That being the case, it is unthinkable that we should isolate ourselves and not be integrated with a good church somewhere. The Lord has promised to be present where two or more of His disciples are gathered in His name. He will be found where His people are gathered to worship Him. When you find a good church, do not remain on the fringes, observing all that is happening while being left out. It is such a pity that you should feel unwanted, sad, and marginalized when all you need to do is to be joined to the church.

Imagine a child lost in the crowd, who seeks out the parent on

hearing his or her voice. The child comes near but still cannot see the parent, who is hidden by the crowd around him. It would be a happy ending if the child is finally reunited with the parent. But what if the parent moves on, calling out for the child, not knowing he was so near? You do not want to be in the midst of people who love the Lord, who have the word of God faithfully preached in their midst, who are so filled with joy in the Holy Spirit, and yet not be part of them. We are talking about joining the church as a believer. But the same principle applies in salvation. Before joining the church, you need to be saved. You do not want to come right to the gates of heaven, and yet remain outside it. Why remain outside the banquet hall, when you could have come in to join the feast? Why know the way of salvation in Jesus Christ, and yet not trust Him to save you?

Response from Christ

We are to seek communion with Christ through His word, and in the fellowship of His people. What may we expect as we do that? Christ will draw near and begin to commune with us. We are seeking Him in the right way, and in the right place. His word will begin to speak to us, and we will begin to sense His presence in the company of His people. Verse 8 says, “If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock ...” We note, here, how Christ looks upon the church. The church sees herself as unworthy of the love of the Lord for, she said, “I am dark ... the sun has tanned me ... my mother’s sons were angry with me ... my own vineyard I have not kept (verse 5-6).” This, as we have seen, was the state of the believer before he was saved. He was unlovely, miserable and unable to improve his own situation. But things changed when Christ came to seek him out, to call him to Himself, and to clothe him in His own righteousness. The believer is washed clean in the blood of Christ, and forgiven all his guilt by God the Father. He becomes a member of the kingdom of God, a member of the body of Christ. He is loved by Christ, for Christ loves His people – the church. The church is addressed as “fairest among women”, showing that the believer is well-loved by Christ. The world may continue to despise us, or to think nothing of us, but we are precious in the sight of Christ.

It is no wonder that Christ will draw near to the believer who seeks for Him. His direction to His people is, “Follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds’ tents.”

Go where the sheep have gone, follow after the well-trodden paths. Do not go where the wolves and the lions are found. Keep to the time-tested paths of past generations of Christians. We are reminded of the words of Jeremiah 6:16, "Thus says the LORD: "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls.'" There is only one good way, namely the way of "salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone". Earlier generations of Christians have sought the Lord and found Him. We do not need the novel ways invented by the present generations of ill-taught Christians. We want to follow the old paths of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We want the old paths of Moses, Samson, and the heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11. We want to follow the paths of the Reformers and the Puritans. We believe that they have found the good way of salvation, and of communion with the Lord. We will find the Lord by following where the Lord's sheep have trodden.

We will bring our little goats to feed beside the shepherds' tents. We will bring our friends and relatives, our neighbours and colleagues, to the places where the word of God is faithfully expounded by His servants. Yes, in an age of apostasy, there are still faithful preachers and faithful churches to be found. We will go to hear the word of God in such churches, from such preachers. We do not want to expose our unconverted friends to the entertainment and the wrong teachings found in so many churches that have gone astray. Rather, we want them to hear God's word faithfully expounded. There, the Lord will meet with them, and transform at least some of them from goats into sheep. There, we will meet our Lord and be refreshed by Him.

3.2 [Entering Into Communion With Christ \(vv. 9-17\)](#)

Assurance from the Lord

Under the section, "Seeking Communion With Christ", we learn that we must seek Him in His word, and we must seek Him in the company of His people. As we do so we expect Him to meet with us. We move on to the second section, which is "Entering Into Communion With Christ". The Lord not only draws near to give us directions how

to find Him, but He comes to meet with us spiritually. The first thing He does is to assure us that we are precious in His sight. It says, in verses 9 to 10, “I have compared you, my love, to my filly among Pharaoh’s chariots. Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with chains *of gold*.” This is the Lord’s assessment of His people: they are beautiful, precious and of great worth. Solomon used to trade in chariots and horses with Egypt. We read in 1 Kings 10:28-29, “Also Solomon had horses imported from Egypt and Keveh; the king’s merchants bought them in Keveh at the *current* price. Now a chariot that was imported from Egypt cost six hundred *shekels* of silver, and a horse one hundred and fifty; and thus, through their agents, they exported *them* to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Syria.” Solomon traded only in the best horses which were of special breed, to pull the chariots in war. The horses were decorated with ornaments and gold chains hung around their necks. The leather straps around them were decorated with gold and silver studs. The chariots could be regarded as equivalent to the tanks of today. They were highly valued in battle. Just as you would buy a car that is good, safe and of high quality, the chariots and horses had to be of high quality. So, what is being said of the bride is that she is lovely, of great worth, and highly valued.

We have seen how Christ’s blood cleanses His people of all sins, and how His righteousness imputed upon them is the basis of God’s acceptance of them. God looks upon His children as lovely in the righteousness of Christ. Furthermore, the fruit of the Spirit is seen more and more in their lives – fruit such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These qualities adorn the lives of God’s children, making them attractive, even to the unconverted around them. Added to these are the various gifts, or talents, bestowed upon believers to make them useful in God’s service. You see now how believers are looked upon as truly precious in the Lord’s sight. Here, it is not the perception of believers concerning themselves, but what Christ perceives them to be. The words of Christ come to us with such power to comfort and assure us. Others around us will notice that we are being blessed by the Lord. In fact, they will be used of the Lord to be a blessing to us. Verses 11 says, “We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver.”

Engaging in personal devotion

We come to the second point under this second section of our message. Christ has assured us of His acceptance as we draw near to Him. We now pray to Him, remembering that He is in heaven, and we are on earth. Of course, He is with us by His Spirit, but our Saviour, the God-Man, is in heaven. The King is in His palace, waiting to return and take us to be with Him. Verse 12 says, "While the king is at his table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance."

Meanwhile, we prepare ourselves for our wedding day – the day of the Lord's return. Every bride will beautify herself for her wedding day. How do Christians prepare themselves for Christ's return? We do so by engaging in deep personal devotions. Here, the bride beautifies herself with a fragrant oil called spikenard. This is the symbol of the prayer of believers, which rises up to heaven. In the Old Testament, herbs were added to the animal sacrifices to produce an aroma which rose up to God in heaven. Today, we do not offer up animal sacrifices, for Christ has offered up Himself as the perfect sacrifice for His people. We may, therefore, draw near to God in prayer based on the finished work of Christ. We also sing praises to our Lord, which is our act of devotion to Him. Do you pray often? Do you sing praises to the Lord?

We also engage in meditation in our personal devotion. A lover who misses her beloved will think of him much. Since we love our Lord, we think of Him much. We can think rightly of Him only if we have biblical views of Him. We need to read the word of God, hear the word preached, and ponder upon the truths of Scripture often. Scripture points us to Christ, showing us His attributes, and telling us what He has accomplished for us. It reminds us of His many promises to His people. We meditate on these things. This is pictured by the bride keeping a bundle of myrrh on her breast, which indicates closeness to her heart. It says in verse 13, "A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, that lies all night between my breasts." The myrrh tree produced a gum which was bitter to the taste but had a pleasant fragrance. It was used in liquid or solid form. Here, the bride seems to have put some myrrh gum in a cloth pouch which she hangs around her neck. That way, she is constantly reminded of her beloved, even when she is falling asleep at night. Night is the time of rest from the day's activities. It represents the time of leisure that we have, even though it might not be literally night yet. It can

also represent the times of sorrow, disappointment, and bleakness. We long for the presence of our loved one at such times. Such is the love of the bride for the groom. Do you love the Lord? Do you spend time meditating on Him?

Meditating on our Lord helps us to see things in perspective. We are told in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatever things *are* true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.” We are often burdened and stressed out by the things that happen to us. We are unable to sleep well, with the result that it shows on our faces. Disappointments from interactions with people cause such stress that sleep eludes us. This is when we must learn to commit everything to our Lord. This is when meditation on things that are true, noble, and pure will help us. The Lord knows our situations, He knows what we are facing, and He cares about us. We must learn to meditate on these truths. We must think much of Him.

We pray to our Lord and praise Him. We meditate on Him, especially at night – whether it is literally night or when we are downcast. There is a third way we exercise our personal devotion – we worship and serve our Lord. The bride is now in the vineyards of En Gedi. We are told, in verse 14, “My beloved is to me a cluster of henna *blossoms* in the vineyards of En Gedi.” En Gedi was located in the territory of Judah. It was a well-watered place, whose fertile vineyards produced good grapes. We are told, in Chapter 8, verse 11, “Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon; he leased the vineyard to keepers; everyone was to bring for its fruit a thousand silver coins.” King Solomon was a rich land owner, who leased out his vineyards. Vineyards speak to us of our service to God. In the Gospels, the Lord often refers to vineyards in His parables. The parables show how we are to serve God and worship Him. Today, it is quite common to refer to our sphere of service to God as a “corner of God’s vineyard”. Missionaries serve in various corners of God’s vineyard. Each of us has a corner of God’s vineyard to serve in. How important it is to maintain a missionary spirit, even though we are not missionaries in the normal sense of the word! We may each have our own vocation – our own calling in life – but we must make sure that we live for our God, and to His glory.

In church, we worship our God and serve Him in various ways. There are times when we grow weary in our service to Him. Setbacks occur, and disappointments are experienced. Controversies and schisms affect God's people severely. At such times, our feelings are soothed by the remembrance of Christ and His death for us whenever we have the Lord's Supper. We are reminded of, and even rebuked by, our selfishness and narrow perceptions of the problems we face, in the light of what the Lord has done for us. Whenever there is a baptism, our hearts are lifted up to realize that souls are being saved, and the Lord's work is going on, despite our human frailties and lack of faith. The Lord's Supper and baptism are the "henna blooms" that grow beside the rows of vines in the vineyard that we serve in. They refresh our souls and remind us of the Lord's mercies to us. But the "henna blooms" may be something else – they may be answers to prayer, or unusual providences, or a strong sense of the Lord's presence in the midst of difficulties and trials, or when we are weary in our service to God. These are tokens of the Lord's love for His people in their times of need.

You see now the acts of personal devotion we engage in: they include prayer and praise to our Lord, meditation upon Him and His word, and persevering in the sphere of service He has given to each of us.

We have covered two main points under this second section of our message – assurance from the Lord and engaging in personal devotions. We come to the third, and last, point under this section, namely, reveling in Christ's love.

Reveling in Christ's love

The interaction between the believer and his Lord appears remote and alternating, at first, as though the conversation is through the telephone line: one speaks while the other listens, the other speaks and the one listens. It then becomes more intimate and interactive, as though the two parties have met face to face, and are now enjoying each other's presence. This is to be expected in our relationship with our Lord. As we seek communion with Him, we soon enter into communion with Him. As we draw near to the Lord, the Lord draws near to us. In verse 15, the groom now says, "Behold, you *are* fair, my love! Behold, you *are* fair! You *have* dove's eyes." We have seen how the Lord loves His people and regards them as beau-

tiful, although the world does not appreciate them. We have been reminded time and again that this is due to the grace of God, shown to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ has done everything needful to make us righteous in God's sight. We have been blessed with the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. We are precious to the Lord.

Now, the Lord affirms His love for His people. The groom tells the bride that she is beautiful. He repeats His praise, showing that He means what He says. It also shows that He finds satisfaction in the bride. Her eyes are singled out for mention. He says, "*You have dove's eyes.*" This tells us two things, namely that the eyes are bright, and they are gentle. The brightness of intelligence is seen in the believer because he or she is enlightened by the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture. Many are those who read God's word but do not understand the spiritual meaning. They think they have understood, but theirs is an academic or intellectual understanding of the words they have read. However, when the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind, the word of God affects his soul. It stirs his inner self, and brings conviction of spiritual realities. The believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit from the time he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has a spiritual understanding of God's word when he reads, or hears, it.

Then, the "dove's eyes" speak of the docility, or gentleness, of spirit in the believer. The dove is different from the eagle, which is a bird of prey. Look at the eyes of an eagle, and you will see that there is a certain aggression in the creature. It is as though the bird has no fear of others, and it is ready to pounce on its prey. Some individuals may have eyes that appear to be fierce, cunning, and even cruel. However, we are not dealing with looks but with the character of the person. If we were to judge a person by mere external looks we might be wrong in our judgement. Furthermore, God's Spirit can transform any rough character such that when we meet him, we know that he is a trophy of God's grace. He is a believer who shows forth the graces and gifts of the Spirit in his life. We are humbled by the works of grace in the lives of individuals. We, in the first place, did not deserve the love of God, much less the salvation He has given to us. Yet that is the truth – God has saved us, and we are well loved by Him. Here, the Lord expresses His love for His people. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah, concerning the coming Saviour: "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has

put *Him* to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see *His* seed, He shall prolong *His* days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. He shall see the labour of His soul, *and* be satisfied ... (Isa. 53:10-11)."

It is to be expected that the believer will respond to the Lord. He loved us first, and continues to love us, so that we are able to love Him. The believer expresses his love by praising the Lord for His loveliness, and by appreciating the blessings that come from Him. The bride says, in verse 16, "Behold, you *are* handsome, my beloved! Yes, pleasant!" If you check up on the word translated "handsome", you will find that it is the same word translated "fair" in verse 15. The Lord is fair, or beautiful, in His person, character, and works. We know that our Lord is far fairer than us, and we praise Him for who He is and what He has done. He is the glorious Son of God who came to this world to pay the heavy price – of laying down His life – to save us from our sins.

We also praise the Lord for the things we enjoy, by grace, with Him. The end of verse 16, and verse 17, read, "Also our bed *is* green. The beams of our houses *are* cedar, *and* our rafters of fir." The word translated as "bed" should really be "couch". The couch was where the host of the house would lean on to entertain friends and have a meal together. As Christians serve their Lord, in fellowship with other Christians, the Lord Himself draws near to them. He will fulfill His promise to be in the midst of His people when two or more of them are gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20). The "green" of the couch can mean one of three things: it can mean that its colour is green, or it is made of young wood, or it is flourishing with vitality. The last of these suits the context best. Like a tree that is green, our service to the Lord in fellowship with one another is flourishing, expanding, and growing with vitality. You see now how much you are missing by not serving the Lord in fellowship with other Christians. You might think that you are keeping up well in the faith, and being useful in the Lord's service in some ways, but you are actually missing out on the special blessing of the Lord while working alone.

Next, we must note that the word "houses" is as it should be, according to the original Hebrew. Some versions of the Bible translate the word in the singular, "house", which is not quite right. This is to show that there are many spheres of service that we are involved

in while on earth. Furthermore, we are connected with other believers in *their* spheres of service. We know that it is never good to be involved in everything and, in the end, being unable to accomplish anything well. We do not want “to have a finger in every pie”, as the saying goes. We must know the areas of service God wants us to be in. We must know our gifts, and have a sober assessment of our abilities. Having said that, it remains true that our lives are brightened by the many facets of God’s work on earth. We are enriched by our involvement in the ministries of other Christians. This, also, is an anticipation of the glories of heaven. Life in heaven will not be monotonous and boring. Instead, there will be much that enriches and excites us there. The Lord says, “In My Father’s house are many mansions ... (John 14:2).” The word “mansions” is in the plural, meaning many rooms, or better, apartments. If we take the Father’s house as heaven, we may say there are many dwelling places, separate houses, everywhere. Each of us will have our own sphere of service in heaven, at the same time that we interact, and are enriched, by the spheres of service of other believers.

We come back to our service on earth. The “houses” we share with the Lord have beams of cedar, and rafters of fir. The cedar beams show that the houses are big and spacious. They are able to hold much, and much can be done under their roofs. The rafters of fir show that the houses are permeated with the fragrance of the wood. This is to indicate that we will be refreshed constantly as we serve the Lord. More specifically, we will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what is right and pleasing in God’s sight. There will be many gospel successes, and we will be able to say often, “The Lord has been with us!”

3.3 Conclusion

Let us review what we have learned. In the first section of this message, we learn that we must seek communion with the Lord. We seek communion with Him in His word, and in the company of His people. As we do so, we expect the Lord to respond by giving us instructions, and by encouraging us to draw near to Him. In the second section, we learn of what it is like to enter into communion with Christ. The Lord will draw near to us to assure us of His presence

and of His love for us. We will be induced to engage in personal devotions – by prayer and praise, by meditation upon Him and His word, and by acts of worship and service. We will then be caught up in the love of Christ, exchanging praises and assurances with Him.

There may be much trials and sorrow in the world, but what does it matter if the Lord loves us and is with us? We will continue to stay close to our Lord and serve Him, for in so doing we find a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life. We are storing up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. Let us long for our Lord who is in heaven. Let us seek Him while we are on earth. Let us commune with Him in private devotion as well as in active service.

Part III

THE GOSPEL AGE

2:1-7

Solomon

- 1 I *am* the rose of Sharon, *and* the lily of the valleys.
2 Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

Shulamite

- 3 Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods,
 So *is* my beloved among the sons.
 I sat down in his shade with great delight,
 And his fruit *was* sweet to my taste.
4 He brought me to the banqueting house,
 And his banner over me *was* love.
5 Sustain me with cakes of raisins,
 Refresh me with apples,
 For I *am* lovesick.
6 His left hand *is* under my head,
 And his right hand embraces me.

Solomon

- 7 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
 By the gazelles or by the does of the field,
 Do not stir up nor awaken *my* love until *she* pleases.

Four

The Church At Peace

We have noted that the Song of Solomon is a book of spiritual allegory. As we study the book, we must not be unduly influenced by the divisions and headings added by the translators of the Bible. These have been added to help us in the reading and understanding of the Bible, but they were never part of the word of God. Among the books of the Bible, the headings and divisions of this book are the most misleading.

Chapter 1 of the book focuses on “Communion With Christ”. Chapter 2 is on “Prophecy Of The Gospel Age”. It deals with the age we are living in, long before that age arrived. The chapter shows the church in its state of peace, then the church in its state of militancy. These are two sides of the same coin. From one point of view, the church is at peace with God. Believers are reconciled with God through faith in Jesus Christ. We still have to face the trials, struggles, and difficulties of living the Christian life, but the Lord sustains us and draws near to comfort His people. Then, from another point of view, the church is in a state of militancy. Believers have to face up to their responsibilities, to obey the commands of the Lord, and to serve Him faithfully. Here, we shall cover the church in its state of peace. We shall see how the Lord comforts and strengthens His people.

4.1 The Beauty Of The Church (vv. 1-2)

The person of Jesus Christ

There are three sections to this message. In the first section, covering verses 1 and 2, we consider the beauty of the church. The beauty of the church cannot be considered apart from Jesus Christ, for her beauty is derived from Him. Verse 1 says, “I *am* the rose of Sharon, *and* the lily of the valleys.” Sharon was a place in Judah which had good weather and fertile soil. Plants grew well and sheep grazed on plentiful grass. Sharon was well-known for the roses that grew on the mountain slopes and plateaus, and for the lilies that grew in the valleys. Although there is some controversy over the identity of “the rose of Sharon”, the traditional rose is as good a contender as any other flower proposed. Roses grew well on the drier highlands, while lilies grew well in the wetter valleys. In many parts of the world, we would associate the growing of tea with the highlands. In those days, in Judah, roses and lilies were associated with Sharon. We note, however, that it is not so much the place that we are concerned with, but rather the roses and lilies which grew there. Here, the roses and lilies of Sharon are used to portray the Lord Jesus Christ.

The rose is well-known for its fragrance. As one enters a room in which a rose is placed, he will straightaway detect its fragrance. His eyes will search out where the rose is. The rose is a flower of beauty in its bud and in bloom. It comes in different colours. Today, through selective breeding, we even have the black rose! But let us consider the normal dark-red rose, which stands in the vase in all its beauty and fragrance. Now, if you were to place a lily side by side with it, you will notice that the lily neither diminishes the beauty of the rose nor is the lily overshadowed by the rose. The lily, which is often pink with streaks of red, is a flower of beauty as well. Side by side, the two flowers complement each other. This is to show to us that Jesus Christ is beautiful in His person, character and attributes as God and Man, in one Person. The Son of God existed from eternity in all His glory, power, and holiness. There was a time when He took upon Himself real human nature, but without sin, to live on this earth. He set aside His divine glory, without ceasing to be the eternal Son of God. In the Gospels, we find His glory manifested on certain occasions – such as when He was transfigured on the mountain, and when He used the name of God, “I AM”, which caused

His enemies to fall to the ground. Here, the rose of the highlands represents the divine nature of Jesus Christ, while the lily of the valleys represents His human nature. Jesus Christ is here portrayed as the most exquisite Person, with unsurpassed beauty of character. He is most desirable.

It will be out of place for a normal human being to praise himself. It will bespeak of egoism. It will smack of vanity. But when these words come from the mouth of the Lord, it is perfect. We see no inappropriateness at all. It is “just right” because the perfect Son of God is incapable of egoism, pride, or vanity. It is only right that He portrays Himself as most desirable. He has to reveal Himself to us, otherwise we will not know Him. And when we do not know Him, we will not be saved. And when we are not saved, we will remain in the hopeless state of being under God’s wrath for our sins. We see therefore, that salvation comes with the revelation of God, and the revelation of God focuses on Jesus Christ. He is the One appointed by God to be our Saviour. He laid down His life on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for His people. By His death on the cross, the sins of His people are taken away, their guilt is cancelled. If we repent of our sins and trust in Him for acceptance before God, we are pardoned by God and accepted as righteous. God adopts us as His children, and gives us all spiritual blessings in Christ. You see now what a wonderful thing has been done for us who are so undeserving. Our salvation comes from Jesus Christ. Our standing before God comes from Jesus Christ. Our beauty comes from Jesus Christ. We must begin by viewing the beauty of the person of Jesus Christ.

We see, now, the importance of preaching “Jesus Christ and Him crucified”. Without a knowledge of Christ’s person and work, there will be no salvation for anyone. God’s appointed way for sinners to be saved is to hear the message about Christ and His death on the cross. Without faith in Christ, there is no salvation. We must speak more of Jesus Christ! We must show others how desirable He is! We must portray Him in all His beauty, as “the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys”.

The church of Jesus Christ

We move on to consider the church, the redeemed people of God. The church in the world is compared to the lily among thorns. We are not talking about the thorns on the stalk of the rose. Instead,

the picture is now that of a lone lily growing in the midst of thorn bushes in the wild. A bush of thorns is not a desirable thing to be near to. If you are not careful, you might be scratched, blood will ooze out, and you will have been hurt. In verse 2, we are told, "Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters." The lily growing in the midst of thorn bushes appear so out of place. The beauty of the lily will stand out, at the same time that it will appear so fragile. Let us talk about its beauty first.

The church has been made beautiful by Jesus Christ. She reflects the beauty of Christ. She stands out in the world which is ugly and aggressive, in contrast. The world is constantly threatening the church, exerting pressure on her, and attempting to make her conform to its wishes. The unbelievers of the world are constantly making life difficult for believers. They want you to join them in their worldly pursuits and desires. The more you seek to be faithful to the Lord, the more they will be against you. Often, you are the butt of their jokes. You will need to laugh it away and not take it too seriously. If you are unable to take it, walk away from them. Seek out a different company of friends. However, there are times when you are unable to get away. They may be your colleagues at work. You will not be able to avoid their company, short of changing jobs. You will, therefore, need to bear up with them despite all their taunts and jokes. The grace of God will be sufficient for you in such a situation. What matters is how the Lord looks upon us. The Lord owns His people and calls them "My love". The church is well-loved by the Lord, and He regards her as most beautiful. Since we belong to Him and are precious in His sight, He will not allow our enemies to get away with their malice. We must learn to rest content in the knowledge that the Lord loves us.

There are many people in the world who are not content with themselves and have no peace in the heart. There are others who feel so small in themselves for they lack self-esteem. They fight for recognition, and they become bitter when rejected by others. They do not have the peace and contentment of the Christians. We are content because the Lord has made us clean and His righteousness is regarded as ours, so that we are accepted fully by our God. We do not have to constantly look over our shoulders to see what others think of us. We do not have to compare with our neighbours to see how well we are doing. We are accepted by our God as beautiful,

and that is all that matters.

Then, let us consider the fragility of the lily in the midst of the thorns. The lily is easily harmed by the thorns – or so it seems. But there is a certain strength in the lily that comes from the fact that it is different from the thorns. We are saying that the church is different from the world. From one point of view, we are weak. We are easily harmed and crushed by the world. However, the church is in the hands of God. Often, people are amazed, as it were, at seeing a lily growing among thorn bushes. They are amazed by how Christians live and survive well in a world that is hostile and bent on destroying it. They do not realize that we are empowered by the Spirit of God, and not by sheer self-will and self-effort. We exert effort to do what is right in God's sight, and God gives us the power to continue in the faith. It is not a case of trusting in God to act, while we remain dormant. Equally, it is not a case of we exerting effort according to our own wisdom, without trusting in God who has revealed His will in the Bible. Rather, we seek to live according to His revealed will, all the while seeking to please Him, and all the while trusting Him to enable us to do what is needful.

We are mindful of the fact that God does not remove difficulties from our life, but strengthens us to overcome those difficulties. His grace is sufficient for us. He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Do you remember Daniel's friends, who were thrown into the fiery furnace? They were not spared the fiery furnace, but the Lord drew near to them in the furnace. The lily grows in the midst of thorns, showing forth its beauty. At the same time, it is constantly intimidated by the presence of the thorns. But grow she must, and shine she must! Christians are to shine in the world. A lamp is meant to shine and give light to an otherwise dark world. The lamp is not meant to be put under the bed, nor to be hidden under a basket. It is such a pity that there are professing Christians who appear to do just that. They allow their light to be hidden away. Their lifestyle is such that it is no different from that of the unconverted. They allow worldly values to creep in, to permeate into one area after another, and finally to overwhelm their lives altogether. They soon deny the Lord by their lifestyle, if not by their words as well. It will become clear that they have never been truly converted.

You would remember the Parable of the Sower, in which the first three categories of seed die without producing fruit. We do not want

to be in any of these categories. The third category of seed is particularly tragic. It seems to be growing well, but its life is soon choked by the thorns that grow around it. There are those who seem to be genuine Christians, who appear to be growing spiritually, but lose their zeal and desire for spiritual things. We do not want to be like such. We do not have to be like them. We can be the last category of seed that grows, despite thorns growing along side of it, and soon produces fruit – thirty-fold, sixty-fold, and even a hundred-fold! Do not make the mistake of thinking that there were no thorn bushes growing around the fourth type of seed. The wonder of the situation would be lost if that were the case. No, we must rather understand that the seed grows and produces fruit in spite of the thorns attempting to choke it. So also with the case of the lily growing among the thorns. It is the picture of the true church growing healthily, and showing forth its beauty, in spite of the trials and difficulties of the world. It is the picture of the true believer persevering in the faith, despite the many trials that come his way. The Lord gives strength to His people, and He beautifies the church so that she will be ready for life in heaven.

4.2 Provisions For The Church (vv. 3-6)

Blessing and help in ordinary times

We have considered the beauty of the church which is in a hostile world. The beauty of the church is derived from the beauty of the Lord in His two natures. We move on to consider the provisions for the church. We have referred to the thorns of the world – the pressures, trials, and even persecutions from the world. The Lord provides for His people's needs as they grow in faith. The Christian life, however, is not always "plain sailing". There will be times of difficulties and trials. The good shepherd will lead the sheep to green pastures. But when the sun rises up, he will need to find shade for the sheep. Otherwise, they will become uncomfortably hot in their thick wool, and even die from dehydration. The need for food and shelter has been shown in Chapter 1:7, "Tell me, O you whom I love, where you feed *your flock*, where you make *it* rest at noon." The Lord is now portrayed as an apple tree that provides food and shade for his people.

When you are faithful to the Lord, persecution of one kind or another will come. "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12)." Sometimes, the persecution can be severe. Many Christians have died for their faith. Most Christians have been spared such severe persecution. We need to ask whether we have been living a faithful and useful life, while we yet live. We desire to stay alive, but we must live well for the Lord. The Lord shelters His people in the midst of persecution, protects them in the midst of trials, and restores them for further service. Remember how Elijah was sustained in his faith after severe confrontation with the prophets of Baal, and had to run for his life from Jezebel. Our life is in God's hands, and the time of our death is determined by Him. If the time has not come, no enemy, or bullet, or poison, can kill us. We can trust the Lord to shelter us as we serve Him. We do not court martyrdom, but some element of risk has to be accepted if we desire to serve the Lord faithfully.

Then, there are the temptations from without, as well as from within, us. These are, perhaps, to be feared more than persecution. The world parades its wares before us, opportunities for sudden riches present themselves, and hidden desires of the heart are stirred up unexpectedly. These are all used by the devil to tempt God's children, and especially those who have been walking faithfully before Him. We are to flee from all forms of evil and seek refuge in our Lord, who laid down His life for us. Temptations must be resisted and sins must be put to death. The struggle to live a holy life may appear so exasperating, but struggle we must in the strength of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. We are reminded of Paul's words in Romans 7:24-25, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

There are times when the child of God is convicted of his sins. His conscience burns, showing that he has sinned against God. He senses God's holy anger burning against him. He has no peace of mind, and his heart is troubled. Sleep might escape him, and he is unable to serve God well. This is the time to examine the heart, to confess your sin, and to put right whatever has been done wrong. This is when you must seek refuge in the Lord, who has made atonement even for this sin of yours. Confess your sin before God, in the name of His Son, and you will find cleansing for all your un-

righteousness. This is the promise of Scripture. This will be your experience. You will be sheltered from the wrath of God. You will find peace with God in the Lord Jesus Christ. It will be “with great delight” that you sit down under His shade.

As you seek shelter in Christ, you will be sustained by Him. Just as Elijah was given food and drink while he rested, the Lord will give us His secret manna to eat and His healing waters to drink. As we pray to Him, read His word, and meditate upon His goodness to His people, our wounded conscience will be healed. Our disappointments will evaporate. Our faith will be restored. The apple tree not only gives shade, but it also provides us fruit to eat. Unlike the fruit of a wild tree, which might be poisonous, the apple tree will not give us harmful fruit. We can freely eat the fruit and experience its nourishing qualities. As we draw near to the Lord, we will find His fruit “sweet to the taste”.

Extraordinary blessing and trials

We have considered the ordinary times when the Lord supplies our needs – the need for protection, and the need for sustenance. All our needs are met in Christ, who provides shade and fruit. His grace is sufficient for us to live the Christian life. However, there are also times of extraordinary blessing, as well as extraordinary need. Such is the Christian life! Let us consider the times of extraordinary blessing. We are reminded of the words of the apostle Paul, in Ephesians 3:20, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us ...” Often, we fail to realize that the Lord desires to bless us “above all that we ask or think”. Instead of giving us fruit from the tree, He brings us to the banqueting house. Imagine arriving there, and seeing so many people being served by the many waiters. All the tables are full of food and drink. As you watch, more food and drink are brought in. No one is hungry here. No one need to go hungry here. You have been invited to such a feast.

Then, as you look out for your host, you see Him seated in the place of honour. Above Him, you see a banner with words written on it. The banner declares the purpose of the occasion, or expresses the sentiment suited to the occasion. As you look, you discover what is written on it – “LOVE”, or perhaps, “My love is for you.” This is to say

the Lord brings us to enjoy blessing beyond what He normally supplies to His redeemed people. There are times when the Lord meets powerfully with the believer who is reading, and meditating on, His word. His love is made manifest in unusual measure, His goodness is appreciated with unusual clarity, and your heart is overwhelmed. You praise Him and thank Him. Your heart is melted by His love. You are overflowing with gratitude to Him. The point comes when you might have to say, “Stop, Lord, I am unable to receive more of this blessing!”

On a corporate level, the Lord may visit His people with a powerful sense of His presence. Everyone will know that He is in the presence of the holy God. The word preached touches his heart. The Holy Spirit applies the word powerfully to the people. Tears may begin to flow. Tongues are loosened to pray. Confession of sins may flow freely. Many are brought to repentance. Souls are saved. The backslidden repent and reconsecrate their lives to the Lord. A repeat of this phenomenon might occur. A true spiritual revival would have broken out! It will be obvious to everyone that this is the work of God. It is so different from the organized and orchestrated revivalism seen in many Christian circles in recent years. The Lord blesses “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think”. And that is because “His banner over us is love”.

Since He loves us, the only right response from us is to love Him in return. We are able to love Him only because He first loved us. Our love for Him will be demonstrated by a consecrated life. We are prepared to serve Him even under trials and severe circumstances. We do not look for a comfortable place to serve Him. We do not wait for a convenient time. Those who seek comfort and convenience will never act. Think of the farmer who works in rain or shine. He alone will reap the harvest in the end. That is the challenge to us. Are we committed to the Lord? Do we serve Him wholeheartedly? We do not want to be mediocre Christians. There are too many of them around already. We want to be true disciples of Christ, and that would entail self-denial and self-sacrifice. It is this type of faith – this type of commitment – that will cause us to feel faint at times. We may be physically tired out. We may feel lonely. We may be misunderstood and misrepresented. But we are prepared to accept all these, for they are part and parcel of true discipleship.

How are we kept strong and persevering in faith and service?

The Lord feeds us with “raisins” and “apples”. Raisins pressed into cakes used to be carried by travellers. They provided a rich source of energy, and were easy to carry on journeys. Even kings fed on raisins. The raisins and apples speak of the Lord’s ways of sustaining and refreshing His people in their trials. The trials we undergo arise from our faithful service to Him, for we love Him. We are “lovesick” in this sense. This is not the romantic love between a couple. This is a love that is far loftier, and much more sublime. It is a spiritual love that arises from faith in Christ.

There will be times when we succumb to pressures, become depressed, and are shaken in our faith. We are referring to those who serve the Lord faithfully, out of love for Him. The spiritual battle can be intense, while our constitution may be weak. Much as we take care of ourselves, and avoid unnecessary risks, we are limited in our physical, emotional, and spiritual strengths. At such times, the Lord will draw near to succour us. This is pictured by Him putting His left hand under the believer’s head, and his right hand embracing him. You would remember how Hagar and her son, Ishmael, were driven away from home. As the lad lay dying in the desert, God spoke to Hagar, saying, “Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand ... (Gen. 21:18).” If you were to paint a picture of this incident, how would you represent them? I believe the most natural way is to show Hagar holding the son’s head off the ground with her left hand, while her right hand is placed on the son’s body. That is how some pictures depict Mary holding the Lord after He had been taken down from the cross. Many of us would not want to represent our Lord in pictures, but the point here is that that is the most natural way to represent a person helping another who is fallen. This, I believe, is the right way to understand verse 6, “His left hand is under my head, and His right hand embraces me.”

We see here the Lord portrayed as someone who is powerful, confident, in control, and caring. In Him is combined the qualities of a doctor and a mother. When you are sick, you would want to see a competent doctor who is confident of curing you. Also, you would like the presence of your mother who cares for you. This is especially so if you are not yet married, and you are far from home. At your time of greatest need, the Lord draws near to reassure you and care for you. Those who live faithfully for the Lord will value His presence when they are fallen in battle – when they are severely

wounded in their hearts, and maybe in their bodies as well.

This is where we must examine ourselves, to see if we have lived too comfortable a life such that suffering for the faith is alien to us. At construction sites where tall buildings are being erected, we often see the sign, “SAFETY FIRST” displayed prominently to remind the workers. Some Christians seem to adopt that as their motto – they avoid difficulties, steer clear of possible dangers, and seek the safest course of action. They do the bare minimum to serve the Lord. They are satisfied to merely qualify to be a Christian and a church member. They practise a minimalist Christianity that keeps them well within their comfort zone. Two things can be said of such people. First, we question whether they have true faith in Jesus Christ. Second, we know for certain that they will receive minimum blessing for their minimalist type of faith.

The Lord provides for His church. All that we need to live the Christian life will be provided for. When we grow faint from serving Him, He will draw near to comfort and strengthen us.

4.3 Charge To All Adherents (v. 7)

Blessing and help in ordinary times

We move on to verse 7, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.” This is a charge to the members and adherents of the church not to disturb the peace which the Lord has given her. Often, we have to add words when translating Bible verses so as to bring out the sense found in the original language. Here, we would need to add the word “my” before “love” so as to be consistent with what we find in verse 2 which says, “Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.” Furthermore, the word translated “it” is a feminine word in the original Hebrew. The better translation should therefore be, “... do not stir up nor awaken my love until she pleases.” The true sense of the verse now comes out. The church is at peace, and full of spiritual vitality, as pictured by the deers grazing peacefully, and prancing about, in the field. The individuals of the church are commanded not to disturb the peace within the church, for it is a peace that the Lord gives. If the church has been unfaithful, disturb the peace by all means. Speak to the

elders about the problems you perceive are there. Raise the issues with the members. Circulate articles that you believe address your concerns. If you have done what you can legitimately to correct the situation and the church remains unfaithful, you might have to leave it and go to a better one.

However, if the church is faithful to the Lord, and has been trying its best to serve Him, make sure that you do not disturb its peace. How is the peace of the church disturbed? It is disturbed when you bring in wrong teachings. It is disturbed when you insist on your ways of doing things. It is disturbed when you compare the church with other churches you have been to, as though those other churches have everything right. Young people who interact with friends from other churches have a tendency to be influenced by them. They are prone to be superficial in their thinking and become easily attracted to novel ideas. When these are brought back to the church, problems will arise. What about older believers? They are prone to stubbornness and self-righteousness, refusing to consider change when change is truly needed. They are likely to be sluggish in their faith and self-satisfied in their lives such that any new gospel endeavour is unreasonably opposed by them. Beware of disturbing the church wrongly, and for the wrong reasons! It will not be to your good. Your joy and spiritual well-being will be affected. You will be causing distress to others in the church. The Lord will not be pleased with you for what you are doing to His church.

4.4 Conclusion

We have considered the church in its state of peace. The Lord makes the church beautiful. He provides for her needs, and blesses her abundantly. When faithful believers feel weak in their service to Him, He will draw near to comfort and strengthen them. Individuals in the church are warned against disturbing the peace of the church.

We come to realize that the church is well-loved by the Lord. We realize that we have not fully fathomed the love of the Lord. We need to delve deeper, and appreciate more, the love of the Lord for His people. As we ponder on the love of the Lord for His church, we are reminded of what the apostle Paul wrote concerning this theme in Ephesians 3:14-19. We wonder if the apostle had the second chapter

of the book of Solomon in mind when he penned those words:

“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

2:8-17

Shulamite

8 The voice of my beloved!

Behold he comes
Leaping upon the mountains,
Skipping upon the hills.

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

Behold, he stands behind our wall;
He is looking through the windows,
Showing through the lattice.

10 My beloved spoke, and said to me:

“Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.

11 For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over *and* gone.

12 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing
has come,

And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

13 The fig tree puts forth its green figs,

And the vines *with* the tender grapes
Give a good smell.

Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away!

Solomon to the Shulamite

14 “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,

In the secret *places* of the cliff,

Let me see your face,

Let me hear your voice;

For your voice *is* sweet,

And your face *is* lovely.”

15 Catch us the foxes,

The little foxes that spoil the vines,
For our vines *have* tender grapes.

Shulamite

16 My beloved *is* mine, and I *am* his.

He feeds *his* flock among the lilies.

17 Until the day breaks

And the shadows flee away,

Turn, my beloved,

And be like a gazelle

Or a young stag

Upon the mountains of **Separation**.

Five

The Church Militant

We have been studying The Song of Solomon, believing that it is a book of spiritual allegory, in which deep spiritual truths are conveyed through a made-up story, although the persons and places may have genuinely existed.

In Chapter 2:1-7, we have considered “The Church At Peace”. The Lord loves His church and provides for all her needs. As the church attempts to serve Him faithfully, there are times when she feels weak. That is when the Lord draws near to strengthen her. The faithful church should not be rocked by those with selfish ambition and personal egoism. There have been times in history when the church went astray. God raised up people like Martin Luther and John Calvin to shake the church, through the preaching of the word. That was necessary, and good for the church. But the church that has been attempting to be faithful to the Lord should not be disturbed by those who quibble over petty differences and wrong emphases brought from without. It would not be to your good, nor the good of others, if you do that.

We now move on to consider “The Church Militant”. Let us be reminded that when we use the word “church” we do not mean the building where Christians meet to worship God. Rather, we are referring to the believers in a locality, who are covenanted together to worship and serve God according to the Bible’s teaching. This is how the word “church” is used in the Bible. Apart from the local church, the Bible refers to all Christ’s people found everywhere, on earth and

in heaven, as the church. This is the universal church – which is the body of Christ. A true believer is a member of the universal church. But the true believer should be a member of a local church as well. It is God's will that you commit yourself to be a member of a local church somewhere.

Furthermore, it needs to be said that not all who profess to be Christians are true believers. Many are those who claim to be Christians, who attend church, who may even have been baptized, but have not been born-again of the Holy Spirit. If you have never been convicted of your sins, nor repented of your sinful life, and are not trusting in Jesus Christ alone for acceptance before God, you are not yet a true Christian. Our message concerns those who are true Christians. They are the people of God. They form the church of Jesus Christ. The church on earth is at peace with God in the sense that God has forgiven His people their sins on the basis of Christ's death for them. They are well-loved by the Lord and taken care of by Him. But the church exists in the midst of a sinful world which is opposed to her very existence, and often causes her much distress and brings her many trials. The church also has much work to do for her Lord on earth, in spite of severe opposition. The church may, therefore, be said to be "militant" in the sense that she is engaged in a spiritual warfare, in which the weapons used are spiritual in nature, and not carnal. The church uses the weapons of the preaching of the word, prayer, good works, and the like, in this warfare.

In this portion of the Song of Solomon, we are considering the church in its state of militancy. There are four sections to this message.

5.1 The First Coming Of Christ (vv. 8-9)

Foretold by the prophets

In the first section, covering verses 8 to 9, the first coming of Jesus Christ to earth is alluded to. We read in verse 8, "The voice of my beloved! Behold he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills." This verse shows God's people excited over the coming of the long-expected Saviour. The coming of the Saviour was foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament. The spiritually minded people of Israel were looking forward to the coming of the

Messiah. When the fullness of time arrived, John the Baptist began to preach and to call for repentance. The arrival of the Saviour in the world was announced. Then, Jesus Christ began to preach and teach in public.

The announcement of the Lord's coming, followed by His appearance on the scene, happened in the midst of a spiritual deadness that had enveloped the nation of Israel. The Jews had been in bondage to legalism for so long. They had, over the centuries, added human traditions to their wrong understanding of God's law. They had relied on law-keeping to achieve righteousness, which was an impossibility. Theirs was a system of salvation by works. Their leaders were constantly on the lookout to catch those who did not keep the many laws of their tradition. Jesus Christ's coming, and His teaching, were a breath of fresh air to the stale religious atmosphere of the time.

Many of us are not unfamiliar with the stifling atmosphere of legalistic religions. The religious leaders impose burdens on the followers, demanding compliance by law, or threats of withholding from them religious privileges. Officers from the religious department go around arresting those who do not fast during the fasting month. Spies are sent out to catch those who commit the sin of "close proximity". The follower's spirituality is measured by how he dresses, or what he wears on the body and the head, or what he eats and refrains from eating. Acceptance before his god is by the frequency and regularity of his acts of worship. Severe punishment awaits the follower who attempts to leave his religion. Only the followers have the right to express what the religion teaches. Others who do not adhere to that faith are not permitted to express what they think or feel about the religion.

That was the type of atmosphere Jesus Christ came into.

The Saviour's arrival

The arrival of the Saviour is portrayed as a young male deer, leaping and skipping over the mountains. This shows His vitality and power. No one could stop Him from coming to rescue His people. Nothing could prevent Him from saving the elect. Satan tried various methods to prevent the Saviour from appearing on the scene, but he failed. Herod the Great tried to destroy the infant Jesus by ordering for all male children from two years old and under to be killed, but he failed. The religious leaders tried their utmost to stop

Him from preaching, and finally delivered Him to be crucified. Even that failed to stop the Lord from saving His people!

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ occurred outside the walls of Jerusalem. We are told in Hebrews 13:12-13, "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach." The Jews rejected Jesus Christ as the Saviour. The Romans crucified Him outside the city of Jerusalem. From the ceremonial point of view, Jesus Christ was regarded as unclean. He was a reproach. Yet, by His death on the cross, He saves sinners from their sins. God "made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21)." In order to be saved, we must be prepared to identify ourselves with Him. We must "go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach." But this the majority of the Jews refused to do. They were prepared only to gaze at Him from the confines of their legalistic system of religion.

This is shown by verse 9, "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag, behold, he stands behind our wall; he is looking through the windows, gazing through the lattice." Note that the phrase, "gazing through the lattice" may be translated as "showing through the lattice". The people could hear the Lord calling, and they could see Him, yet they would not want to expose themselves fully to Him. Often, this is what happens to those who hear the gospel. You hear the voice of Jesus Christ calling, you know He is near, but you do not want to come to Him. You hide yourself from Him, yet you would not flee from Him. You are attracted to Him, yet you would not come openly to Him. It is as though you sense that He knows too much about you. You want to run away from Him because you are a creature of darkness, while Jesus Christ is the light of the world, and His brightness hurts your eyes. You protest when Christians come to tell you about Jesus Christ, yet you want to know more about Him.

This, then, is the picture painted for us concerning the first coming of Jesus Christ. He came to call sinners to Himself, but He was not received well by His own people – the Jews.

5.2 The Call Of The Gospel (vv. 10-13)

Redemption accomplished

The second section covers verses 10 to 13 – the call of the gospel. Everything needed to save sinners has been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ. He lived a perfectly righteous life, fulfilling all the requirements of the law of God on behalf of His people. He died on the cross, bearing the full penalty of the sins of His people. We are saved by Christ's life, as much as by His death. This might sound strange if you are hearing it for the first time. Actually, this is correct doctrine – we are saved by the life, and the death, of Christ. Often, we say that the death of Christ saves us from our sins. But that is only a summary of the full doctrine of salvation. We are saved by His active obedience, i.e. by His keeping of the law of God on behalf of His people, and also by His passive obedience, i.e. by His death on the cross as a substitute for His people.

The gospel calls upon sinners to repent from sin and to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. When a person turns from his sinful life to trust in Christ, his sins are regarded as taken away by Christ who died on the cross. At the same time, the righteousness of Christ is regarded as given to the believer. The Jews, however, refused to trust in Christ as their Saviour, and relied on their attempts to keep the law to be saved. Many people today also have the same attitude towards Jesus Christ. They refuse to trust in Christ alone for salvation. Instead, they rely on their attempts to live a holy life to earn salvation. The Bible makes it clear that we do not have any righteousness of our own, and no amount of human effort can change our sinful nature nor make up for the sins we have committed against God. Salvation cannot be earned by human effort. The only way to be saved is to trust in Jesus Christ. Salvation is truly by the grace of God, through faith in Christ alone.

Redemption applied

This message of salvation is proclaimed to people everywhere. Through the hearing of the gospel you are being called to Christ. The call of the Lord Jesus Christ comes to you in such a tender and loving manner, persuading you with powerful reasons. We are told, in verses 10 to 13, that winter is past, the rainy season is over, spring

has come, the birds are singing, and the fruits are appearing on the trees. The passage is so beautiful, not only in its form, but also in its content. It says, 'My beloved spoke, and said to me: "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over *and* gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its green figs, and the vines *with* the tender grapes give a good smell. Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away!"' We have here a powerfully persuasive call from the Lord to arise and follow Him. Winter conveys to us the idea of coldness, gloom, and fruitlessness. We would all agree that although winter has its own beauty, it generally conveys gloom in contrast to the brightness, joy and fruitfulness of the spring season.

Historically, the proclamation of the gospel to all nations started on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the gathered disciples of Christ. The long wait for the coming of the Saviour was over. The period of bondage to sin, to legalism, and to frustrating failures in spiritual pursuits was over. From that day, Jesus Christ has been proclaimed as "the way, the truth, and the life". Many are the people held in bondage to sin, to the keeping of religious rituals, and to the futility of earning salvation by good works. The proclamation of salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, is startling to those hearing it for the first time. Salvation is not accomplished by our human effort, but by humbling ourselves before God and coming to Him through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Acceptance before the holy God is not by building up for ourselves a greater pool of merits through good works, but by receiving the righteousness of Christ through faith in Him.

Redemption has been accomplished by Jesus Christ when He died on the cross as a substitute for those He came to save. It must now be applied, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel. We are told, in Romans 10:17, that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God". We are commanded in the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all the nations. Persuasive preaching, consisting of doctrine applied to the hearers, must be used to reason with souls so that they may come to faith in Christ. Sinners need to hear the gospel proclaimed for what it is – the good news of salvation!

As applied to the church, we realize that there are times when

it goes through hardship, barrenness, and even persecution. Severe trials also come through disagreements among the brethren, such that emotions run high, hurtful words are hurled at one another, breakups occur, and severe damage is caused to the work of the gospel. While in the midst of such trials, darkness and gloom appear to be upon us. Service to God is such a burden, and the joy of meeting together appears to have fizzled away. But we cannot remain in such a situation forever. We must get out of the coldness and barrenness of such winter seasons, and move on into the joy and blessing of the Lord. We must seek Him till we find Him, so that the fruitfulness of the gospel is seen again.

In the personal life of the Christian, there are times when winter appears to set in. There is coldness of heart, and the joy of salvation is lost. Often, that is due to carelessness in the spiritual life, when you are drawn away by temptation and fall into sin. Backsliding is never a pleasant state to be in. You know what needs to be done – you must repent of your sins, and put things right with God and men. Confess your sins to God, seek forgiveness from those you have wronged, and make restitution where possible. Draw near to the Lord, and He will draw near to you.

We must not fail to address those who are not yet converted. For too long, you have called yourself a Christian but you are not born again. For too long, you are satisfied with a nominal Christianity, failing to experience the blessedness of new life in Christ. Why remain in the coldness and gloom of winter, when there is the joy and blessedness of spring to be enjoyed? Come to Jesus Christ! Go outside the camp, to join Him in His reproach. Stand with Him, share in the shame of Calvary, and you will find rivers of blessing pouring into your life.

5.3 The Response Of The Church (vv. 14-15)

Responding in worship

In the third section, covering verses 14 to 15, we have the Lord calling upon His people to draw near to Him in worship and prayer. First, we see the Lord calling out to the church with tender adoration: “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice.” The Lord looks

upon the church as a dove, and not a bird of prey. A dove is gentle and peaceable, unlike the eagle that is constantly on the look out for other creatures to pounce upon. We are told by those who are more knowledgeable in these matters that the dove has some peculiar characteristics. The dove will eat only grain, and not worms. The dove is gentle in spirit and sweet in its voice. It also keeps its nest clean, refusing to litter it with its own droppings. Here, the dove is used to picture those who have believed in Jesus Christ. Believers have had their wild spirits tamed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and their nature is being transformed from one degree of holiness to another.

Believers are described as those who are hidden “in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff.” This is an allusion to Moses being sheltered in the rock as God passed by and revealed His back to him (Ex. 33:22-23). God condescended to reveal a glimpse of His glory to Moses, but He specially protected him from harm – for no one could see God and live. It is also an allusion to Isaiah 32:2, in which we are told that the Lord will be “as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land”. Jesus Christ is, to the believer, the “Rock of Ages, cleft for me.” We also sing the hymn, “Beneath the cross of Jesus, I gladly take my stand. The shadow of a mighty rock, within a weary land.” That is what it means – we are kept safe from the wrath of God which we deserve for our sins, and we are protected from harm in a world ravaged by sin, all because Jesus Christ has redeemed us by His blood. Believers have their fair share of trials and troubles in the world, but the Lord’s eye is upon them for good.

We want to draw near the Lord because we love Him and are grateful to Him for our salvation. We are able to love the Lord only because He first loved us. The Lord takes delight in His people. He says to us, “For your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.” We are reminded of the grandmother who cannot take any criticism of her precious grandchild for, to her, the grandchild is perfect! We might say that love is blind towards any defect or imperfection. To the Lord, we are sweet and lovely. He has made us so by cleansing us of our sins by His precious blood, and transforming us into new creatures. The unbelieving world disdains us, and we are conscious of our own sinfulness. The Lord, however, sees us as precious and beautiful, because we are clothed in His righteousness. He is determined to transform us into His own image. He sees us from the

perspective of eternity, when we will be made perfect in heaven. The transformation He has begun in us will be brought to completion in due time.

Since the Lord takes delight in His people, should we not draw near to Him in worship? Should we not sing to Him in praise? Yet, what do we find often in our worship? We do not worship with joy. We do not sing from the heart. As a preacher, I often glance at the faces of the people in front of me when the singing is not as it should be and, as expected, many mouths are seen to be not moving, or are merely mumbling. Since we are singing to the Lord, can we not sing properly, and with our hearts in the words we are singing? Apart from singing praise to the Lord, we are to listen to Him as His word is expounded. Here, again, we can tell whether or not people are listening attentively. No doubt, there are those who are truly listening despite the fact that they appear to be sleeping, but can we not look at the preacher while he is preaching? If we are focused on listening to the words, we would not be conscious of looking at the preacher. It is basic courtesy to look at the person who is speaking to you. Without stretching it too far, there is a sense in which the preacher represents the Lord when His word is being proclaimed. We are to show our faces to the Lord, for we are lovely in His sight. More importantly, we are to listen to Him attentively.

Responding in sanctification

Apart from responding to Him in worship, we also respond in sanctification. We are told, in verse 15, “Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines *have* tender grapes.” As the Lord’s people, we serve Him in various spheres of ministry – each in a corner of His vineyard. Note the plural, “Catch **us** the foxes ...” and “**our** vines have tender grapes ...” We have a share in the Lord’s kingdom. There are the foxes that come in to create havoc. These foxes may be small but as they run around in the vineyard, much damage is caused. What are these foxes? They are a reference to anything that destroys the good that God is doing in us, and through us. There are foxes within our lives, and there are foxes without. Within us are sinful desires lurking, waiting to stir us to action against God’s will. There are the ulterior motives, wrong attitudes, and sinful thoughts. We must catch those foxes, and remove them. We are to put to death

the besetting sins in our lives.

Apart from the “little foxes” within us, there are those that come from without. There are worldly temptations, bad influences, and false doctrines. Some professing believers take for granted the opportunities to meet together in church, and often absent themselves. Some are critical of those who serve God faithfully, while others are cynical of any gospel enterprise, believing that not much good can be accomplished. If you interact too much with these negative-minded people, you might be influenced to come less frequently to church meetings. You might show a false humility by not contributing to the life of the church, claiming that you have few gifts, all of which are insignificant. You are actually behaving irresponsibly, failing to see that you are hindering the work of God, not so much by what you do, but rather by what you are not doing. Laziness, false humility and irresponsibility are little foxes that can cause harm to your spiritual life and hinder the progress of the gospel. Then, you might be interacting too closely with those who hold to wrong teaching, or unhelpful emphases on some points of doctrine. You justify your interaction with them by claiming that *they* also are the children of God, who profess faith in Christ. What I can say is that you have a false generosity of heart towards such people, and you are more likely to be influenced by them for ill than to influence them for good.

Responding in service

Another matter concerns the vineyard itself, or rather, the vines with the tender grapes. We are told, “... for our vines *have* tender grapes”. This shows that fruitfulness is guaranteed in the church and in the life of the individual Christian. We begin with the individual Christian. We read in Galatians 5:22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” The Spirit of Christ who dwells in the true believer will ensure that such “graces” are produced. The believer will be transformed in his character, from one degree of holiness to another. We also read in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” What is the fruit? It includes the Christian graces like love, joy, and peace, which we have mentioned. But it includes also

the result of witnessing and the good works which we engage in. Although the measure of our success in spiritual work is not always in terms of the number of converts made, we are nevertheless given the assurance that there will be fruit. You never know when the persons you witness to may come to faith in Christ. We may have the joy of knowing this while on earth, or we may not know until we arrive in heaven.

We must also consider the fruitfulness of the church's ministry. As a church, we are expected to plant other churches. We must not only be concerned about growing bigger numerically, but we must also engage in planting other churches – whether directly or indirectly. A careful study of the Great Commission, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, will show that it is a command given by the Lord to the local church, to plant other local churches. The early church understood the Great Commission in this way. The church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas to plant local churches. The church at Jerusalem did the same in Judea. This is clearly seen in the book of Acts. The church today must endeavour to evangelize its vicinity, and also to plant churches farther afield. This is where we must not allow the little foxes to disrupt the work of evangelization and church planting. Petty jealousies, personal disputes, and schism must not be allowed to stifle mission-mindedness and definite gospel endeavours.

Beware of the little foxes! God wants us to live a holy life, to be obedient to His word, and to be faithful to Him, so that gospel progress is not hindered.

5.4 The Second Coming Of Christ (vv. 16-17)

Present by His Spirit

The fourth and final section is about the second coming of Christ. The Lord came to earth the first time to redeem His people. After His death and resurrection, He returned to heaven and promised to come back to take His people to be with Him. In a sense, He is still with His people on earth. He is present with them by His Spirit. As His word is proclaimed by the under-shepherds, He feeds His people by giving them understanding in the power of the Spirit. He comforts and strengthens them, and assures them of His love for

them. We, therefore, read in verse 16, “My beloved is mine, and I am his. He feeds *his flock* among the lilies.”

Absent in heaven

From another point of view, the Lord is away in heaven, acting as our High Priest before the Father. He is the groom who is away, while the church is the bride waiting for Him on earth. Although separated physically, they are thinking of each other. The mutual love between them is pure, and quite different from the selfish, possessive, love seen among immature couples. You know how it is with a couple whose love is insecure and unstable. When separated, they are constantly checking on each other to make sure that he or she is not getting too close to another person. Each is fearful of the other falling in love with someone else, and each is suspicious of the other. This is not the case between the church and her Lord. The church knows that the Lord loves her, and the Lord is constantly interceding for her in heaven. The church longs for the Lord to return. That wonderful day will come, when there will be the great marriage supper of the Lamb!

Faithfully waiting

While waiting for that day to arrive, we want to be faithful and obedient to Him, and to purify ourselves in readiness for Him. The trials of earth will end. The Lord will come quickly, in power, like a deer that bounces over the mountains which currently separate us. The word “Bether” in verse 17 actually means “Separation” – “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Separation.” This is another beautiful passage. Like verses 10 to 13, this verse is beautiful in form and meaning.

I cannot help but think that the apostle John had this passage of the Song of Solomon in mind when he penned the last chapter of the book of Revelation. Just as the bride yearns for the return of her beloved, so also the church yearns for the return of Christ. We read in Revelation 22:17, ‘And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!”’ Verse 20 says, ‘He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!’

5.5 Conclusion

As we end, let us note that the teaching of this portion of Scripture is already fulfilled, is being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled. The Lord has already come to redeem His people. The gospel is going out to all nations, calling out God's chosen people. The church is responding in worship and in sanctification. The Lord will one day return for His people. We know that eternal blessedness awaits God's people. We know also that when the Lord returns, He will judge the unbelieving people of the world. That is why, in closing, I would appeal to you who are not yet believers or who are only Christians in name, to come to Jesus Christ for salvation. The winter is past ... The time of singing has come ... Come to the Lord Jesus Christ! Trust in Him, and you will be given eternal life.

Part IV

THE GIFT OF ASSURANCE

3:1-5

Shulamite

- 1 **Night** by night on my bed I sought the one I love;
I sought him, but I did not find him.
- 2 “I will rise now,” *I said*,
“And go about the city;
In the streets and in the squares
I will seek the one I love.”
I sought him, but I did not find him.
- 3 The watchmen who go about the city found me;
I said, “Have you seen the one I love?”
- 4 Scarcely had I passed by them,
When I found the one I love.
I held him and would not let him go,
Until I had brought him to the house of my mother,
And into the chamber of her who conceived me.

Solomon

- 5 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the does of the field,
Do not stir up nor awaken **my** love until **she** pleases.

Six

Assurance Lost And Regained

We remind ourselves that the Song of Solomon is an allegory written by King Solomon, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. King Solomon was given a glimpse of the future, when the promised Saviour would come. He was given an understanding of the relationship between the Saviour and His people.

We have learned that Chapter 2 is a prophecy of the gospel age. The chapter consists of two parts, which teach about “The Church At Peace”, and “The Church Militant”. Moving on to Chapter 3, we find that it can also be divided into two parts. Verses 1 to 5 concern “Assurance Lost And Regained”, which we study here. This will be followed by verses 6 to 11, “God’s Seal Of Assurance”. While the previous chapter is about the church considered corporately, the present chapter focuses on the experiences of the individual believer. In this study, we shall consider two things. Firstly, we shall consider the danger of losing the assurance of salvation. Secondly, we shall consider how to regain and keep the assurance of salvation.

6.1 Losing Assurance Of Salvation (vv. 1-3)

A precious gift

The passage begins with the bride thinking of the groom, “By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him.” We should begin by noting that there is such a thing as the assurance of salvation. A person who has repented of his sins, and

trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation, may have that sense of certainty that he is forgiven and accepted by God, and is in possession of eternal life. This truth is taught in many parts of the Scripture but we will refer only to a couple of passages. In Romans 8:14-17 we are told, 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together.' Then, we have 1 John 5:13 which says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue* to believe in the name of the Son of God." From these, you can see that believers may come to a certainty that they are the children of God. They have been fully forgiven of their sins and are accepted by God.

This certainty is both objective and subjective in nature. We consider, first, the objective aspect of assurance. By "objective" we mean that which is not based on our feelings. Rather, it is based on something outside of ourselves which can readily be confirmed. We are referring to the objectivity and authority of God's word. We are saying that God's word is the basis of our assurance of salvation. From the word of God, we know that the Lord Jesus Christ came to die for sinners. From the word of God, we know that whoever repents of his sins and trusts in Jesus Christ will be saved. The word of God also assures us that the Lord will never allow any of His sheep to be snatched out of His hands. The word of God declares that the Lord will return to take us to be with Him. If we trust in Jesus Christ, we can be sure that we are saved. We know that God cannot tell a lie, for that would be contrary to His nature. And since God's word is true, we believe what it says. That is the objective aspect of our salvation.

Then, there is the subjective aspect of assurance, which lies within ourselves. Although our feeling is not a sure guide, God nevertheless works in us so that we may know, and sense, that we are forgiven, that we belong to Christ and will never be lost. That is because the Holy Spirit is given to us when we repent of our sins to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit who dwells in us bears witness

with our spirit to give us that assurance of salvation. That assurance can grow, but it can also weaken and be lost. That is why we must be careful not to lose the assurance of our salvation. We consider how that may happen.

How assurance may be lost

The Scripture shows us that one of the chief reasons why our assurance of salvation may be weakened is because we indulge in sinful habits. When you do something sinful and get addicted to it, a sinful pattern or habit is formed which will cause you to wonder whether you are truly saved. You will be wondering, "Is it possible that the Lord has forgiven all my sins while I continue in this particular sin?" The Bible tells us, in 1 John 3:4-6, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him." Habitual sinning is referred to in this passage.

Secondly, there is the neglect of God's word. We know that a person is saved only by the hearing of God's word. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17)." Once saved, we continue to need God's word to sustain us in the faith and in order that we may grow spiritually. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4)." We need to feed on good spiritual food on a regular basis to grow well spiritually. Irregular feeding will not help one to grow well. Irregular attendance at church will mean that you do not hear God's word regularly, which will affect adversely your spiritual growth. A workman who builds a wall will lay the bricks side by side, then layer by layer. In that way, he gets a strong and well-built wall once the cement is dry. Similarly, building up our faith is by the hearing of God's word expounded on a regular basis. It has to be "precept upon precept, and line upon line (Isa. 28:10)". This is a common truth, yet many do not seem to see it. They come to church whenever they like, and they absent themselves whenever they like. How can they expect to grow well spiritually? While there are Christians who do not have the opportunity to hear systematic, expository, and applied preaching, others seem to take the opportunities they have for granted.

Then there is disobedience to God's word. When you refuse to

obey what is clearly commanded by God, you will be in danger of losing your assurance. God will chastise you, and if you give up on the faith, you will prove yourself unregenerate. You will be like the seeds that either grow on stony ground or are choked by the thorns of life, in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-9). In addition, there is physical and mental exhaustion. A living person is made up of body and soul united together. Physical or mental exhaustion may affect a person spiritually. The reverse is true as well. Spiritual ill-health may affect you physically. We are here discussing the loss of assurance. Physical ill-health may cause a person to become depressed, and lose his assurance of salvation. It is good to stay physically healthy, although our priority should be upon godliness. We remember Paul's exhortation to Timothy, saying, "... exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come (1 Tim. 4:7-8)." Similarly, in the midst of dealing with godly living, Paul reminded Timothy to "use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities (1 Tim. 3:23)". Here, of course, wine was used as a medicine, and not for enjoyment. There is an undeniable link between our physical and spiritual well-being.

Briefly, then, these are the possible causes of a loss of assurance of salvation – sinful habits, neglect of God's word, disobedience to God's word, and physical and emotional exhaustion. But let us not forget the spiritual dimension, and fail to consider the activity of the devil in all these. The devil is very good at shaking the assurance in God's children. Two very common tactics used by him are to bring fear and discouragement to them. We fear men, imprisonment, pain, shame, the loss of reputation, and what others say about us. Fear brings us down and makes us ineffective in God's service. Imagine what would have happened if Martin Luther had succumbed to fear – if he had feared the pope, feared death, or feared the loss of his reputation as the top theologian of his day. There would have been no Reformation! Today, fear grips too many of God's people. You fear that your weaknesses might be known to others, you fear suffering pain and imprisonment, you fear the threats of enemies of the gospel, you fear offending people, you fear taking risks in missions. What is the result? You do not take any initiative for the gospel, and you become ineffective in God's service.

Then, there is discouragement, arising from disappointments of various kinds. You do not see visible results in your ministry, you are betrayed by trusted friends, you are accused by others of what they are guilty of themselves, you are disappointed by pettiness and vindictiveness in the most unexpected people. Like Shylock in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice", they are bent on destroying you and causing you pain. If you "step on their tail" – causing them offence in any way – they will demand from you the pound of flesh you are supposed to owe them. We do encounter such characters. They are supposed to be Christians, and even ministers of the gospel! It shocks us that they are capable of such vindictiveness. We find it hard to believe that they can be so petty. But that is what we find in them, and it causes us to be so depressed. That is where we must be careful, for severe disappointments can lead to discouragement, discouragement can lead to depression, and depression can cause you to lose the assurance of salvation. The devil is very good at that. Beware of the weapons of the devil! Do not be ignorant of his devices!

Indolence, the chief cause

But let us not blame the devil for everything. Let God deal with the devil. More importantly for us is a problem within ourselves which may be considered the common, if not the chief, cause of the loss of assurance. That problem is indolence – or laziness coupled with carelessness. We are often lazy and careless – both in action and in attitude. This is portrayed in verse 1, "By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him." What it means in the original text is that the bride has been lying in bed "night by night". It had been going on for some time. She had been lazy, careless, and half-hearted in her search for the groom. She looks for him through such inaction, in such a sloppy state of mind. And she expects to find the one whom she professes to love. Of course, she does not find him! If nothing is done about the indolence in us, we are likely to become worse. Drastic action is needed. A definite effort has to be made to bestir ourselves from indolence. We cannot expect half-hearted attempts to pull us through.

It is like being caught in a whirlpool. We are not saying that anyone of us has experienced being sucked into a whirlpool. We are only using this to illustrate a point. A whirlpool is supposed to turn

in one direction as it sucks you in. If you were caught in one, you wouldn't wait for it to turn in the opposite direction to throw you up. You want to get out of it right away. When caught in a sin, you must make a drastic break with it, or it will spiral and suck you deeper down. Indolence and wishful thinking will not set you free. Here, the bride finally realizes that the one she loves is not with her, and that she is not going to find him by lazing around. It says, in verse 2, "I will rise now," *I said*, "and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love." We are reminded of the prodigal son, in Luke 15, who finally awakened to the realization of his ridiculous situation. We are told in Luke 15:17, "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father ...'" Coming back to our passage, we see the bride stirring herself and saying, "I will rise now". Then, doing the right thing, she goes through the city of Jerusalem to seek the one she loves. She does not go into the wilderness, but through the city.

In the Christian life, we are to seek the Lord in the midst of His people, which is the church. The Lord wouldn't be in the wilderness of the world. The Lord is in the holy city. All too often, we seek the Lord in the wrong places, and we attempt to solve things in our own ways. We know of those who attend so-called "Marriage Enrichment" seminars to solve their marital problems. Others look for "How To" books to cure their low self-esteem and countless other problems. Yet others listen to gospel songs to overcome their low spirits. We are not saying that these things are wrong in themselves, or that you will not derive any benefit from them. What we are saying is that these can offer you only temporary relief. What you should do is to seek the Lord in His word, in the company of His people. You should go to a church that teaches the Bible faithfully, in which the believers love the Lord and His word. The Lord will be found there! You would remember the occasion when Jesus Christ was told, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You." Looking around, He said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother (Mark 3:34-35)." You must look for Christ in the midst of His people!

Thank God, He will not let His children to go astray for too long.

As long as you make the effort to seek the Lord, and if you seek Him in the right place, God will honour you. In His providence, He often arranges things such that you are confronted by His watchmen. We are told in verse 3, ‘The watchmen who go about the city found me; *I said*, “Have you seen the one I love?”’ Who are these watchmen? They are the shepherds of the souls. They are the mature Christians who are filled with the spirit of God. They are the pastors and ministers of the gospel. As watchmen, they do not have power within themselves to restore you. But they can point you to Christ. They will direct you to God’s word. They will remind you of truths that are relevant to your situation. In the first place, you should have gone straight to them to seek their help. You needn’t have wandered “in the streets and in the squares”. You could have sought out those who could give you directions based on the Bible’s teaching.

As you make the effort to seek the Lord, God will confront you through His ministers. He will seek you out in order to restore you. When Adam fell, God drew near and called to him asking, “Where are you (Gen. 3:9)?” It wasn’t that God did not know where Adam was. He asked only to show Adam that he had been found out, that he had to have dealings with his God. In the same way, God asked, “What are you doing here, Elijah (1 Kings 19:9, 13)?” God wanted Elijah to realize that He was in control of everything, that He had not forsaken His people – the nation of Israel. Elijah had run away from wicked Jezebel in fear, but God had more work for him to do. God will not forsake His children. He wants us to draw near to Him. As we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us.

6.2 Regaining And Keeping Assurance (vv. 4-5)

Seek the Lord in the word of God

We have seen that the Lord must be sought in the city, i.e. in the midst of His people. We have also seen that His ministers, and other mature Christians, are ready to help us. Our objective, however, is to seek the Lord, not the place nor the helpers. We wish to regain our communion with the Lord. We ask, next, how do we regain the assurance of our salvation? As we seek help from the watchmen, we will be directed to God’s word. Assurance of salvation is to be sought in God’s word. If ever you go astray, return to God’s word.

Return to hear it expounded. Seek out those who teach it faithfully. Of course, the question would arise, "How do you recognize a true watchman from a false one?" We live in desperate times. We cannot trust everyone. Many purveyors of falsehood are around. We want to know how we may recognize a true teacher of the word from one who is not.

In the old days, the watchman would stand guard on the city walls. He would not fall asleep while on duty. He would watch out for potential dangers, and potential enemies. If he discerned danger, or enemies, he would warn the people in the city. The prophet Ezekiel tells us that preachers are the watchmen over souls. They warn you of dangers. They identify the enemies of the soul. The first mark of a true servant of God is that he preaches God's word faithfully. He does not rely on human wisdom. He does not base his teaching on secular philosophy or humanistic psychology. Instead, he refers you to the Bible, and attempts to convince you from God's word. He teaches, and he warns. That is because the Bible contains both instructions and warnings. The preacher who seeks only to soothe your conscience and say nice things to please you is not a true watchman from God.

Then, we expect the true watchman to point you to Jesus Christ, who alone can save you. He will make much of the cross of Jesus Christ, for it is by His death on the cross that atonement is made for our sins. Without the death of Christ, there would be no reconciliation with God. Without the shedding of His blood, there would be no forgiveness of our sins. The faithful servant of God preachers "Christ crucified", not a Christ who comes to make you happy and wealthy. He calls people to repentance and faith, not to experience miraculous healing and tongue speaking. And when you are backslidden, he preaches to you the same message of "Christ crucified". It is in Christ that you will find restoration. It is by His atoning death that you can be assured of forgiveness.

Thirdly, a true servant of God will direct you to trust in the sovereign God. You are not to trust in yourself, nor in him as a preacher. God knows the end from the beginning, and is in control of all things. Nothing happens by chance. It is to Him that you must turn, and in Him you must trust. You must submit yourself to Him, and not insist on your own ways. His word is our all-sufficient guide. What He says in the Bible is what He wants you to believe in. What

He promises to do, He will carry out. That is because He is a faithful God, who is incapable of telling a lie. And He has the power to carry out whatever He promises to do.

Fourthly, you must examine the fruit of the watchman's ministry. One who professes to be a servant of God will be serving God. Is he being used as an instrument of blessing by God? Are people being helped in their walk with the Lord by his ministry? Are people soundly saved in his ministry? Are the members of his church those who love the Lord, and those who live to please God, or are they mere hypocrites? A true teacher of the word does all things to God's glory, and for the edification of the saints. Sadly, there are people who profess to be pastors, and teachers of the word, but mislead others. Strangely, there are many who follow such false teachers. They do not seem to mind being used by such men, and being under bondage to them. It is only after they have been badly burned, or when they are rudely awakened by some great disappointments, that they realize the seriousness of their situation. Thank God, many have been rescued from such situations. Beware of being brainwashed by false teachers in the name of truth! Beware of being bound in your conscience to a mere man, all in the name of God!

The true servant of God works hard in the ministry. He is prepared to suffer for the faith. Time, money, and effort are spent in kingdom work. Consider the Lord Jesus Christ. While on earth, He was constantly travelling in circuit to preach. He was often exhausted and had to take time off to pray and recuperate. Consider the apostle Paul. He laboured in the ministry that the Lord had given to him, and suffered for it. Suffering is part and parcel of the ministry. Paul reminded Timothy that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12)". If our Master laboured and suffered for what He did, His disciples cannot expect to do less nor to be spared suffering. Examine the fruit to see if the man is being blessed in the midst of hard work and suffering. That is a mark of a true servant of God. By the fruit you will be able to tell the tree!

These, then, are the four marks by which you may test whether you are meeting a true watchman from God. Does he faithfully preach God's word? Does he point you to Jesus Christ? Does he direct your trust to the sovereign God? Does he labour fruitfully despite trials and persecution? God uses His servants to restore you.

Thank God for them. They are sent into your path in your time of need. But you must have a heart to learn, and the right spirit to receive instruction. You must have a hunger for God's word, and a desire to find Christ in the pages of Scripture.

Renew your commitment to Christ

This leads us to the second point under this second section, namely, that you must renew your commitment to Christ. We read, in verse 3, of the bride asking the watchmen, "Have you seen the one I love?" She had asked the right people, and was rewarded accordingly, for we read next, "Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the one I love." Then, we are told, "I held him and would not let him go ..." This speaks of our commitment to Christ, of the renewal of our consecration to Him.

I am a little embarrassed to tell you this but I think it will be helpful for you to know. As a father of four young children, I had had the great embarrassment of losing a son in the crowd on two separate occasions. Those were not pleasant experiences – to be so absorbed talking to friends and then to turn around and find the son missing in the crowd. On each of those occasions, I panicked for a moment and had to control myself and prayed to the Lord. I blamed myself for being so careless, and a deep pang of regret hit. What if my son is lost for good? What if he has been taken away by some bad people? While frantically looking around for him, a voice came over the public address system saying that a boy of a certain description had been found. The description fitted my son and I rushed over to the place specified to fetch him. Oh, what a great relief it was to have him back! You would be happy to have your son back. You would not want to let him go away from you, at least for the moment. What about the son who had been lost? He would stay close to his father, and hold his father's hand tight. He would cling to his father, and would not let go, at least for the moment.

The point I am making is this – when we have gone astray, and finally found our Lord again, what would we do? We would cling to Him in faith. We would not want to let Him go. We would not want to lose Him again through our own foolishness. You would remember Jacob wrestling with the Lord, recorded in Genesis 32. Even when the Lord touched his hip and dislocated it, he clung on and would not let go until the Lord blessed him. That is the picture

of our struggle with the Lord in prayer. But it also speaks to us of our relationship with Him. If we really want the Lord and His blessings, we must cling on to Him. A true child of God would want to return to the Lord, however far he has gone astray. Deep down in him, there is that spark of spiritual life which makes him aware that he belongs to the Lord and causes him to long for Him. When he finally returns to the Lord, he would not want to depart from Him again.

Just glance through the five verses we are considering here and see how many times the groom is referred to as 'the one I love'. In verse 1, we have, "By night on my bed I sought the one I love." In verse 2, we have, "... I will seek the one I love". In verse 3, we have, "Have you seen the one I love?" In verse 4, we have, "... when I found the one I love". In just five verses, there are four times in which the groom is regarded as "the one I love". True believers have a genuine love for the Lord. When he loses the sense of the presence of the Lord, he feels miserable. He would want to find back the One he loves. Put in other words, we want to have our assurance of salvation restored.

The first step to take towards restoration is to seek the Lord in God's word by going to hear it preached regularly and by seeking out the counsel of the godly, if necessary. Once we have found the Lord, which we will, we must renew our commitment to Him. God's word declares that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)". The Lord is ready to forgive all those who come genuinely to Him in repentance. On our part, we must submit ourselves to Him and be thankful for the salvation we find in Him. A thankful person would love his Lord, who had first loved him.

The best way to show our gratitude to the Lord is by our life and actions, not just by our words. We want to obey Him, serve Him, and worship Him. We enthrone Him in our hearts, and attempt to share the good news of salvation to others. This is what we find the bride doing – she brings the groom home to her mother's house, into the only bedroom that is there. She wants to talk to the groom, and to hear from his lips again. She wants her mother and siblings to sit at the feet of the groom, in the same way that Mary sat at the Lord's feet, in the Gospels. Remember that the bride is from the countryside, and not from the city. The house cannot be too big, and there is probably only a bedroom and a hall, with barely any

furniture, while the cooking is done at the back of the house. We have visited such homes in neighbouring countries where we have some ongoing ministries. The peculiar thing about our love for the Lord is that we want to share Him with as many people as possible, and especially with those close to us. Unlike selfish romantic love, we do not want to keep the One we love to ourselves. We see now the sense of verse 4, “Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go, until I had brought him to the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me.”

Maintain peace and communion

Finally, we have verse 5 which says, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.” These words are the same as those in chapter 2, verse 7. We have noted there that the better translation is, “... do not stir up nor awaken **my** love until **she** pleases”. This is to be consistent with the passage which, throughout, is speaking of the groom – “my love” – and not about the feeling of love. Now, the groom responds by reaffirming his love for the bride – “Let her sleep in peace to her heart’s content.” The word for “pleases” is feminine in the original language, not neuter. What we must learn here is that those who love the Lord will value the peace and blessing in His church. It is in the church that the Lord is found. The Lord considers the church as His mother and brothers and sisters (Mark 3:34-35). We would not want to disturb the peace of the church by making unnecessary and unreasonable demands. A church that has gone astray needs to be warned and attempts will need to be made by its members to restore it. But a church that is striving to be faithful to God’s word and doing its best to serve the Lord should not be disturbed unnecessarily. We must value the peace that the Lord gives to the church. You must do your utmost to maintain peace and communion with the Lord.

6.3 Conclusion

Let us summarize what we have learned. In the first section, we have learned of the danger of losing the assurance of our salvation. Assurance of salvation is a gift from God that must be treasured and

sought after. Many factors may lead to the weakening and loss of assurance. The chief cause is indolence on the part of the believer. In the second section, we have learned how to find and keep the assurance of salvation. We must seek the Lord in His word, renew our commitment to Him, and maintain peace and communion with the Lord.

The assurance of salvation is a precious gift from God. We must seek and pray for it. It is to our comfort and good that we have a strong sense of assurance. Sadly, there are Christians who do not seek for it due to ignorance of this teaching. On the other hand, there are those who claim to have assurance of salvation when they have no reason to be sure. If you have not repented of your sins, if you do not trust in Christ to save you, or if you are not walking in obedience to Him, you have no good reason to be sure. Instead, you should be told that you need to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Otherwise, you will be rejected by the Lord, whatever you claim about yourself. Repent of your sins! Come to Jesus Christ! Make up your mind to follow Him for the rest of your life!

3:6-11

Daughters of Jerusalem

- 6 Who is **she** coming out of the wilderness
Like pillars of smoke,
Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
With all the merchant's fragrant powders?
- 7 Behold, it is Solomon's couch,
With sixty valiant men around it,
Of the valiant of Israel.
- 8 They all hold swords,
Being expert in war.
Every man *has* his sword on his thigh
Because of fear in the night.

Shulamite

- 9 Of the wood of Lebanon
Solomon the King
Made himself a palanquin:
- 10 He made its pillars *of* silver,
Its support *of* gold,
Its seat *of* purple,
Its interior paved *with* love
For the daughters of Jerusalem.

Shulamite

- 11 Go forth, O daughters of Zion,
And see King Solomon with the crown
With which his mother crowned him
On the day of his **espousal**,
The day of the gladness of his heart.

Seven

God's Seal Of Assurance

We are studying the Song of Solomon, a book of spiritual allegory concerning the relationship between the Saviour and His people. Although written by King Solomon long before the Saviour Jesus Christ came to this world, the book was inspired by the Holy Spirit and has been preserved for our learning and edification.

We have seen that Chapter 3 may be divided into two parts. In the first part, consisting of verses 1-5, we have "Assurance Lost And Regained". We have learned that it is possible for us to have a genuine assurance of our own salvation. This salvation is primarily based on the teaching of God's word, and secondarily on the sense of salvation given to us by the Holy Spirit who indwells the believer. Of the two, the first, or objective, aspect of assurance takes the primacy, while we do not undervalue the second, or subjective, aspect which is an inner certainty that the Holy Spirit gives to our spirit. We also have learnt that our assurance can be weakened, and even lost. The causes of this include sinful habits, neglect of God's word, disobedience to God's commands, bodily exhaustion, and the attacks of the devil. But one common cause singled out for consideration is indolence on the part of the believer. Laziness and a careless attitude drive away the Saviour from our lives. We must bestir ourselves to regain a sense of His presence. The way to do so is by searching for Him in the word of God, in the company of God's people. Once we find Him, we must recommit our lives to Him, repenting of our sins. And we must maintain the spiritual peace and communion we have

with our Saviour.

God expects us to do something about our backsliding and sins. When we begin to do something to put things right, we will discover that God has been watching over us and leading us to Himself. He provides watchmen, or spiritual helpers, to guide us. The Lord is ready to forgive us and to welcome us into His presence. More than that, He takes the initiative to assure us of His love for His people. This is what we find in Chapter 3:6-11, from which we learn of “God’s Seal of Assurance”. There are two sections to this message: God’s promise of salvation (vv. 6-8), and God’s provision of salvation (vv. 9-11).

7.1 God’s Promise Of Salvation (vv. 6-8)

The bridal party

We begin with verses 6 to 8, which concern God’s promise of salvation to the church. The picture given to us is that of a watchman watching on the city walls. The city is Jerusalem, as will become clear in the later verses. As the watchman scans the horizon, he sees some people approaching. Are they friends or foes? The people are approaching fast and with determination, with the horses kicking up dust. The watchman asks himself, in the words of verse 6, “Who is she coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke ...?” We have deliberately changed the word “this” to “she” because, in the original Hebrew, the word is feminine and conveys the idea of a female person. It seems that the watchman discerns a lady in the centre of the group of people, seated in a carriage, and is being escorted by many valiant men. If he cannot see the lady directly because the carriage is covered over, he must have drawn that conclusion by some means such as from the colour of the carriage and from the ladies-in-waiting who accompany the carriage. This is actually the bridal party.

In this book, Solomon is the groom, who represents the coming Saviour. Solomon is a type, or symbol, of Christ. The bride, the Shulamite woman who is betrothed to him, represents the church, i.e. the people of God. Sometimes, the church is looked upon as an individual, namely, the bride, and at other times the church is represented by a group of people, namely, the bride together with

the daughters of Jerusalem. The daughters of Jerusalem are the adherents and seekers in the church. In verse 6, the church is represented by the group of people coming out from the wilderness, and heading for the city. Here is the scene of people being called out from their lives of sin and misery. This group of people is heading for Jerusalem, where the groom is waiting. They come with such energy, and such determination. They represent the church – the redeemed people of God – being energized by Christ, moving towards heaven with excitement and enthusiasm. In short, this is the picture of sinners being called out by the gospel to trust in Christ for salvation, during the present gospel age.

As the watchman watches intently, the cloud of dust reminds him of the smoke that constantly rises at the temple in the city. In the time of Solomon, the Jews worshipped God by bringing animal sacrifices. The worshipper would place his hand on the head of the animal to show, symbolically, that his sins were being transferred to the animal, which was then slaughtered and offered up to God on the altar. This was to acknowledge that the worshipper deserved death in God's hand because he had broken God's law. The animal was sacrificed in the sinner's place, and its blood was shed to cleanse him of his sins. The life was in the blood, so that the shedding of blood was the laying down of its life. By the death of the animal, the worshipper was spared death. The punishment he deserved from God was deemed to have fallen on the animal instead. In that way, the sinner was accepted by God. All this was to show that, one day, the Saviour would come to lay down His life for His people. When the time arrived, the Son of God came to take upon Himself perfect human nature so that, as God and Man in one Person, He was able to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for His people. Those who repent of their sins and trust in Christ for salvation are regarded as righteous by God because their sins have been paid for by Christ while Christ's righteousness is regarded as theirs. This is imputation – the believer's sins are imputed to Christ, while Christ's righteousness is imputed to them. In the Old Testament, this was shown by the constant offering of animals on the altar which sent columns of smoke up to God.

As the watchman looks and is reminded of the smoke from the burnt offerings, he is reminded also of the smoke that rises from the altar of incense within the temple. We are told, in verse 6, "Who

is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense ...” In those days, the altar was directly in front of the curtain that divided the sanctuary from the Most Holy Place. Incense and oil were sprinkled on the altar to produce a sweet smelling fragrance that rose up to God. The main ingredient of the incense was frankincense, which was made from the gum of a tree. This was the offering of the sinner who had been forgiven by God. So, a sinner sought forgiveness from God through the burnt offering in the outer court of the temple, and then entered the sanctuary to make offerings of thanksgiving at the altar of incense in the sanctuary. This was a picture of how sinners were going to be saved, to worship, and to serve God in the New Testament age. Believers are able to worship God acceptably only because their sins have been paid for by Christ’s death on the cross, and their prayers and praises are made perfect by Christ’s intercession for them in heaven.

The fragrance of the incense in turn reminds the watchman of the perfumed powders brought by the merchants: “Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant’s fragrant powders?” Merchants in the Old Testament speak to us of foreigners. Israel was at the crossing point of many trade routes, with merchants coming and passing through from the north, the south and the east. Merchants also came by way of the sea from the west. We are reminded of the Ishmaelites to whom Joseph was sold by his brothers. Here is a characteristic of the bridal party – there is an obvious international flavour in the way the people dress, showing that the party is made up of people from various places. This would be an additional reason why the watchman is reminded of the merchants. What is described here is to show that the church of Jesus Christ would be made up of people from all over the world, who are called out by the gospel. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the gospel is being proclaimed to all nations.

The way of salvation

As the entourage gets nearer the focus is shifted to the carriage that carries the bride, which is a picture of the way God saves His people. We are told, in verse 7, “Behold, it is Solomon’s couch, *with* sixty valiant men around it, of the valiant of Israel.” The carriage actually belongs to King Solomon. He is the one who has sent the carriage,

and the warriors, to fetch the bride from the wilderness. This would have been obvious to any onlooker for there would have been a flag bearing the royal insignia – a flag showing who the party of people belong to. This was the practice in many parts of the world. In ancient China, security firms used to escort those who hired them by carrying banners indicating who they were. Robbers would be fool-hardy to attack any of the well-known firms, which were manned by *kungfu* experts. Spiritually speaking, this is to show that our salvation is accomplished by Christ's death on the cross. Without the atoning work of Christ, there would be no salvation for anyone. We owe our salvation to Christ, who has done everything needful to save sinners. Those united to Him by faith are being brought safely to heaven. Christians are "strangers and pilgrims on the earth (Heb. 11:13)". We are only passing through this world, heading for our eternal home. Our safety is guaranteed by our Lord, who provides the "valiant warriors" to escort us.

Who are "the valiant of Israel" who escort Christ's people through their pilgrimage in this world? We are told in verse 8, "They all hold swords, *being* expert in war. Every man *has* his sword on his thigh because of fear in the night." These are the preachers of the gospel, the pastors and teachers of the word of God. They wield "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17)". The word of God guides us and warns us of dangers to our faith. The word of God feeds us and strengthens us so that we are able to fight temptations and sins, and serve God effectively. There are sixty valiant men accompanying the bride, showing that our Lord has supplied the full and adequate number of helpers to help us in our spiritual pilgrimage. The number sixty is equivalent to 6×10 , where 6 is the number representing man, while 10 represents the completeness in God. So, what is being portrayed to us is that the Lord has equipped the church with all the necessary helpers. These helpers – the preachers of God's word – use the word of God, which is sufficient to guide and help us in our Christian life and in our service to God.

The warriors remind us of David's mighty men, recorded in 2 Samuel 23. These men did great exploits and became famous in their own rights. Some were more famous than others. David was surrounded by such mighty warriors. No wonder he was such a powerful king and accomplished so much. Through the centuries, the Lord

has raised up mighty men to fight the enemies of the church. They were spiritual warriors who used the word of God to fend off the attacks of the enemies. Men like Irenaeus and Tertullian were instrumental in countering the errors of Gnosticism, which among other things, claimed that matter is evil while the spirit is good. Athanasius was raised up by God to counter the error of Arianism, which taught that God is absolutely one, and Jesus Christ is the highest of God's creatures. During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, God used Martin Luther and John Calvin to recover key doctrines of the Bible, without which we would have lost crucial biblical truths such as salvation by grace, the sovereignty of God, and the sole authority of the Bible. In the days of C. H. Spurgeon, God used him to defend the truth against the inroads of Liberalism. There have been others less well known, but each has been used by God to defend the truth and to strengthen the church. There have been many missionaries who went out to preach the word of God. We know of some like William Carey, Hudson Taylor, and David Brainerd. There have been many others unknown to us who were used mightily by God to bring the gospel to other people. These, then, are the valiant preachers used by God to defend the truth and to protect the church against the enemies.

We see now how God promises salvation to the church. He provides for the salvation of His people through the atoning death of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. He ensures their safety by providing preachers and teachers to proclaim His truth and to defend it against attacks. These things were made known to us by way of this allegory, in which the groom sends for his bride, fetching her from the wilderness to the city.

7.2 God's Provision Of Salvation (vv. 9-11)

The atoning work of Christ

From the promise of salvation, we move to the provision of salvation. We shall consider how God provides for the salvation of His people. We have already spoken on that, but we want to examine the details now. Earlier, the focus was on the bride. Now, we shall focus on the carriage. We notice that it is made of the best wood of Lebanon. We are told, in verse 9, "Of the wood of Lebanon Solomon the King

made himself a palanquin.” The emphasis on the material, namely, the wood of Lebanon, shows that the Son of God would come to this world to take upon Himself perfect human nature. The carriage is of wood – the best wood. The Saviour would come to the earth, to take upon Himself true human nature, but without sin. The wooden carriage, the vehicle of our salvation, is also an allusion to the death of Christ on the wooden cross of Calvary. We must be saved by the death of Christ on the cross, without which there is no other way of salvation. The wooden carriage is, therefore, about the atoning work of Christ.

Then, we consider the design of the carriage in which the bride is carried. When sinners are united to Christ by faith, they begin to partake of the nature of Christ. They begin to be transformed into the people that God wants them to be, all because of Christ’s death for them. Verse 10 says, “He made its pillars *of* silver, its support *of* gold, its seat *of* purple, its interior paved *with* love ...” The pillars are made of silver, which conveys to us the idea of beauty. The church has no beauty of its own, but it is made beautiful by Christ. Individual believers are not beautiful from the spiritual point of view, for “there is none righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10)”. However, by faith in Christ, they receive His righteousness by imputation. In that way, they are regarded as beautiful in God’s sight. And they will continue to be made beautiful by the Spirit of God, through the hearing of God’s word. This is true on the individual as well as the corporate level. We are told in Ephesians 5:25-27, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.”

The support of the carriage is of gold, which reminds us of the mercy seat of the ark in the Old Testament temple, which was made of pure gold. The mercy seat was sprinkled with the blood of the animal sacrifice once a year by the High Priest. This was to show that God would be present in the midst of His people only because atonement had been made for their sins. It pointed to the coming of Christ who would die on the cross, and shed His blood for the cleansing of the sins of His people. God’s glory was shown by the “shekinah”, which was the glowing cloud above the mercy seat. In

the ark were the two tables of stone on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments. The mercy seat covered the ark, to show that the demands of the law, which would have resulted in the death of the sinner, were being covered by the mercy of God. Gold also symbolizes purity and value. Sinners who are united to Christ by faith are regarded as pure and precious in God's sight.

As we look more closely at the carriage, we discover that its seat is purple – which was the colour of royalty in those days. In the East, at the height of the Chinese civilization and its influence over the surrounding nations, yellow was the royal colour. In the West, the royal colour was purple. When Jesus Christ was arrested and mocked by the Roman soldiers, one of the things done by them was to array Him in a purple robe as they mocked Him as a king. They did not realize that He was truly a king, the King of all kings. Here, the purple colour of the seat is to show that the bride sitting on it is treated as royalty. All Christians are the children of God, well-loved by Him, and precious in His sight. They are the apple of His eye. They are to be recognized as such, and treated with honour like princes and princesses. We know, however, that the world does not recognize Christians as such. We are often despised and persecuted for our faith. Life as a Christian can be tough, but we are to remember that we are the royal children of God.

Finally, consider the cosiness and comfort of the carriage. How may we describe the most exquisite sense of comfort? Silver and gold, and purple, have been used to describe wonderful qualities. There seems to be no better term left to describe that sense of supreme comfort, safety and contentment other than the word “love”. Think of the homes you live in. Is it a cosy and comfortable place – a place where you can truly relax after a day of hard work? All too often, what we have is a mere house and not truly a home. For it to be a home, it must be reasonably comfortable to live in. It does not have to be elaborate nor expensively furnished, but it should be reasonably comfortable. More importantly, there should be warmth and acceptance among the family members. If love is not found in the home, it would not be truly “home” to those who live in it. Children who are unhappy at home would not want to be home much. We want our children to grow up knowing that home is where they belong. However far they go away, because of their studies or their jobs, we want them to desire coming home. Whatever trials they

face in life in later years, however bitter their disappointments may be in the outside world, we want them to know that they will be accepted at home. That can happen only when there is love in the home.

This is how the carriage is described – the interior is paved with love. And it is paved with love “for the daughters of Jerusalem”. We have used the word “for” instead of “by”, following the King James Version of the Bible instead of the New King James Version. The carriage is made *for* the daughters of Jerusalem. This makes better sense, for we would not expect the carriage to have been built *by* the daughters of Jerusalem. The carriage is made for the bride, and the daughters of Jerusalem who are her constant companions. This is to show that believers experience the love of God through the atoning work of Christ. When gathered together, that is a constant theme of their conversation and worship. Visitors will find that this is the chief characteristic of believers in the church – they love the Lord, and they love one another. They are able to love only because the Lord first loved them. Furthermore, the Lord has promised to be present when two or more are gathered in His name. We would expect to experience the closeness of the Lord in the church, where His people are gathered. A church that is right in doctrine but lacking in love is a misnomer. When there is constant quarreling and suspicion between the members, it will not be a happy place to come to. This, of course, poses a challenge to us. Is love experienced in the church? Is the beauty of Christ seen in His people? God has provided us the security of salvation in Christ, the beauty of righteousness in Christ, the purity of life in the finished work of Christ, and the majesty of adoption in Christ. Best of all, we are surrounded by the love of God in Christ. Any visitor should be able to see the love and beauty of Christ in the midst of His people.

Christ our Redeemer

We have covered much ground. We must now stand back and ponder on the privileges that we enjoy in Christ. We must ask, “Who has made all this possible?” It is at this juncture that we are told, in verse 11, “Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his espousal, the day of the gladness of his heart.” We have changed the

word “wedding” to “espousal”, which is the better of the two possible translations. This is not the wedding day of the King, for there is no mention of that at all. It would be strange to have so important an event as the wedding of the king left without any description, while much has been said about the fetching of the bride. We must understand that in a Jewish marriage, there was first the betrothal, which was more binding than our modern engagement. When betrothed, the couple legally were considered husband and wife, although they would not live together yet. There was the period of waiting, in which preparations would be made for the wedding day. When the wedding day arrived, the groom would send for the bride. There would then be the marriage supper, at which the couple would be wedded. The celebration could last from one to seven days. What we have here is the fetching of the bride, with no wedding celebration mentioned at all. This is the espousal period, in which the bride is betrothed to the groom. The bride is waiting for the groom. The bride is, in fact, being taken to the groom, but the wedding day has not arrived yet.

Our attention is made to focus upon King Solomon, in regal majesty. He is described as wearing the crown that his mother crowned him with on the day of his espousal. If Solomon represents Christ, who does the mother represent? The answer is to be sought in the Scripture. The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself. We are told in Revelation 12 that Satan, the fiery red dragon, attempted to destroy the male Child but was thwarted by God. That male Child has to be Jesus Christ, for He was crucified, rose from death, and was taken up to heaven. We are told in Revelation 12:5 that the woman “bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne.” Who is the woman who gave birth to the male Child? We are told, towards the end of the chapter, that the dragon attempted to destroy the woman but failed. The dragon then turned his fury upon the rest of her offspring, “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ”. It is clear that the other offspring of the woman are the Christians, which means that the woman is the church.

The church, i.e. the people of God considered collectively, gave birth to the Christ whom Satan attempted to destroy from the beginning. God had foretold the enmity between the Satan and Christ,

after the fall of Adam and Eve. We read in Genesis 3:15, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” This is recognized by all Christians as the first time that the gospel is proclaimed in the Bible. Satan would attempt to destroy the Saviour and, in the process, the Saviour would crush him. Christ died on the cross but, by His death, conquered Satan’s last stronghold, namely, death. The woman is the church, from whom came the Saviour. Satan was unsuccessful in his attempt to destroy the Saviour, so he now turns his fury upon the members of the church. The church, however, crowns Christ as Lord. Christ has completed His work on the cross. He has died, risen, and is now glorified. The day of His espousal – i.e. of His glorification, after His death and resurrection – was the day of the gladness of His heart. We are told in Isaiah 53:11, “He shall see the labour of His soul, *and* be satisfied ...” The Lord continues to take pleasure in the salvation of souls.

We see now how Jesus Christ is portrayed in this allegory. He is our glorious Redeemer. He deserves the praise and worship of His people for what He has accomplished for them. He is now reigning in heaven. The time will come when all kings and powers will be subject to Him. All glory and praise be to our King and Saviour!

It is worthwhile digressing a little to consider the principle of interpretation we have adopted for this book. We have repeatedly said that this is a book of spiritual allegory. This book must not be interpreted literally, which would bring us countless difficulties in the understanding of various passages, and also cause us to lose so much of its spiritual riches. The description of the carriage of King Solomon, with all the details concerning its various parts, would lend support to the basic correctness of our approach in understanding the book. Why should our attention be drawn to the details of the parts if they are not to be understood allegorically? It would be odd if no purpose is served by the sudden focus on the details of the carriage. Furthermore, an allegory is different from a parable, in which one or two main points are conveyed by the story without the details conveying any spiritual significance. In an allegory, however, the details are intended to convey certain aspects of truth connected with the story. You would agree that the present passage, and the book as a whole, is so rich and beautiful when interpreted as allegory.

7.3 Conclusion

We have considered the promise of salvation by God to His people. The king sends forth his carriage to fetch the bride from the wilderness. That portrays the spread of the gospel, which calls out Christ's people from the wilderness of the world, and of sin. The carriage is escorted by sixty mighty warriors, which portrays the safety given to believers as they live by faith on earth, being guided and defended by the truth proclaimed by preachers and teachers of the word.

We have also considered God's provision of salvation to the church. The carriage is beautifully crafted and fully adequate to fetch the bride. That portrays the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ's atoning death to save His people. The daughters of Zion are told to focus their attention on King Solomon who is crowned with the crown given to him by his mother on the day of his espousal. This is to say that Christians must focus their attention upon Christ, who has made salvation possible, together with all the accompanying blessing.

There are some closing applications that we must consider. First, we must trust the preaching of the gospel to save souls. As the gospel is proclaimed faithfully, God's elect will be called out of the world. The church of Jesus Christ will be built up. The gates of Hades cannot prevail against it. Satan may do his worse, but the word of God will stand. The kingdom of God will extend. We must believe that the preaching of God's word, in the power of His Spirit, is all that is needed to build up the church of Jesus Christ. We must not be diverted from the proclamation of God's word. We must not attempt to improve on God's appointed method to save souls, by introducing other methods of men's making.

Then, we must ponder the excellence of Christ more and more. We must know Him better, love Him more sincerely, and give ourselves to Him more whole heartedly. All these can happen only if we study His word more deeply, meditate more upon His word, and learn to enjoy listening to His word expounded. This is best done in the company of God's people, in the context of the local church.

Finally, we must seek assurance of our salvation in Christ, who is revealed in the word of God. The seal on an official document guarantees the genuineness of its contents. The one who puts the seal on the document is declaring that he promises to fulfill all that is contained in the document. God's promise and provision of salvation

are already sealed with the blood of Christ. The more we understand the promise and provision of salvation in Christ, the greater will be our assurance. How we must bemoan the shallowness of our understanding concerning these things! How we must acknowledge the poverty of our love for Him! If you have strayed from Him, arise and seek Him today! Seek Him with all your heart, and you will find Him!

“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Heb. 6:11-12).”

Part V

**CHRIST'S LOVE FOR THE
CHURCH**

4:1-6

Solomon to Shulamite

1 Behold, you *are* fair, my love!

Behold, you *are* fair!

You *have* dove's eyes behind your veil.

Your hair *is* like a flock of goats,

Going down from Mount Gilead.

2 Your teeth *are* like a flock of shorn sheep

Which have come up from the washing,

Every one of which bears twins,

And none *is* barren among them.

3 Your lips *are* like a strand of scarlet,

And your mouth is lovely.

Your temples behind your veil

Are like a piece of pomegranate.

4 Your neck *is* like the tower of David,

Built for an armory,

On which hang a thousand bucklers,

All shields of mighty men.

5 Your two breasts *are* like two fawns,

Twins of a gazelle,

Which feed among the lilies.

Shulamite

6 Until the day breaks

And the shadows flee away,

I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh

And to the hill of frankincense.

Eight

Christ's Estimate Of The Church

We come to “The Song of Solomon”, Chapter 4, which teaches about Christ’s love for the church. In the first part, covering verses 1 to 6, we learn of “Christ’s Estimate Of The Church”. God-willing, this will be followed by a study of verses 7 to 16, from which we learn of “Christ’s Delight In His Church”. An allegory, by its nature, tends to make a point-for-point comparison. As a love poem, the basic intention of the book is to convey to the reader the mutual love between Christ and the church. This is done by means of the relationship between King Solomon and the Shulamite woman, to whom he is betrothed.

The purpose of this passage and, indeed, of the whole chapter, is to assure believers of Christ’s love for them. This is so much needed because believers are under constant pressure in the world and have to bear many trials for their faith. Contrary to the “health-and-wealth gospel” taught in many churches today, the Bible teaches us to be prepared for trials, sufferings and self-denials that will come to believers because of their faith. The Lord tells us in Luke 14:27, “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” This does not mean that the Christian life is dull, gloomy and depressing. No, the Christian life has its inner joy, and its sense of fulfillment, given by the Lord. However, the sense of joy and fulfillment is experienced in the midst of trials and sufferings

which we have to bear with. If you are new to the Christian faith, please be prepared for this!

What are the trials and sufferings likely to come to us? They may be from without, or they may be from within us. From without comes persecution from the unbelieving world, misunderstandings from family members, and ridicule from unconverted friends. These trials vary in intensity and in frequency, but they are sure to come to the believer. With the Lord's help, and with growing experience and spiritual maturity, we will be more and more able to handle them. Then, there are the trials from within us. Remaining sins trouble us, and temptations to sin can be particularly strong. When converted, we are given a new desire to live a holy life and a new ability to obey God's word. All these are due to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But that does not mean we are free from inner struggles – against the stirrings of lusts, the tendency to be lazy, the inclination to do what is convenient and comfortable to ourselves over against what is pleasing to God, and the like.

These trials, both from without and from within, often cause us to be disappointed, discouraged, and depressed. One of the ways the Lord comforts us is by revealing His love for us. Even if we are joyful and filled with the Spirit most of the time, the assurance of Christ's love for us is a welcome tonic. In the present passage, we learn of Christ's estimate of His church. He sees us as beautiful because He has made us so. He loves us and has made us to be what we are. There are three sections to this message.

8.1 [Beauty In The Eyes Of The Lord \(vv. 1-2\)](#)

The beauty of the bride

First, we learn that the church is beautiful in the eyes of the Lord. We often say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Here, the beholder is Christ. We are told, in verse 1, "Behold, you *are* fair, my love! Behold, you *are* fair! You *have* dove's eyes behind your veil. Your hair *is* like a flock of goats, going down from Mount Gilead." This is a general statement of our standing before God and of how the Lord looks upon us. In the eyes of the world, the church is nothing. We have no position, power, or glory. The world despises the Christians. This is generally true. We know that there are individuals who are

attracted to the Christian faith because of what they observe in the lives of their Christian friends. The Christians may not be perfect people but they love one another, there is a certain inner joy in them, and they appear to have values and a sense of direction in life. Some parents even encourage their children to go to church to seek for good life partners there. They do not realize that the true Christians will not court non-Christians, let alone marry them.

Yes, there are non-Christians who are attracted to the Christian life, but the world at large does not appreciate the Christians. God, however, loves His children, and Christ looks upon the church as beautiful. And beautiful she is, for she has been purchased by His precious blood which was shed on the cross of Calvary, and He continues to cleanse her “with the washing of water by the word (Eph. 5:26)”. Believers show that they belong to Christ by getting baptized, and they continue to grow in holiness by the hearing of God’s word. The Holy Spirit in the believer transforms him as he hears and obeys the word.

The eyes and hair

The transformed character of the believer is portrayed by the eyes of a dove. The eyes of a dove are round and clear, showing gentleness, meekness, and docility. They are unlike the eyes of an eagle or a tiger, which show their readiness to pounce on their prey. Gentleness, teachability and humility are qualities found in a believer. One of the first things the Holy Spirit does in us when we are converted is to subdue our aggressive nature. Saul was full of fury and hatred against the Christians, but when confronted by the Lord on the road to Damascus, he was subdued. When converted, you find peace with God, contentment in life, and tranquility of spirit. This has been the experience for many of us. When converted, we found rest for our troubled souls in the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that it is God’s grace that has done this for us. John Newton expressed it in his hymn, saying, “ ‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed!”

Then we consider the wavy, black hair of the bride – in all its fullness and length. Her hair appears like a flock of goats going down from Mount Gilead. It seems odd that the beauty of a lady should be compared to a flock of goats, but its very oddity shows

that there are qualities of the person being alluded to rather than her actual physical beauty being praised. What does the hair speak of concerning the person? We are reminded of 1 Corinthians 11:3, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman *is* man, and the head of Christ *is* God.” Then, it says in verse 10, “For this reason the woman ought to have a *symbol of* authority on *her* head, because of the angels.” In its context, these words show that a woman is to be submitted to man. God created man and woman equal in His sight. They were to complement each other in life. As a result of the Fall, they are equally in need of salvation in Christ. However, it is God’s intention that they have different, complementary, roles in life. There are biological and physical differences between man and woman. Man is generally bigger and physically stronger than woman so that he is more suited to rough work such as carrying heavy loads and fighting in wars. The feminine hormones in woman make her more suited to the role of a homemaker and caregiver. It is God’s will that man takes the role of leadership in the country, in the home, and in the church. This is not to say that women cannot function well, or are totally excluded from any leadership role. We are only saying that it is God’s will for man to lead, and for the woman to submit to the rightful authority of man. When man fails to play the role of head, a woman may arise to take his role, as happened in the case of the prophetess, Deborah, in time of the Judges. A Christian man who fails to act as head of the family is not setting a good example to his children. Such a family is unlikely to be greatly blessed by God.

Coming back to the hair of the bride, we note that it is first a symbol of submission to rightful authority. It is, secondly, a symbol of beauty. We are told in 1 Corinthians 11:15, “But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.” Women throughout the ages, and in all cultures, keep longer hair compared to men, to display their femininity and beauty. In recent days, there have been women who cut their hair short like that of men, such that it is difficult to tell whether they are male or female. Also, there have been men who keep long hair such that it is impossible to tell whether they are male or female when looked from the back. Those people depart from the norm, but it is God’s will that men should be dressed clearly as men, and women as women. We do not want to dwell on these departures from the norm. We are

considering the beauty of the bride as seen in her hair. The hair of the bride is like a flock of goats moving down the hill, which shows that it is wavy in an orderly fashion. In Ephesians 6:17, we are told to “take the helmet of salvation”, as we put on the other pieces of armour. The helmet is meant to protect the head. Here, the hair covers the head, which is the seat of our thoughts. The wavy hair, like a flock of moving goats, show that the thoughts of the bride are clear and orderly. She is a rational and clear-thinking lady, and not merely an emotional and sentimental one. The beauty of her hair is intended to show the beauty of her thought-life.

The believer whose life is regulated by God’s word will stand out in obvious spiritual beauty. He is stable in his belief, and not easily drawn away by false teaching. He is balanced in his grasp of Bible truths, and not easily offset by issues and trends of the time. He is clear-minded, and able to distinguish the main matters from the peripheral ones. On the corporate level, the church that is adorned with clear, systematic, teaching will stand out in an age of superficiality. Visitors will sense the warmth and vitality of those who walk closely with their God. The Lord is pleased with the church that reflects His character and is faithful to His word.

The teeth

Verse 2 says, “Your teeth *are* like a flock of shorn *sheep* which have come up from the washing, every one of which bears twins, and none *is* barren among them.” When a person bares his teeth, we are able to see whether there is a tooth missing. In the case of this bride, not one is missing. The teeth are in pairs – nice and even, white and clean – like sheep that have been shorn, and coming up after a good wash. Why should the bride be showing her teeth? Animals bare their teeth when they are about to attack their enemies. Humans show their teeth when they smile. The more broadly you smile, the clearer your teeth are seen. If you have nice teeth, they make your smile beautiful and attractive. The smile speaks of warmth of heart and friendliness of disposition. These are characteristics of converted people. Those who have trusted in Christ for salvation would have joy in them, and a warm and friendly heart towards other people.

We have considered the eyes, the hair, and the teeth (or, rather, the smile) of the bride. Christian ladies who are gentle, meek, and

sweet in spirit are truly attractive. Coupled with clear-mindedness and a good understanding of God's word, we have a truly beautiful person. This is not someone who has "beauty without brains". Added to those qualities are friendliness and warm-heartedness. What more do you want in a bride? She seems to be the perfect bride! But we must remember that this is the picture of the bride of Christ, the church. The Lord has made her the beauty that she is. The church has been purchased and cleansed by the blood of Christ. She is being transformed by the Holy Spirit in accordance to the teaching of the Bible. She is submitted to the Lord, and to all lawful authorities. She follows the teaching of God's word and is not easily swayed by "every wind of doctrine", nor easily drawn away by the trends and fashions of the time. She has a love towards other people which is shown by a warm and friendly disposition. The church is truly beautiful, and well-loved by the Lord.

8.2 Additional Assets Of The Bride (vv. 3-5)

We have considered the looks of the bride. She is beautiful to behold. Her eyes and her hair make her look particularly beautiful. Her warm and friendly smile is so attractive. Which man will not be stricken by her beauty? But we must control ourselves and consider the other assets she possesses. We consider her speech, her abilities, and her emotion.

Her speech

While describing the bride's teeth, the writer cannot help but notice her lips. He, therefore, goes on to say, in verse 3, "Your lips *are* like a strand of scarlet, and your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil *are* like a piece of pomegranate." Generally speaking, our lips are red in colour. The redness causes the lips to stand out on our faces. Throughout the world, the traditional colour of lipsticks is red. Today, lipsticks come in different colours, including purple, and even black, but red is still the favoured colour. Women use lipsticks to enhance the colour of their lips. The lips form the shape of the mouth. Some ladies have particularly well-shaped lips, making their mouths beautiful, just as there are those who have beautiful eyes and noses. When we speak of the lips and the mouth, we are alluding to the speech of the person. In Matthew 15:8, the Lord rebuked the

Pharisees for their hypocrisy, saying, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.” In Romans 10:10, we are told, “For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Furthermore, it says in Romans 10:15, ‘And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things.*”’ We see, then, that the lips and mouth are related to speech in worship, in the confessing of faith, and in the preaching of the gospel. Our speech is to be employed in the service of God.

The bride has beautiful lips and a lovely mouth. Since these are a reference to the speech of believers, we need to ask if we have employed it well in the service of God. Do we pray regularly? Do we sing heartily to the Lord? Do we confess our faith to the world and proclaim the gospel to all? Apart from these, we have to consider the use of our speech to edify one another. Is our speech gracious and “seasoned with salt (Col. 4:6)”? The words we utter, and the manner we utter them, have a tremendous effect upon our hearers. You would know of individuals who are such a joy to be with because they are so warm, understanding, and encouraging. Their words are balm to our bruised souls. There are others who make us unhappy each time we meet them. When we analyze the situation to determine why this is so, we discover that their speech is so caustic and the way they say things is such that our hearts are constantly being pierced at. These are very unedifying people to be with. Then, there are the individuals who are the opposite of these, who try to be encouraging but in the wrong way. They do not finish listening to what we have to say and, therefore, do not understand what we are saying, yet they are so quick to want to encourage us. Such people are so artificial in their manners and so unhelpful to talk to because they do not truly listen to others. Let us make sure that our speech is truly edifying to others. “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers (Eph. 4:29).”

This leads us to consider the temples of the bride which are hidden behind the veil. It would seem that the veil is made of gauze, so that what is covered can still be discerned. The temples, or sides of the head, are described as like a piece of pomegranate which has

been opened, ready for eating. It sparkles red, like rubies, juicy and clear as crystal. It is so attractive! The attractiveness of the temples would appear to lie in the fact that they are partially hidden behind the veil. This is to show that the bride is modest and humble about her intelligence, which the temples represent. A person with a broad forehead, and therefore prominent temples, is supposed to be intelligent. We have considered earlier the wise and edifying speech of the bride, which reveals her intelligence. We are now shown the modesty and humility of the bride, who does not parade her intelligence but covers her head appropriately. Here is someone who is not showy and obtrusive about her wisdom and knowledge. There are beautiful women who talk too loudly, too much, and are attention-seeking. They are not attractive, despite their physical beauty. The believer should not appear threatening to others around him. His wisdom should be sought by others, and not imposed upon them. He bears witness to others, carrying out “aggressive evangelism”, but he should not be aggressive in his approach and mannerism. “Aggressive evangelism” is about taking initiatives, not about our mannerism. Furthermore, the church should not be showy and attention-seeking in the world. We do not need to declare our presence by addressing social and political issues. We quietly act upon issues as they arise, and as we are able, in accordance to God’s word. We do not want to be diverted from being a centre of truth, a beacon to the spiritually lost, and a refuge for wounded and bruised souls. The church should be modest and humble in the world.

Her readiness to serve

Consider another asset of the bride, namely her readiness to serve the Lord. We read, in verse 4, “Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an armoury, on which hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.” No lady would like her neck to be described like this – strong, muscular, and solid. But this is the description of the Tower of David, whose qualities are found in the neck of the bride, which supports the head. The Tower of David is the armoury in Jerusalem in which are kept the weapons – both the offensive and the defensive ones. The Tower is strong and impregnable to the enemies. The weapons are to be used by the mighty men, who can be counted on to fend off the enemies and to protect the nation. This is to show that Jesus Christ, the greater Son of David – the One

greater than Solomon – has His mighty men to defend His people from the enemies of souls and to protect them from dangers. This is a reference to the Christians who are given various gifts, or abilities, to serve Him in the church. The Lord trusts them and has entrusted them with the task of defending His church.

In life, we experience betrayal and lack of trust from others. We are not valued, our abilities are not recognized, and we feel “used” by others. We successfully accomplish a task, but the credit goes to someone else. We have the necessary qualifications, but others less qualified are assigned to a project. We have obvious abilities to be useful, but others feel threatened by our presence. We are sidelined, unappreciated, and not valued. This happens in the place of work, in the family, and also among Christians. When betrayed by Christians, we can feel terribly hurt. Our spirit can become dampened, so that we become discouraged and cynical. This is when we must be very careful, for it is a common strategy of Satan to destroy our usefulness in the Lord’s service. Satan often sows fear or discouragement in our hearts so that we become less useful in God’s service. We must fight him off with all the weapons that the Lord has equipped us with – using both the defensive and the offensive ones. In Ephesians 6, we are told to put on all the pieces of the spiritual armour, and use the weapons of prayer and the word of God.

The Lord knows that His people can be relied upon to fight His battles. He is entrusting the faith to His people. The church must propagate the faith from one generation to another, without it being changed – faithfully passing on the truth and spreading it far and wide. If you are truly born again, you belong to the Lord and you are valued by Him. Each of us has been given gifts to serve Him with. There are those who can preach. There are those who can give. There are others who can encourage. And all of us can pray. When we are united as a church, we are like the impregnable Tower of David. The world may not value us, the world may scorn the church, but what does it matter? If the Lord trusts His people, and values our service, what is our reputation before men? Our self-esteem does not depend on the approval of men. It is sufficient to be valued by our Lord.

Her love and commitment

There is another asset seen in the bride, namely her love and com-

mitment to the Lord. This is shown in verse 5, which says, “Your two breasts *are* like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies.” Some artists would want to paint the naked woman with her two dangling breasts, and regard that as art. Our purpose, however, should be higher than that. We seek the spiritual significance, the loftier meaning. We have seen that the hair of the bride is symbolic of her submission to authority and of her beauty in thought and understanding. That arises from the fact that the hair covers the head, which is the symbol of authority and the seat of reasoning. The New Testament equivalent is the helmet which covers the head, in Ephesians 6. The helmet of salvation will shield us from the fiery darts of Satan, which are the lies and doubts he shoots into our mind. In the same way, we should not focus attention on the physical breasts but, rather, see those as a reference to the part of the body closest to the heart – the seat of our emotion. We know that emotion by itself cannot be the measure of truth. We must therefore be careful not to trust mere feelings, or allow our lives to be ruled by feelings. At the same time, we must recognize that the emotion is given to us by God. It is a faculty of our human personality. From it arises our feelings. We must learn to regulate our feelings with the truth of Scripture, and cultivate feelings that are right and good. Feelings of hatred and jealousy should not be entertained. Love and compassion should be cultivated.

When we talk about right feelings, which is the chief for the Christian? We can quite safely say that love should be the chief characteristic of the Christian’s emotion. We are referring to love that arises from the experience of the love of God in Jesus Christ. We are able to love God only because He first loved us and sent His only begotten Son to save us. There is nothing lovely about us, yet the Lord laid down His life for us and made us lovely in His sight. We are so unworthy of His love, yet He loves us to the end. When we ponder on the love of God shown to us in His Son, we are overwhelmed. The only right response is for us to love the Lord and to give ourselves wholeheartedly to Him. We know that our love for Him is so imperfect, but believers who know the love of God would want to love Him and commit their lives to Him. We desire to be faithful to His word, and loyal to His cause.

Our love for God must be shown in our love for men as well, for these are the chief of the commandments. In particular, we must

love God's people. Sad to say, that is not often seen. There is so much carnal rivalry between Christians, so much competition and backstabbing. There is a proper place to admonish and correct other Christians, and there is a proper place to separate from those who continue adamantly in sin or wrong teaching. But those situations are quite easily distinguished from carnal rivalry. The competitive spirit can show itself in ugly ways, causing so much heartache to God's people, and so much damage to God's work. Many problems in church are caused by this – a lack of love for God and His people, with too much love for self. There seems to be no concern for the hurt caused to God's servants, no concern for the damage caused to gospel work, and no concern for the dishonour brought to Christ. There is insistence on one's own ways, one's rights, and one's points of view. We are such great sinners! We need to repent of our self-centredness and our self-will.

Believers need to show greater love and commitment to the Lord, for He loves His people despite their faltering love for Him.

8.3 The Resolve Of The Bride (v. 6)

Let us stand back and reflect on what has been covered. In the first section, we considered the eyes, the hair, and the smile of the bride. She has a gentle spirit, intelligence in the things of God, and a warm heart. In the second section, we considered her lips and mouth, her temples, her neck, and her breasts. She has the assets of gracious speech, readiness of service, and love for the Lord and His people. In this third section, we consider the resolve of the bride. We know that we are not perfect. At the same time, we are aware that God treats us as perfect because of what Christ has accomplished in our salvation. We are beautiful in God's sight only because of the continuing work of the Lord in our lives. If the Lord had not saved us, and if the Holy Spirit does not continue to transform us, none of us will be beautiful. The full ugliness in each of us will show more and more. In view of this, what is our response?

The right response is shown to us in verse 6: "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense." These words are familiar to us. We have met them in Chapter 2, verse 17: "Until the day breaks

and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Bether (or Separation).” There, we learned of the need to be yearning for the Lord’s return. The Lord has gone to prepare a place for us in heaven. He will one day return to take His people to be with Him. Meanwhile, the church should long for His coming, which will be like a young deer bouncing over the mountains that currently separate us. In our present passage, an additional thought is added, namely that the bride resolves to go up into the mountain to await the return of the groom. This seems to be a reference to Mount Zion, on which is the temple where worship is carried out.

Myrrh was a fragrant liquid produced from an aromatic plant. It was the main ingredient in the anointing oil used in Israel. It was used to anoint a person who was being set apart to serve God in the capacity of a prophet, a priest, or a king. Frankincense was the chief ingredient in the incense offered on the altar of incense in the temple in Jerusalem. It produced a sweet fragrance that rose up to God. It represented the prayer and praise of the worshipper. The idea conveyed to us is that the church must resolve to set herself apart for God and spend time in prayer and praise. We live in the world, but we need not be of the world. We serve God in the world, but we must take time off to worship Him. We do not want to be influenced by the world. We do not want to absorb worldly values and live worldly lives. We want to be in much fellowship with God’s people, to worship God together, to hear His word, and be in His presence. It is so easy to be full of zeal for the Lord, to be active in His service, and then to gradually lose our spiritual sharpness and the heart of worship. It is easy to have the spirit of Martha instead of the spirit of Mary. While there are some Christians who seem to be so full of piety to the extent of becoming virtually useless in God’s service, there are more Christians who are so full of activity to the extent of losing their spirituality. Beware of the spirit of Martha!

8.4 Conclusion

As we ponder on the love of the Lord for His church, do we not bemoan the fact that we do not love Him more? The Lord looks upon His church as beautiful, and He continues to sanctify His church by

the power of His Spirit, in accordance to His word. The church has so many qualities that make her beautiful in the Lord's sight. That the world should miss seeing those qualities is understandable. That believers should fail to see those qualities is such a pity, for they miss the inner comfort of knowing the love of Christ for His people.

We must allow the truth of Christ's love for the church to sink into our understanding. Consider a young lady and a young man who are in love with each other. The young man does not feel embarrassed to tell her that she is beautiful because he loves her deeply. If you are that young lady, would you not make greater effort to beautify yourself? Would you not cut and perm your hair nicely, put reasonable make up on yourself, and dress well so that you appear even more beautiful? You wouldn't just grin sheepishly each time the young man expresses his appreciation of you. Instead, you would thank him and resolve to be even more beautiful. The Lord loves us and sees so many things beautiful about us. The right response is for us to thank Him and attempt to be even more pleasing to our Lord by improving on our spiritual qualities.

Let us end by noting that we owe everything that we are, and everything that we have, to the Lord. We must resolve to keep a close walk with Him, and to live for Him. May God help us to do that.

4:7-16

Solomon to the Shulamite

7 You *are* all fair, my love,

And *there is* no spot in you.

8 Come with me from Lebanon, *my* spouse,

With me from Lebanon.

Look from the top of Amana,

From the top of Senir and Hermon,

From the lions' dens,

From the mountains of the leopards.

9 You have ravished my heart,

My sister, *my* spouse,

You have ravished my heart

With one *look* of your eyes,

With one link of your necklace.

10 How fair is your love,

My sister, *my* spouse!

How much better than wine is your love,

And the scent of your perfumes

Than all spices!

11 Your lips, O *my* spouse,

Drip as the honeycomb;

Honey and milk *are* under your tongue;

And the fragrance of your garments

Is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

- 12 A garden enclosed
Is my sister, *my* spouse,
A spring shut up,
A fountain sealed.
- 13 Your plants *are* an orchard of pomegranates
With pleasant fruits,
Fragrant henna with spikenard,
- 14 Spikenard and saffron,
Calamus and cinnamon,
With all trees of frankincense,
Myrrh and aloes,
With all the chief spices –
- 15 A fountain of gardens,
A well of living waters,
And streams from Lebanon.

Shulamite

- 16 Awake, O north *wind*,
And come, O south!
Blow upon my garden,
That its spices may flow out.
Let my beloved come to his garden
And eat its pleasant fruits.

Nine

Christ's Delight In His Church

The book of “The Song Of Solomon” is a spiritual allegory in which the author uses his own person as a symbol, or type, of the coming Saviour. Solomon was aware that God was inspiring him to write Scripture, such that the love relationship between him and the Shulamite woman was used to portray deeper, loftier truths regarding the relationship between the Lord and His church. The Shulamite woman represents the church, considered corporately, or the individual believer as a member of the church. Occasionally, other members of the church are referred to in the imagery of “the daughters of Jerusalem”.

Chapter 4 of the book is about “The Love of Christ for His Church”. The chapter may be divided into two, the first part of which concerns “Christ’s Estimate of the Church”, covering verses 1 to 6. The church is seen passively, as the object of Christ’s love. She has been redeemed by the blood of Christ and is being transformed by the Holy Spirit according to the truths of Scripture, such that she is beautiful in thought, speech, loyalty, love, and consecration. The bride has been admired from the aspects of her looks, her character, and the inner disposition of her heart. The second part, covering verses 7 to 16, concerns “Christ’s Delight in His Church”. Here, we are going to see how the church is perceived actively. The Lord takes delight in the church not only because of what she is, but also because of how she lives. There are four sections to this message, each revolving around a key word, namely, *vision*, *devotion*, *consecration*, and

proclamation.

9.1 Delight In Sharing A Lofty Vision (vv. 7-8)

In the first section, we have the Lord sharing with the church a lofty vision. The groom has expressed his love for the bride because of her beauty. The bride, in response to the groom's delight in her, has expressed her resolve to keep herself close to him until he returns. We read in verse 6, "Until the day breaks and the shadow flees away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense." We have seen that this expresses the church's resolve to keep close communion with her Lord while on earth. This is expressed by the picture of going into the mountain where there is peace and tranquility, suited to meditation and prayer. As though in response, the groom invites the bride for a tour up in the mountains to capture a vision of her overall mission on earth. But before that, the groom reminds the bride of her adequacy – her readiness – to handle the work set before her.

The adequacy of the church

Verse 7 says, "You *are* all fair, my love, and *there is* no spot in you." The groom has praised the bride for her beauty before, and he will continue to do so. Each time, however, the word "all" is never used except in this place. In Chapter 1, verse 15, we have, "Behold, you *are* fair, my love! Behold, you *are* fair!" In Chapter 4, verse 1, we have, "Behold, you *are* fair, my love! Behold, you *are* fair!" In Chapter 4, verse 10, we have, "How fair is your love, my sister, my spouse!" In none of these places is the word "all" used. However, in Chapter 4, verse 7, the word "all" is used. This is to show the completeness, or adequacy, of the bride and, therefore, of the church. There seems to be nothing lacking in the beauty of the bride. And there is nothing superfluous to spoil her beauty. An individual may have all the qualities of beauty such as good body proportions, symmetry in facial features, big eyes, beautifully shaped lips, etc., only to be spoilt by a nose that is flat. Or, she may have all the qualities of beauty only to be spoilt by a prominent patch of birth mark on her cheek. This is not the case, however, with the bride. She is complete in her beauty, with nothing lacking, and with nothing superfluous.

This is to convey the idea that the church – the bride of Christ – is perfect, endowed with all the necessary qualities and gifts to live well and to serve the Lord while on earth. This is not to say that she is already perfect qualitatively and morally, as she will be when in heaven. No, what we have here is a perfection or completeness that is suited to her needs on earth. A well-trained soldier is ready to go into the battlefield. A well-trained medical school graduate is fully qualified to function as a doctor. A well-trained son is ready to go away from home to earn a living without the parents worrying overmuch for him. The church is well-equipped by the Lord to survive in this hostile world. Indeed, she is ready not merely to survive, but to serve the Lord well. This is true because the Lord has died for her in order that she may have life. The Lord has cleansed her so that she may stand righteous before God. The Lord has given her all the necessary gifts so that she is able to function as she ought. If she is not functioning well, the fault does not lie with the Lord but with herself. It may be that she is not using all the resources the Lord has endowed her with, or she may be going her own way instead of abiding in the Lord and drawing strength from Him. It may be that she is relying on human wisdom instead of trusting in God's word.

In Galatians 5:22-23 we have these words, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law." The word "fruit" is in the singular, yet nine qualities are listed. The list is not exhaustive, since we are told, "Against such there is no law." The expression, "against such", shows that there are other similar qualities that have not been listed here. The singular, "fruit", indicates that all the qualities – whether listed here or not – constitute a complete set given to the believer so that he can live a life that is pleasing to God. By living under the control of the Holy Spirit, the believer is enabled to show forth all the qualities that make him truly beautiful in God's sight. We know that all believers do not live a qualitatively perfect life on earth, but the spiritual resource is given to him to live in such a way that God treats him as perfect in Christ. This truth is expressed by the words, "*there* is no spot in you" in the Song of Solomon, Chapter 4, verse 7.

God looks upon the believer who walks in the Spirit as "without spot" because Jesus Christ has died for him and made him clean by His blood. The sinner who repents of his sin and trusts in Christ for

salvation is treated as clean, and clothed with the righteousness of Christ. *Positionally*, he is regarded as perfect in Christ. *Practically*, he is being perfected daily as he strives to grow in holiness by the power of the Holy Spirit. The same can be said of the church, which is made up of believers considered corporately. The church, which is the bride of Christ, is regarded as righteous in God's sight. At the same time, she is being sanctified daily. This truth is taught in Ephesians 5:25-27, which says, "...Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish." We see, then, that the church is well-loved, well-endowed, and well-able to live for the Lord on earth.

A lofty vision

Having reminded the church of her adequacy, the Lord invites the church to have a lofty vision of her mission on earth. This is shown in verse 8, which says, "Come with me from Lebanon, *my* spouse, with me from Lebanon. Look from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards." The bride has just expressed her desire to keep close communion with the groom, in verse 6. In response to that, the groom draws near to invite her to have a stroll on the mountains – to look down upon the country from the tops of the well-known resorts of Mount Amana, Mount Senir and Mount Hermon. This is not only to view the beauty of the scenery, but also to have a broader and wider view of the country. From the vantage point of a mountain top, the bride will be able to see far. From the three different mountains, she would be able to get a better idea of the total landscape.

The spiritual lesson is that the church must have a lofty vision of her mission on earth. She should have a long-term perspective in order to strategize her short-term objectives. She should have a wider view of God's will in order to obey Him in the particulars of His commands. A student is able to study well if he understands the overall structure of the course he is taking. A traveller is able to plan his journey well if he knows his ultimate destination and the general outlay of the terrain he has to traverse. As far as her

sojourn on earth is concerned, the church has to grasp and grapple with three matters – her relationship with her Lord, her relationship with the world, and her service to the Lord in the world. These we would consider in the sections following. What we wish to note at this juncture is the need to continue growing in all these areas, and not to be content with what has been achieved already. There is such a thing as a “holy discontent” with our communion with God, with our growth in holiness, and with our service to God. For there to be constant growth in all these areas, there must be constant feeding upon the word of God. Doctrine must be studied. God’s will as it unfolds in history must be understood from the perspective of the Bible. The individual Christian who has a clear sense of destination will have a clear sense of direction. The same may be said of the local church. This is what the Lord invites us to have – a lofty vision of our mission on earth.

The fact that it is our life on earth that is referred to here is indicated by the reference to Lebanon. The groom invites the bride to come with him “from Lebanon”. When we studied Chapter 3, verse 9, we learned that Solomon’s carriage was made of the wood of Lebanon, which meant that the Son of God would come to the world to take upon Himself perfect human nature. So also, here, in Chapter 4, verse 8, the reference to Lebanon is to indicate life on earth. Furthermore, there are the references to “the lions’ dens” and “the mountains of the leopards” to show that life on earth has its dangers. The Lord is reminding us through these words that we are serving Him in a world that is hostile to Christians. There will be dangers, trials, and sufferings as we serve the Lord.

9.2 Delight In Her Devotion (vv. 9-11)

Christ’s delight in the church

We do not have to wait for the time, or situation, to be right before we express our love for our Lord. Where there is genuine love, difficulties and trials are no barrier to the expression of love. The world may be hostile to the Christian faith, and the Christian life may be plagued with difficulties of various kinds, but the Christian will express his love for his Lord by the way he lives. We must not think the government of the country has to be more favourable to the church

before we can serve the Lord, or that the circumstances of our life have to be more stable and peaceful before we show forth love for Him in practical ways. You may think that you can be a non-active member of the church for the moment, or a secret disciple of Christ, until such time as you are ready to show forth your faith publicly. If that is the case, you are badly mistaken. Nicodemus was a secret disciple until circumstances forced him to show his faith in Christ, but it was too late – in a sense. He waited till the Lord was crucified before coming forward to claim His body for burial. Wouldn't it have been better if he had testified for Christ more boldly while the Lord was yet alive? In verses 9 to 11 of our present passage, we see the Lord coaxing us, His disciples, to greater devotion to Him.

He encourages us in our public and active devotion to Him by expressing how delighted He is with our love for Him. This is shown by the words of the groom in verse 9, “You have ravished my heart, my sister, *my* spouse; you have ravished my heart with one *look* of your eyes, with one link of your necklace.” In the allegory before us, Solomon is betrothed to the Shulamite woman and, according to Jewish custom, they are regarded legally as husband and wife, although they are not married yet. The love of the groom for his bride is intense, however. He, therefore, speaks of his heart being ravished by the mere sight of the bride. One glance from the bride stirs up such intense love for her; one glint of light upon her necklace causes him to surge with tender love for her. Such is the love of Christ for His church. We often think of Christ's love for His church in a one sided way, in that Christ loves the church actively by laying down His life for her, while the church is thought of as passive towards Christ. That is true in the sense that believers are unable to contribute anything towards their own salvation, while Christ has done everything needful for their salvation. However, from another point of view, the church shows forth her love for the Lord in definite ways. “We love Him because He first loved us”, as 1 John 4:19 says. What are the ways by which the church shows forth her love for her Lord? That we will consider in a moment.

We wish to digress to consider the fact that the Lord loves the church while she is on earth. This is portrayed by the groom and the bride being betrothed but not yet living together as husband and wife. The groom visits the bride often, thinks of her often, and hears news of her often. The bride's devotion to the groom stirs up the love

that the groom has for her. We often hear it said that long-distance relationships will not work out. The idea is that for a love relationship to work, the two persons in love must be constantly together. That idea is open to question, but we will not dwell on it here. Related to that is the fact that a couple in love are constantly together, to the extent that they do not have time for other people. I would say that a relationship like that is selfish because the couple is so engrossed with each other to the exclusion of others. They overlook the fact that there are lonely people who need attention, and there are hurting people who need to be ministered to. It will not do for Christian couples to be so engrossed in their love for one another to the extent of failing to notice, let alone minister to, the needs of others. Another situation that may be encountered is the jealous lover who feels unhappy whenever his or her loved one is seen talking to someone of the opposite sex, fearing that the loved one might be drawn away. Such kind of love is fragile and unstable, for there is no trust between them. Christian couples who find happiness in their mutual love for the Lord will love one another in an unselfish way. Their love for each other is strengthened by the mutual desire to please the Lord and to serve Him well. Hopefully, these thoughts will be of some help to young, courting, Christian couples.

The church's devotion to Christ

We come back to consider how the church shows forth her devotion to the Lord. There are three ways revealed in verses 10 to 11. Verse 10 says, "How fair is your love, my sister, *my spouse!* How much better than wine is your love, and the scent of your perfumes than all spices!" Perfumes and spices speak to us of the prayer of God's people. Mary Magdalene expressed her love for the Lord by anointing Him with perfume, the fragrance of which permeated the room. The church expresses her love for the Lord by constantly being in prayer, in praise, and in thanksgiving. In the Old Testament, incense was burnt on the altar located directly before the veil in the tabernacle to represent the prayer of the people to God. The incense was prepared by Bazzalel, from spices specified by God, as mentioned in Exodus 37:29, "He also made the holy anointing oil and the pure incense of sweet spices, according to the work of the perfumer." In Psalm 141:2, David said, "Let my prayer be set before You as incense ..." In Revelation 5:8, we are told, "Now when He had taken

the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayer of the saints.” It is clear that the perfumes and spices mentioned in our present passage refer to the prayer of the church. The Lord, represented by the groom, takes delight in the prayer offered up by His people.

The second way the church shows forth her love for the Lord is by the proclamation of His word. We are told in verse 11, “Your lips, O my spouse, drip as the honeycomb; honey and milk *are* under your tongue; ...”. We have learned from verse 3 that the lips and mouth are a reference to the speech, i.e. the words that are uttered. Similarly, the lips and tongues in the present verse refer to the words that are uttered. The church makes it a point to preach God’s word regularly, both by bringing the gospel to sinners and by teaching the saints. David, in Psalm 119:103, refers to God’s word in this way, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, *sweeter* than honey to my mouth!” The church that faithfully preaches God’s word is well-loved by the Lord. The individual believer who delights in God’s word is well-pleasing to the Lord. We show forth our delight in God’s word by attending the meetings in church regularly, listening to the preached word attentively, and meditating upon God’s word often. It is as we make God’s word our own that we begin to be transformed accordingly, such that our speech is “seasoned with salt” and our lives show forth the fragrance of Christ. We are told in Colossians 4:6, “*Let* your speech always *be* with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.” Our speech should be wholesome, kind, encouraging, and edifying to others. We do not want to be those who are avoided by others because we are so caustic, insensitive and critical. There are times when the truth we speak hurts, but it would be to the good of our hearer. When uttered in love, it will be appreciated by those who are sensible. The Lord takes delight in His people who speak His truth to the good and edification of others.

The third way the church evokes love in the Lord is by her way of life. Verse 11 continues by saying, “... and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.” We have noted that Lebanon points to life on earth. The forest of Lebanon had its own fragrance because of the trees and plants growing there. The garments are a reference to the way of life, including the behaviour and the actions.

We must be clear, first, that our lives are regarded as righteous in God's sight only because Jesus Christ's righteousness is counted as ours through faith in Him. We are unable to cleanse ourselves of our sins except in the blood of the Lamb. In Revelation 7:9-10, we read of the saints in heaven, 'After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"' The white robes refer to the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believers, whether in heaven or on earth. We are saved not by our good works and human effort, but by what Christ had accomplished when He died on the cross. Those who are saved would want to live righteously, in obedience to God's word, while they are on earth. In Revelation 3:4, we are told, "You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." The believers who had not defiled their garments had not compromised their faith by doing wrong in God's sight. In contrast, Revelation 3:18 shows that there were those in the church in Laodicea who needed white garments to cover the shame of their nakedness. They were living in sin and needed to come to Christ in repentance so as to be forgiven. They needed the righteousness of Christ to cover the shame of their sinful lives. Coming back to the Song of Solomon, to Chapter 4, verse 11, we find that the fragrance of the bride's garments pleases the groom. This is to say that the Lord takes delight in the righteous life of the church. Believers who live in obedience to God's word are well-pleasing to the Lord.

9.3 Delight In Her Consecration (vv. 12-15)

Separation from the world

The Lord shows His delight for the church by sharing a lofty vision of His work on earth. He shows His delight in her devotion to Him. The Lord also shows His delight in her consecration to Him. This truth is conveyed to us by verse 12, "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." The bride is compared to a garden that is fenced, or walled up. The garden is in

the world, but not of the world, just as the church is in the world, but not of the world. The fountain is active, and the spring is flowing with living waters – as we can see from verse 15. But they are kept enclosed in the garden. She does not parade her beauty to an ogling world. She is a real beauty, but not the type to participate in a beauty pageant. She makes every effort to keep herself from the influence of the world. Consecration to the Lord means keeping worldliness out of our lives. The Bible's teaching is that the church should remain separate from the world, from sins, and from heresies. Worldly allurements must be resisted, sins in our lives must be put to death, and wrong teachings must be exposed and rejected. Too many churches today are lax in these areas. Worldly methods of worship are adopted, a liberal attitude towards the world is embraced, and no warning of the dangers of worldliness is sounded forth. The Bible, however, commands us in the words of 2 Corinthians 6:17, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." Many other similar passages can be quoted. There should be rightful separation from the world.

We make the qualification that the separation should be of the right kind because there have been those who practise separation of the wrong kind. In the past, there were those who withdrew to monasteries and nunneries, to spend time in prayer and meditation. Today, there are those who prefer a hermit's life to being drawn away by the rat race of the day. These are extreme reactions which are not called for. The Son of God came to the world to interact with sinners and to die for them. The apostle Paul did not withdraw himself from the world when he was converted. Instead, he went around seeking out hearers to preach to them. We are to be the light of the world, and the salt of the earth. If we withdraw ourselves, how are we to exert a positive influence upon others? This is where I would cautiously warn you against sending your children to Christian schools, or home-schooling them. I know that many good Christian parents in western countries have done that out of concern for their children, who would otherwise be exposed to bad influences and wrong teachings in the public schools. But there are many reasons why we would not encourage that – reasons which we would not go into here. We would only raise one point relevant to our passage, namely that there is a rightful separation to be practised by God's people

without the principle being carried too far. Once that happens, we would have gone astray to the opposite extreme. We do not want to over-protect our children by shielding them from what are perceived to be bad influences. Instead, we should teach them the right principles so that they can be strong and be able to fend for themselves in the world.

Orderliness

Consecration to the Lord is not to be understood in a wholly negative, or defensive, sense. Not only must there be separation from the world, but there must be orderliness in life, too. Look at the garden – everything is arranged in an orderly fashion. There are varieties of plants and fragrant herbs in the same garden, showing that these are cultivated plants and not wild ones that are found growing sporadically. The plants are mentioned in order in verses 13 to 14 – the fruit trees, the fragrant herbs, the spices: “Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices –”. There is no indication of disorder. Every plant is in the right place, and every type of plant is in specifically designated rows or plots. They have been cultivated intelligently and with purpose. The orderliness of the garden speaks of the good order that should be found in a church. Orderliness in the life of a church is not to be looked upon as something optional. While we eschew worldly churches which have adopted business techniques into their administration, no church should be without order. Elders are to lead, and deacons are to help in the implementation of policies. Clear biblical policies are to be formulated to accomplish the two-pronged mission of winning souls to Christ and building up the faith of believers. All categories of people are to be reached with the gospel, with the aim of establishing faithful churches. God’s work must be done in God’s way – as is revealed in Scripture. The apostle Paul taught the Corinthian church, “Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40).” He wrote to the Colossian church, “For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ (Col. 2:5).”

This truth must be extended to the individual Christian life. A believer should be orderly in his thoughts, and systematic in the way

he does things. This is reflected in the way you study, the tidiness of your room, and the manner you carry out an assignment. There are those who begin doing something with enthusiasm but never complete the job with satisfaction. We are used to hearing Chinese mothers scolding their children for being “tailless dogs”, meaning that they sweep the floor but do not put away the broom and dust-pan, they wash the dishes but do not dry them up, and so on. In the church, the members get upset over those who behave like “tailless dogs”. This is when we must learn to be patient with one another, at the same time that the “tailless dogs” must learn to grow tails! Since we live and work together with other people, it is important that we learn to be considerate. Ultimately, we want to live orderly lives because that is pleasing to our Lord. Our God is a God of order.

Liveliness

The consecrated church is separate from the world and orderly. It is also lively. This truth is expressed in verse 15, “A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.” The eyes see the orderliness of the garden, the nose smells the fragrance of the plants, and the ears hear the soothing sound of the waters – from the fountain and in the streams. The garden is fed by waters flowing down from the mountains of Lebanon. Lebanon has been mentioned a number of times in the present passage – in verses 8 and 11 – and now in verse 15. As noted earlier, by comparison with Chapter 3, verse 9, this reminds us that we are considering life on earth. The bride is compared with a lively garden in which fresh waters flow. The streams would be clear, so that fishes are found aplenty in them. The wind would be blowing through it, as the next verse shows. We can imagine the birds hopping on the branches and flying happily through the garden. This speaks to us of a lively church that is filled with the Holy Spirit. There will be such warmth in the fellowship, and such love between the members. Any visitor will feel welcome, any bruised individual will feel comforted, and any tired soul will leave the place refreshed. Is our church like that? May it be so!

Then, applying this to the individual believer, are you a person with a bright disposition? Do you show forth the joy of salvation? Are people encouraged and helped in their interaction with you? Or are you a grumpy person who hardly ever smiles? Are you always moaning and complaining? Are you not contented with your lot?

We need to be reminded of Philippians 4:4-7, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

9.4 Delight In Her Proclamation (v. 16)

Proclaiming Christ

We come to the final verse of our passage, which is verse 16, “Awake, O north *wind*, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden, *that* its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.” The beauty of the verse cannot have escaped our eyes. In the first part of the chapter, namely verse 1 to 6, the church responds to Christ’s love for her passive characteristics in the words of the last verse, “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense.” The church is saying, “Until this world is over, and Christ comes to gather us to be with Him, we will live a separated life and keep a close walk with Him in the Spirit.” Now, in the second part of the chapter, the church responds to Christ’s delight in her active characteristics with the words of verse 16. The church is saying, “Until Christ comes again, we will proclaim the truth far and wide so that the fragrance of His name is in all the nations.” The Lord loves us and, therefore, out of love for Him, we desire to make Him known as widely as we can so that others may come to honour Him and be saved. Love for Christ is a strange thing in that, instead of keeping Him to ourselves, we want others to share in our love for Him. Another way of putting it is that the church that loves her Lord would always keep the Great Commission in mind. The members of the church would be praying for souls to be saved, and engaging in bringing the gospel to others.

Pleasing Christ

The last part of the verse is to be noted, “Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.” This speaks of the motive for our activity. We are not doing everything for our own glory. We are not seeking to please anyone but Christ. We want to bear spiritual

children for Christ because of our love for Him. He has loved His people and laid down His life for them. It is only right that He sees the fruit of His labour. We are reminded of Isaiah 53:11, "He shall see the labour of His soul, *and* be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities." Unless there is love for Christ, there will be no sustained desire to win souls for Him. There will be the fear of men in us such that we do not dare to witness to certain classes of people. There will be the fear of embarrassment when we meet with relatives and friends while distributing tracts. However, when the love *of Christ* is in us, we will witness to all and sundry. And if the love *for Christ* is also in us, we would not be overly concerned about what our friends and relatives think of us. Our concern is to show forth our love for our Lord while we are able.

9.5 Conclusion

Let us summarize what we have learned. Christ takes delight in His church because of her active characteristics. These may be summarized under four key words - *vision, devotion, consecration, and proclamation*. Christ invites the church to have a lofty vision of the task set before her in the world. He takes delight in her devotion to Him. He takes delight also in her consecration to Him. The church responds with a deep desire to proclaim His name to the world. How we are overwhelmed by His love for us! We owe the Lord a debt of love which we are unable to repay. Let us show forth our love for the Lord without fanfare, and without reserve.

*When this passing world is done,
When has sunk the radiant sun,
When I stand with Christ on high,
Looking o'er life's history,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.
(Robert Murray M'Cheyne, 1813-43)*

Part VI

**BACKSLIDING AND
RESTORATION**

5:1-8

Solomon

1 I have come to my garden, my sister, *my* spouse;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice;
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey;
I have drunk my wine with my milk.

Eat, O friends!
Drink, yes, drink deeply,
O beloved ones!

Shulamite

2 I sleep, but my heart is awake;
It is the voice of my beloved!
He knocks, *saying*,
“Open for me, my sister, my love,
My dove, my perfect one;
For my head is covered with dew,
My locks with the drops of the night.”

3 I have taken off my robe;
How can I put it on *again*?
I have washed my feet;
How can I defile them?

4 My beloved put his hand
By the latch *of the door*,
And my heart yearned for him.

5 I arose to open for my beloved,
And my hands dripped *with* myrrh,
My fingers with liquid myrrh,
On the handles of the lock.

6 I opened for my beloved,
But my beloved had turned away *and* was gone.
My heart leaped up when he spoke.
I sought him, but I could not find him;
I called him, but he gave me no answer.

7 The watchmen who went about the city found me.
They struck me, they wounded me;
The keepers of the walls
Took my veil away from me.

8 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
If you find my beloved,
That you tell him I *am* lovesick!

Ten

Beware Of Backsliding!

In this book of allegory, we are learning about the love of Christ for His church. This is portrayed by the relationship between King Solomon and the Shulamite woman. We arrived at Chapter 4, in which we learned of Christ's love for the *passive* characteristics of the church as well as for her *active* characteristics. The church responds to Christ's love in two basic ways, namely, by resolving to keep close to her Lord, and also to serve Him well. The church, or the believer, is saying, in Chapter 4:6, "Until this world is over, and Christ comes to gather us to be with Him, we will live a separated life and keep a close walk with Him in the Spirit." In Chapter 4:16, the church, or the believer, is saying: "Until Christ comes again, we will proclaim the truth far and wide so that the fragrance of His name is in all the nations."

The believer, or the church, that is spiritually healthy will want to maintain the health of these two areas – namely, our devotion to God and our service to Him. If we are not careful in these two aspects of our spiritual life, backsliding will occur. Chapter 5 is about backsliding and its cure. In the present passage, which is Chapter 5:1-8, we consider the "why", "how", and "what" of backsliding. We want to find out why backsliding occurs, how it occurs, and what the consequences are.

10.1 Why Backsliding Occurs (v. 1)

We consider, first, why backsliding occurs. Verse 1 says, “I have come to my garden, my sister, *my* spouse; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk.” This is the groom speaking, in response to the invitation of the bride who had earlier said, “Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.”

True believers only

It must be understood that we are dealing with regenerate people, that is, with true believers in Jesus Christ. Those who are not true believers cannot possibly backslide since they do not have spiritual life in the first place. They may be enthusiastic about Christian things, and come to church with some regularity but, with time, they lose interest. We are not surprised when they lose interest in spiritual things because we were never too convinced of their profession of faith. If you are one of these, you might be wondering how we know that you are not true believers. This is something hard to explain, but it may be compared to some form of “spiritual sense” which is related to the teaching of Scripture. The Bible teaches about those who have been convicted of their sins, who have despaired of saving themselves, and who now trust in Christ alone for salvation. It teaches about those who have repented of sins and are full of gratitude now for Christ’s death on the cross for them. It speaks of a hunger for God’s word, a thirsting for God’s righteousness, and living to God’s glory. We have experienced these things ourselves, and known of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. When we meet those who have the Spirit of Christ in them, we can sense that they are children of God, like us. We may not always be sure and, therefore, are careful in passing judgement. Nevertheless, we are wary of those who put on a veneer of Christianity – those who have “a form of godliness” but “deny its power” in their lives.

Only true believers would live to please their Lord. Only true believers would regard their lives and their service as belonging to the Lord. Only they would say, “Let my beloved come to *his* garden and eat its pleasant fruit.” It is to your own good that you ensure you have true faith in Jesus Christ. The assurance of salvation cannot come from what others think of you. It is also useless to have a

false sense of assurance. You can tell a lie enough times and come to believe it in time. You can act like a Christian long enough and begin to think that you are one. God, however, knows who are His. On the last day, there will be *many* who call out, “Lord, Lord” but are rejected because the Lord has never regarded them as His. Let us, then, understand that only true Christians would want to guard their devotional life and their service to God.

Blessing from God

The believer would read the Bible regularly. He would meditate on God’s word. He would attend church regularly to hear God’s word preached, and to worship God with other believers. He would have a desire to see the gospel propagated to others, and he would gather with other believers to pray for souls to be converted. What would God do for such a believer? What would the Lord do for a church that guards her devotional life and serves Him well? Verse 1 tells us that the Lord will draw near to them as they draw near to Him. He comes to share the meal with them, appreciating everything they have done for Him. He makes everything done in His name fragrant and sweet – like myrrh and honey. He makes everything joyful and nourishing – like drinking wine and milk.

Eating a meal together speaks of warmth, acceptance and joy. Missionaries working in pagan cultures know too well the importance of eating anything served to them by their pagan hosts. Refusal to eat or drink with the hosts would be taken as a lack of acceptance of them. There is warmth, acceptance, and joy at a wedding feast. There is warmth, acceptance and joy when we welcome guests for a meal. This is reflected in the Lord’s Supper in church, when believers gather together in the presence of their Lord. The book of Revelation tells us that when all God’s people are finally gathered together, there will be eternal celebration described as “the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9)”.

The next verse shows that there is plenty of food for everyone. The groom says, “Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!” The Lord desires His people to enjoy deeply the blessing He gives to them. More importantly, He desires us to enjoy His presence richly. For that to happen, we must be aware of His presence and appreciate it well. When the three apostles were on the Mount of Transfiguration, they were overwhelmed by the brightness of Christ’s

glory. The apostle Peter speaks of the possibility of loving Christ and rejoicing “with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8)”. It is possible for the individual believer, and the gathered church, to experience this “inexpressible joy” of Christ’s presence. Did not our Lord promised that “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matt. 18:20)”? May we experience this, and experience it more and more!

Complacency

We must understand that the rich enjoyment of the Lord Jesus Christ is experienced not only individually, but also when God’s people are gathered together in worship. It is experienced not only when we are in quiet contemplation, but also during active service of some kind, such as when evangelizing from village to village, or when distributing tracts. Christ’s presence is to be sought as we serve Him. Has He not promised to be with His people “to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20)”? As we worship and serve Him, we must beware of becoming complacent, that is, taking for granted the blessing of God, being careless, dropping our guard, and not being watchful of dangers. This is when backsliding can come to us.

One way that happens is to treat God’s work as our own work. We forget who we are serving, and why we are doing certain things. Those who love the Lord would be emotionally involved in His work, in His church, and in the progress of the gospel. That is understandable, and to be expected. We, therefore, feel strongly when things go wrong. The danger lies in forgetting that we are serving *Him* so that we become unduly agitated when other people appear to get in the way. When we forget that it is *God’s* work we are doing, we become unduly upset, angry, or disappointed at any lack of progress, any disruption to our plans, or any disagreement from fellow believers. A root of bitterness in the heart may grow and cripple your service to God. When that happens, you might decline spiritually without even realizing it.

There are others who take for granted the privileges they have, such as the opportunity of hearing systematic teaching every week, the pastoral care received in church, and the fellowship with like-minded Christians. You begin to take the Lord’s day lightly and do not come with a heart of joy and anticipation. You sleep late on Saturday and have difficulty waking up on Sunday. You are sleepy on

the Lord's day and no longer listen attentively to God's word. Spiritual decline comes to you so imperceptibly. Soon, you are excusing yourself from meetings, and going away quickly whenever a meeting finishes. You have lost the joy of meeting with other believers and desire to avoid any probing from discerning friends.

God desires to bless the consecrated church and the devoted believer. The blessing of God will be experienced when we draw near to God, and serve the Lord faithfully. There is no necessity for backsliding to occur in the midst of blessing. But backsliding will come when God's people become complacent.

10.2 [How Backsliding Occurs \(vv. 2-5\)](#)

We consider, next, how backsliding occurs. We are not dealing with the manifestations of spiritual declension. We are not describing the ways by which backsliding shows itself. We have already described some of these ways. What we want to do now is to examine the hidden causes of decline in the individual. When individuals decline spiritually, it will affect the church in one way or another. What are the causes of spiritual decline, as revealed in the present portion of Scripture?

Indolence

Firstly, backsliding occurs when the believer becomes indolent, that is, lazy and careless. We become sluggish, slow in doing what is right. We have already come across this in Chapter 3:1, which says, "By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him." We have noted that the original Hebrew indicates a searching "night by night" in a half-hearted manner. Here, in Chapter 5:2, we have, 'I sleep, but my heart is awake; *it is* the voice of my beloved! He knocks, *saying*, "Open for me, my sister, my love, My dove, my perfect one; for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.'" Just as the groom expresses his love for the bride, the Lord is constantly expressing His love to His people. He knocks on the door of our lives, desiring to come in to commune with us. The right thing to do is to get up quickly and open the door for Him to come in. Instead, we have been slow in responding to Him. We waste time coming to serve the Lord. Wasting time means that opportunities to serve Him are lost as well. When we lose one

opportunity, we also lose all the opportunities attached to it. It is a scary thought. When God blesses you with one opportunity to serve Him, you will discover that it leads to a string of other opportunities. Those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. As you stretch yourselves to serve God, your talents are sharpened and your abilities are exercised. Since you prove yourselves faithful and willing to serve, God will use you even more. In fact, you will be amazed that you are able to do all that God gives you to do. What happens is that God fills you with His Spirit as you serve Him. His Spirit empowers you to do more than you thought you were able to do. However, the reverse is also true. When you are unwilling to serve, when you are lazy and slow to obey, you miss many opportunities to be useful. Your gifts are not developed, and you do not experience the joy of the Lord's presence.

Indolence is a chief cause of backsliding. You must be careful when sluggishness begins to be seen in your life. You are slow and lazy to respond to the Lord. You might not be lying in bed literally, but you take your time to do what needs to be done. We know, however, that there are those who literally lie in bed although they are not sleeping. They are not tired and lying down to rest. Instead, they have had too much sleep and are still lying down! Whether literally or not, we know what it means. This is the beginning of spiritual decline. Is the Lord speaking to anyone through this message? The Lord speaks to His people by His word. Often, we do not allow the word of God to speak to us as we read it. Then, when you come to hear the word preached, the Lord begins to address you personally. If you still refuse to respond, He may speak to you through a discerning Christian friend. If you still refuse to respond, the Lord may send trials into your life. We know that not all trials are brought about by sin. As with Job, a righteous man can be plagued with trials. However, it is always a healthy thing to do to examine yourselves. It is to your own good that you examine yourselves to see if God is chastising you through the trials.

Self-centredness

Apart from indolence, there is the problem of self-centredness. Indolence causes you to be sluggish, while self-centredness causes you to be self-pampering, such that you are always seeking personal convenience and personal comfort. In verse 3, the bride says, "I have

taken off my robe; how can I put it on *again*? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them?" In those days, and in that part of the world, people walked about on dusty roads in sandals. They had to wash their feet at night before sleeping, and they would wash the feet of guests who arrived at their home. Here, the bride does not want the inconvenience and discomfort of putting on her robe to open the door for the visitor, and of washing her feet again later when the visitor has left. She fails to notice what it means when the groom says, "my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." The groom has travelled a distance to come to her. He has been in the dark and in the cold. His hair is wet with the dew. How could she not notice that? Would not her heart be moved with compassion, and love, for the groom who has taken the trouble to come to see her? We would expect her to be so moved, but she isn't, simply because she is too absorbed with herself and her own situation.

This can easily happen to us when we are too absorbed with ourselves. We are too concerned with our own comfort and convenience to the point of overlooking the needs of others. Do you grumble about the neighbour ringing your door bell in the middle of the night, without a thought that his son might be critically ill and needing help? Are you unhappy that the pastor should visit so late at night, without a thought that he was held up by a bad traffic jam and had lost his way while looking for your house in the dark? Amazingly, self-centred people do not think much of the inconvenience and discomfort they cause to others whenever they want something done for themselves. The Lord taught His disciples not to lord it over others like the Gentiles did. Such self-centred people think nothing of the Lord's teaching because it is lost upon them. They just do not seem to think it applies to themselves. They are too quick to ask others to do things for them, without any thought of the inconvenience caused, or even the inappropriateness of asking. Of course, good friends would not hesitate to seek help from one another, but that is different from abusing the friendship. You can be sure that such self-centred people have few friends. They are absorbed with their own comfort and convenience, and do not think much of the discomfort and inconvenience caused to others. When we really need help, we would hesitate to approach such people. They may be our friends, but they are not our close friends.

The spiritual lesson must not be missed. The Lord is constantly drawing near to His people to reassure them of His presence, and of His love for them. He does not seek our pity, for He needs none. But, surely, we ought to give some thought to what it meant for the Son of God to leave the glory of heaven to come to earth to save His people. Surely, we ought to give some thought to what it meant for the Son of God to bear the sins of His people on the cross, to be forsaken by the Father, and to be “made sin who knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21)”. Do we still begrudge having to come to church to worship Him? Do we still complain about the times of meeting, and the distance we need to travel, and the expectation to serve Him? Oh, sinful selves that we are! We need to weep for our sins. Just as Peter wept for denying the Lord, have we not denied the Lord ourselves?

Procrastination

Closely related to indolence and self-centredness is procrastination. You would have heard that “procrastination is the thief of time”. To procrastinate is to put off doing something out of habitual laziness. You are too slow to respond to the Lord’s call, and to His commands. You would finally do what is required, but you take so long to do it. The Lord will wait patiently, for He is longsuffering towards His people. In verse 4, we read, “My beloved put his hand by the latch of *the door*, and my heart yearned for him.” Why have we to wait until the Lord “puts His hand to the latch”? Yes, we yearned for Him, but why didn’t we come to Him immediately? The bride finally stirs, for we read in verse 5, “I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped *with* myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock.” Her hands and fingers drip with myrrh, to make it appear that she is so welcoming and has been waiting for the groom, but it has taken her so long to stir and finally to get up and open the door. She has waited until the groom attempted to unlatch the door himself but found it locked.

A similar situation is found in Revelation 3:20, where the Lord stands at the door and knocks. We are told, “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” The Lord wants to bless us with His presence and in many other ways, but are we responding? This passage has been used in gospel preaching to call sinners to repentance. It is legitimate to apply it in that way, but what happens today is that

it is used to convey the wrong message that salvation is dependent upon our response when, in fact, our response is only the means of receiving the gift of salvation. Modern teaching is largely Arminian, in which Christ is portrayed as having done His part, and it is now up to the sinner to do his part, to gain salvation. The passage actually speaks of Christ calling upon wayward churches to repent of their sins. It is addressed to backslidden Christians. As we have said, it is legitimate to apply it in the direction of calling upon sinners to come to faith in Christ, but it should be made clear that the call is for repentance from sin, to faith in Christ. It is not a call to the sinner to contribute his share of work to secure his own salvation. Christ must not be portrayed as pathetically standing at the door of the sinner's life, waiting for the sinner to show pity on Him. No, the true teaching is rather that Christ has done all that is necessary to save sinners, by His death on the cross, and the sinner must come humbly to Him to receive salvation.

Coming back to the passage, let us remember that the Lord knows all that is in our heart. No amount of pretense, however subtle, can cover up the true state of our heart. If we do not serve the Lord willingly and sincerely, He already knows. That is why, as the years go by – as we grow in understanding of the Bible's teaching, as we grow to some degree of spiritual maturity – we come to realize the futility of putting on a show before man. Let us be more forthright, let us be more open, with one another. Let us practise "simple faith", leaving out all the charade and subtle hypocrisy of the carnal self. Let us seek to please the Lord rather than to please man.

We see now the three causes of backsliding, namely, indolence, self-centredness, and procrastination. A combination of the condition of our heart, our attitude, and our response to the Lord conspire to erode away our love for Him. We are sluggish, lazy, self-pampering, and slow to act on what we know to be right. We may even say sincerely that we want the Lord, that we want His blessing, that we want to know His presence in our lives – but why have we been so slow to act? One may conceivably argue whether these are *causes* of backsliding or are they *signs* of backsliding? But our purpose is already achieved, which is to show that there is a very real danger believers may backslide in their spiritual life. Of course, there are those who tend to act too rashly, especially when they are upset and get into fits of passion. Those people must learn to control them-

selves, or they will regret their rashness, in words or actions. That is a different matter, however. Here, we are concerned only with the danger of backsliding. If nothing is done to put the situation right, adverse consequences will come to us.

10.3 The Consequences Of Backsliding (vv. 6-8)

What are the possible adverse consequences? The passage continues to show that there are some definite things that will happen. Three definite consequences are described.

Spiritual barrenness

First, there will be spiritual barrenness. We may carry out the right actions, but there is no noticeable profit from what we do. The ground has become dry. We dig for water, but none is to be found. We sow the seeds, but nothing seems to grow. This is shown by verse 6, which says, “I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away *and* was gone. My heart leaped up when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.” The Lord is generous. He continues to call out to you. He desires to fill your cup to overflowing. When He came to you, you were not ready. He has now moved on to the next one in line, to fill *his* cup. And there are others who are waiting to have *their* cups filled. It wasn’t that the Lord did not want to fill your cup. You were not ready when He came to you. You now have to wait for your turn. In the Lord’s mercy, He will come back to you. But you must wait for Him, and be ready.

Do we not read of the Ten Virgins, waiting for the groom to arrive (Matt. 25)? The five foolish virgins do not have oil ready, and are left out when the groom arrives. The five wise ones have oil ready, and so are allowed in with the groom. We do not want to be slow and lazy, to think only of our own comfort and convenience before we bestir ourselves to serve the Lord. How many opportunities are lost, and how much blessing we have missed! And how the years have flown by! As these words are heard, I will not be surprised if there are those whose hearts ache with pangs of remorse. But, O friends, do not linger longer in your remorse. Bestir yourselves to do what is right. Come, search for the Lord, and He will be found by you!

Conscience seared

The second consequences of backsliding is that your conscience will be seared. The apostle Paul speaks of those who have “their own conscience seared with a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2)”, which is a graphic way of describing what might happen to us when we backslide. In the present passage, we have verse 7, which says, “The watchmen who went about the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil away from me.” We have come across the watchmen in Chapter 3:3, who are the pastors or some mature Christians in church. They guide those who have lost the assurance of salvation by directing them to God’s word. It is to God’s word that you must go so that your assurance may be restored. You must return to church to hear the word of God preached. You must renew your commitment to the Lord, and maintain peace in the church instead of creating trouble. In these ways, your assurance will be restored.

In the present passage, the watchmen do a very unusual thing. Instead of directing the troubled person in the right direction, they beat her up and humiliate her. However, this is only the perception of the troubled person. She thinks the watchmen are being rough and unhelpful. She even exaggerates the discomfort she experiences, when all the while the problem lies in herself. This is the description of the backslidden Christian. His conscience is sore, and he perceives that the preacher in church is harsh and unhelpful. He complains and exaggerates his negative perception of the preacher and his preaching. He is like a person in depression who sees the day as dull and gloomy. But is that the case? The sun is shining, and people are cheerful, but he perceives the situation as the complete opposite. The word of God is meant to comfort and strengthen those who are faithful to the Lord. But you have not been faithful. You are backslidden. Your conscience is burned. That is why the word of God causes you to smart. Healthy skin feels the pleasure of running water during a nice shower, but broken skin feels the sting of the same water.

Cutting-edge blunted

There is a third consequence of backsliding. This is expressed in verse 8, which says, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you

find my beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick!” The daughters of Jerusalem are the new believers, the seekers, and the adherents in the church. They are not hostile to the church and, in fact, are friends who seem happy to be part of us and try to be involved in the life of the church. Of course, our desire is that, with time, the seekers will come to faith in Christ, and the new Christians would become committed members of the church. Our hope is that those who claim to be Christians will be convinced of the need to be integrated into the life of the church, instead of merely “holding to the skirts” as adherents. But let us come to what is taught in this verse.

What it is saying is that the spiritually healthy believer is constantly guiding the new believers and the seekers – the daughters of Jerusalem. He is looked up to, his advice is sought, and his guidance is appreciated. However, when the believer is backslidden, his usefulness is reduced – his cutting edge is blunted. You know what it is like for the cutting edge of a knife to be blunted – it cuts with difficulty, and it does not cut cleanly. So also with the service of the backslidden believer – he is no longer spiritually sharp. Instead of being of help to the “daughters of Jerusalem”, he is seeking their help. This can happen to the church as a whole as well. Our cutting edge can become blunt such that we are no more as effective or useful as we used to be. Are we in such a state? On the personal level, is anyone in such a state? Are you needing the encouragement and support of those who have looked up to you? Of course you are still respected by them, for you have been their teacher and mentor. You might even be their spiritual father or mother, who have led them to faith in Christ. But in your backslidden state, you are not as helpful as you could be.

10.4 Conclusion

Here, then, are the three consequences of backsliding – you become spiritually barren, your conscience is seared, and you lose your spiritual sharpness. These consequences are never pleasant. Any right-thinking believer would not want to experience them. Such consequences come from indolence, self-centredness, and procrastination in our walk with God. They come to us when we are complacent with regard to the blessing of God upon us. How good it will be to

have sustained blessing from the Lord, to know His presence, to be filled continually with His Spirit. The children of God need not have to backslide. The tendency to backslide is always there. We must take stock of ourselves, and not allow that to happen. God willing, we will consider next how to be restored from the backslidden state. It will be appropriate to end with these words by Joseph Hart (1712-68):

*How good is the God we adore,
Our faithful and unchangeable Friend!
His love is as great as His pow'r
And knows neither measure nor end!*

*'Tis Jesus the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us home;
We'll praise Him for all that is past,
We'll trust Him for all that's to come.*

5:9-16

Daughters of Jerusalem

9 What *is* your beloved
More than *another* beloved,
O fairest among women?
What *is* your beloved
More than *another* beloved,
That you so charge us?

Shulamite

10 My beloved *is* white and ruddy,
Chief among ten thousand.
11 His head *is like* the finest gold;
His locks *are* wavy,
And black as a raven.
12 His eyes *are* like doves
By the rivers of waters,
Washed with milk,
And fitly set.
13 His cheeks *are* like a bed of spices,
Banks of scented herbs.
His lips *are* lilies,
Dripping liquid myrrh.
14 His hands *are* rods of gold
Set with beryl.
His **belly** *is* carved ivory
Inlaid *with* sapphires.
15 His legs *are* pillars of marble
Set on bases of fine gold.
His countenance *is* like Lebanon,
Excellent as the cedars.
16 His mouth *is* most sweet,
Yes, he *is* altogether lovely.
This *is* my beloved,
And this *is* my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem!

Eleven

Reaching Out For Restoration

The fifth chapter of this book of allegory is about *Backsliding* and its *Restoration*. The normal Christian life is one of blessed communion with the Lord. The Lord does not save His people and then leave them to fend for themselves. Instead, He continues to commune with them, to take care of them and to bless them. There are occasions when we are filled with the Holy Spirit to such a measure that there is rejoicing with “joy inexpressible and full of glory” because of the closeness of the Lord. On the other hand, if we are complacent and take for granted God’s blessing upon us, our hearts may begin to grow cold. We begin to treat His blessing as common. Spiritual activities become a formality, and we are no longer excited about the things of God. We grow cold spiritually, and begin to backslide in our spiritual life.

Backsliding occurs when we are complacent and take for granted our spiritual privileges. It takes place through indolence, self-centredness, and procrastination. When indolence sets in, we become lazy and careless in our response to the Lord. We are slow to do what is required of us. We show no enthusiasm and move too slowly to do whatever needs to be done. When self-centredness characterizes our lives, we would only do those things that are convenient to ourselves. Everything we do must suit our time, our situation, and our family. We think more of ourselves than of others. When there is procrastination, or delay, in responding to the Lord, He will continue to speak to us by His word, through preaching. The Lord reminds us

of His truth through the circumstances of our lives. We know what should be done, but we delay until the last moment before getting it done. When we finally stir ourselves to get it done, we behave as though we have been willing and keen to do it. The Lord, however, can see the true state of our hearts. It is of no use pretending before Him. We can fool others, and we can fool ourselves, but we cannot fool the Lord. All these are the causes of backsliding.

What are the consequences of backsliding? First, we experience spiritual barrenness. The Lord withdraws His blessing, and we sense that He is no more with us. Secondly, our conscience is burned. The word of God is meant to minister strength and comfort to His people, but it now comes across as rebuking you and wounding you in your conscience. Thirdly, your cutting edge becomes blunted. In other words, you become ineffective and less useful in the Lord's service. Instead of being of help to seekers and new converts, you are now seeking their help and need their comfort.

What must we do to regain a close walk with the Lord? How may we be restored to spiritual health? The second half of Chapter 5 in "the Song of Solomon" shows us how. It shows us that there is only one way, which is to seek the Lord until we find Him again. As we seek Him earnestly, we will be led step by step to recovery. Four steps to recovery are revealed to us.

11.1 [The Needs Around You \(v. 9\)](#)

First, we will become aware of the spiritual needs around us. In verse 9, we have the daughters of Jerusalem asking the bride, "What *is* your beloved more than *another* beloved, O fairest among women? What *is* your beloved more than *another* beloved, that you so charge us?" The bride has been looking for the groom desperately, and asks her companions if they have seen him. If they see him, can they please let him know that he is sorely missed? Here is a two-fold lesson to be noted.

Still needed

From one point of view, we will feel chastised by the needs around us while we are in such a pathetic spiritual condition. The bride is awakened to the realization that the daughters of Jerusalem are mystified as to why she is so desperately looking for the groom.

They cannot understand why there should be a fuss over his absence, which surely is only temporary. They are wondering what is in the groom that makes him different from all other persons such that he should be sought with such earnestness. Young believers do not understand the dangers of backsliding. They do not understand the serious consequences of becoming cold-hearted in the spiritual life. They are new to many spiritual experiences that come only with years of walking with the Lord. Not only is their knowledge of the Bible limited, but their experience of spiritual realities is limited as well. If these are true of the new believer, how much more true with the seekers who are not yet converted! The “daughters of Jerusalem” would include also true believers who are not yet integrated into the life of the church. They do not know why the church members are agitated over certain developments in the church, or in the mission field. They are not members and, therefore, have not been privy to developments within the body of Christ. They were not involved in the formulation of the policies of the church, nor in the decisions taken on certain issues. They do not know all the ins-and-outs, the warp-and-woof, of church life, and often ask questions which we have to explain patiently. They might show concern and attempt to help but we know that, ultimately speaking, the church members must bear the burden and responsibility of whatever is at stake.

The realization that “the daughters of Jerusalem” still need help should awaken the backslidden believer to pull himself together and to quickly seek restoration. The converted person cannot remain indifferent to hungry souls around him. The true disciple of Christ cannot ignore those who are seeking to know his Lord. New believers are easily shaken in their faith. The sheep that are not in the sheepfold are prone to go astray, and are exposed to many dangers. Are we so hard-hearted as not to care? A broken pipe can be repaired by a plumber, a car that needs servicing can be seen to by a mechanic, and a sick person can be attended to by a doctor. Spiritual needs, however, can only be met by those who have spiritual life. We have to be spiritually healthy if we are to be used by the Lord to minister to the needy souls around us.

Christ precious

From another point of view, we will be made to feel how foolish we have been for loosing so precious a person as our Saviour. We know

that we are not indispensable in God's work. God does not need us to serve Him. He could easily use someone else, or some other means, to accomplish His purpose. Yet, He is pleased to use us who are so unworthy. We begin to see how foolish we have been to take the Lord for granted. This point may be seen from the daughters of Jerusalem inquiring about the groom. They are asking what makes the groom different from other persons.

The unbelievers and the new believers are still unclear about the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and why He means so much to us. The needs of the daughters of Jerusalem is one thing, the value of the Lord to the believer is another. The bride is now awakened to the resources at her disposal. It is like being reminded that you have plenty of good food stored up in the freezer. What you need to do is take out the frozen food, thaw it, and cook a nice, hot, meal for yourself. Seek the Lord whom you already know. The Lord is the Pearl of great price. He must be sought with all our hearts. The church is built upon Jesus Christ alone. "No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11)." All that we work for, and all that we live for, come crumbling down if not for Jesus Christ. We know, of course, that the foundation of the church, or of our faith, cannot be moved. The Lord has promised never to leave nor forsake His people. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are awakened to realize that we need to value our Lord more. How could we have caused Him to withdraw from us?

11.2 [To Seek The Lord \(v. 10\)](#)

There is only one answer to the predicament faced by the backslidden Christian, or the church that has grown cold – to seek the Lord in prayer and in His word. This is the second step we are led to. We have already encountered a similar situation in Chapter 3, when the bride could not find the groom. On that occasion, we considered how the assurance of our salvation can be lost, and how it is to be regained. We learned that we must seek the Lord in His word. We must attend to the hearing of God's word preached. We must ponder upon what we hear, and pray to God in response. God speaks to us by His word. As we ponder upon what He is saying to us, we are

to respond in prayer. We pray in private, and we pray also corporately. This is suggested by the interaction between the bride and the daughters of Jerusalem. As we interact over spiritual matters, we are brought to focus on the right things. Our aim is to find the Lord.

Christ to be sought

We consider, first, the need to seek the Lord in His word. Verse 10 says, “My beloved is white and ruddy, chief among ten thousand.” We have learnt from verse 7 that the backslidden Christian often feels himself attacked and humiliated in the hearing of God’s word when, in reality, that is only his perception of the situation. No true servant of God would want to harm a soul that is already wounded. No true shepherd of souls would harm sheep that are in need of help. While it may be that the pastor is still young and inexperienced, or has a prickly and insensitive personality, we would expect that he has the basic qualifications to do good to souls through preaching. In fact, if he is truly called of God and is suitably qualified, we would expect him to be quite effective and useful in the work of the Lord. He will have the compassion found in his Master – “A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench (Isa. 42:3).” The pastor may be able to discern that you are backslidden, but he wouldn’t know what is in your mind or what you are experiencing as you hear the word preached. Do not blame him for all your problems! Medicine will sting in an open wound. The word of God will sting in order to do you good. However, we expect the wound to heal soon, as the medicine is applied. Jesus Christ preached would soon be balm to the soul. Christ must be sought.

Christ to be proclaimed

That brings us to the second point, which is that Christ must be sought in any sermon. Preachers must proclaim much of Christ. The glory of His name, and the beauty of His character, should be portrayed clearly. As the bride ponders on her beloved, she is reminded of his unsurpassed beauty. He is white and ruddy. The word “white” in the original language means “dazzling” or “shining”. It is like what the three apostles saw of the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration – the Lord glowed. The glory of the Lord’s divinity was revealed at that time. Jesus Christ is actually the eternal Son of God, who has

taken for Himself sinless human nature. Our Lord is portrayed here as “ruddy”, just as David was described as “ruddy, with bright eyes, and good-looking” in 1 Samuel 16:12 and 17:42. A ruddy young man is healthy, strong, and energetic. David was a type of Christ. Our Lord is portrayed as the all-powerful Son of God, who has been given all authority both in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). Who will not be encouraged, and strengthened, and stirred to love the Lord afresh, with such a portrayal of Him?

Christ to be heard

This brings us to the third point, which is that we should want to hear of the Lord as often as possible. While some Christians are *prevented* by circumstances from coming to hear the Lord proclaimed, there are others who *choose* not come to hear of Him. In churches of the Reformed and Puritan tradition, there are usually two main services on the Lord’s day – the morning teaching service, and the evening gospel service. While one is aimed at building up the faith of believers, and the other at winning souls to Christ, both show us much of Christ. It is such a pity that believers should choose not to come to the gospel service, thinking that it is meant for non-believers. How mistaken they are, for both are services of worship. We want to begin the Lord’s day with worship, and end the Lord’s day with worship. Hearing much of Christ will be good for our souls. We want to be reminded of the basics of the faith, and of God’s goodness to us. We want our burden for souls to be saved stirred up afresh, as we hear the gospel proclaimed. Jesus Christ is proclaimed in both the morning and evening services. We should want to hear more of Him because He is truly “chief among ten thousand”.

These, then, are the things we want to hear. These are the things we want to ponder and meditate upon. These are the things most likely to cause us to praise and thank God. We will be on the way to recovery from backsliding if there is much thanksgiving and praise in our prayer.

11.3 The Person Of Christ (vv. 11-13)

As we seek the Lord, we begin to ponder on His person. This constitutes the third step leading to our recovery. The person of Christ is alluded to in verses 11 to 13. Verse 11 says, “His head is *like* the

finest gold; his locks *are wavy, and black as a raven.*” The head is the centre of control, where information flows in and out. A poisonous snake is rendered harmless when struck on the head. During a war, the enemies will be easily scattered and subdued when their head-quarters is struck and destroyed. The head controls the rest of the body. It also shows forth the dignity of the person. It is the highest part of the person. Proverbs 16:31 says, “The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness.” The groom has a head of gold, yes, of the finest gold.

The head

In the Bible, gold is used to portray the qualities of high value, purity, and stability. We are taught in 1 Corinthians 3 that our work for the Lord must be of the quality of gold, silver and precious stones in order to withstand the fire of judgement day. If it is of the quality of wood, hay and straw, it will be burned away and proven worthless. In Revelation 1, the churches of Jesus Christ are represented by seven golden lampstands. The churches are made up of God’s people, who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ. Each church on earth may be imperfect, but it belongs to the Lord and is being sanctified so as to be perfect on that great day when all God’s elect are gathered together. In Revelation 21, the complete number of God’s people gathered together is represented by “the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God”. It is a cubic city, portraying stability, and it is golden, showing its purity and value. It is, in fact, “pure gold, like clear glass”. The Lord Jesus Christ has a head of the finest gold, i.e. He is stable, pure, and dignified to the highest degree. He is the wisest among the wise. He is completely trustworthy. He may be depended upon.

The hair

We consider, next, the hair of the groom. It is thick, wavy, and completely black. As in Chapter 4:1, the hair is meant to portray the thoughts of the person. Here, it is a portrayal of the strong, orderly, and consistent thoughts, or teaching, of our Lord. We have seen that the head is the centre of thought and control. The hair speaks of the actual words of the Lord, and of His revealed will. A person with plenty of black hair is youthful and strong, unlike a baby or an old man who does not have much hair. The Lord is being portrayed as

strong and energetic, in a controlled and purposeful way. A storm may be powerful but uncontrolled in its destruction. A bomb may be powerful, but indiscriminate in its explosive power. Not so with our Lord – He works out all things according to the will of His Father. In the vision of Revelation 1:14, we are told that the Lord has a head and hair that is “white like wool, as white as snow”. This corresponds with the hair of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7, which signifies eternity and wisdom. Old men generally have white hair, showing that they have more experience and are wiser than younger people. The Lord is portrayed as having white hair in the last book of the Bible to show that He is the eternal Son of God, who knows all things and is in control of all things. The black hair of the groom in the Song of Solomon complements the teaching of Revelation 1. The Lord’s teaching is strong, powerful, and orderly. His promises are completely reliable and will never be broken.

The eyes

Verse 12 says, “His eyes *are* like doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, *and* fitly set.” Unlike Chapter 1:15 and Chapter 4:1, where the bride is described as having dove’s eyes, here, the groom has eyes like doves washed in rivers of milk. He does not have dove’s eyes but eyes like doves. While the eyes of a dove reveal gentleness and intelligence, the dove itself is gentle and docile, pointing to the characteristics of gentleness and compassion. Furthermore, the doves are milky white, as though washed in rivers of milk. Our imagination gets transported away. We have here a person who is gentle and compassionate, and also pure – as the whiteness of milk conveys. The strength and precision of the person is portrayed by the eyes set tightly in place. He sees through all things, and knows the hearts of men. His judgement is accurate and just. Here, the Lord is shown to be our compassionate High Priest, who intercedes for His people in heaven, who is our righteous Judge, and whose judgement is just and fair. Hebrews 4:15 tells us, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Cheeks and lips

Verse 13 says, “His cheeks *are* like a bed of spices, banks of scented herbs. His lips *are* lilies, dripping liquid myrrh.” The cheeks consti-

tute the face of the person. The countenance of the person is shown on his face. What is the person like – is he fierce or kindly, angry or joyful, friendly or hostile? The spices and herbs give fragrance and healing. They are grown in an orderly manner, on the well-made beds of soil in the garden. They are also grown in banks, i.e. row by row. If a person's face shows forth fragrance and healing, and is orderly and neat like a cultivated garden, he must be someone good to have around. We would expect him to be kind and sympathetic, understanding and clear-minded, whose speech brings healing to whoever he speaks to. The lips are a reference to his speech, and the words he utters. Myrrh is a fragrant liquid. Therefore, the person's speech is gracious and edifying, and always appropriate. You can find no man who fits this description, except the Lord Jesus Christ. While we aim to imitate our Lord, we know we fall so far short of Him. Are we not thankful to have Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, and our High Priest and Eldest Brother?

11.4 The Work Of Christ (vv. 14-16)

From the person of Christ, we move on to consider His work, which is the fourth step to recovery. This is covered in verses 14 to 16. We have, first, the description of his hands and body. Verse 14 says, "His hands *are* rods of gold set with beryl. His body *is* carved ivory inlaid *with* sapphires." A better translation for "body" here is "belly", or the abdomen area. It is a reference to the location where the soft organs are found. An athletic body will not be bulging with fat, but will be tight and muscular, like carved ivory. We have, therefore, "His hands *are* rods of gold set with beryl. His belly *is* carved ivory inlaid *with* sapphires." Consider the composite picture, as applied to the Lord Jesus Christ. The hands of our Lord were nailed to the cross, and His side was pierced with a spear, so that "blood and water came out (John 19:34)". By His death on the cross, our Lord redeemed for Himself a people. Are you washed in the blood of Jesus Christ? Have you experienced the power of His salvation?

Hands and fingers

Consider the hands and fingers next. Note that the word used is a reference to the open hands, not the arms. This does not mean that the arms are not included, for how would you move the hands

without moving the arms? The arms represent strength in the Bible, but the focus here is on the hands. The hands are strong, like those of a person used to hard work or handling weapons. The fingers are similarly strong, like rods, on which are rings of gold set with beryl. Beryl is a transparently green precious stone. The hands and fingers are instruments of action and distribution. It reminds us of Isaiah 40:10, “Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong *hand*, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.” Having redeemed His people, the Lord rules over them, and gives them gifts, or abilities, with which to serve Him. He is fair, giving to each according to his ability – just as in the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25). He is also just, governing His people by the rule of His word. Today, we hear much of the importance of the rule of law. When rule is not according to law, there will be corruption, chaos and injustice. The Lord rules according to His righteous law. We, who are His, willingly submit ourselves to Him, knowing that He is good to us, an undeserving people. The light green colour may be considered the symbol of justice and fairness.

The belly

Then, we consider the belly, which is “carved ivory, inlaid *with* sapphires”. We have noted that the belly refers to the location of the soft, or tender, organs. We are told, in Colossians 3: 12-13, “Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*.” The Lord has shown tender mercies to us, and wants us to “put on tender mercies” as well. In the old King James Version, Colossians 3:12 reads, “Put on ... bowels of mercies”. The “bowels” are the soft organs. That is why the New King James version says, “put on tender mercies”. The tender mercies shown by believers are laced with the compassion of the Lord, like the shining blue of sapphire crystals. Law and order that is not tempered with love and compassion will come across as hard and cold. Light blue may be considered the colour of love and mercy.

The legs

We move on to the last part on the work of Christ. We are told in

verses 15 and 16, “His legs *are* pillars of marble set on bases of fine gold. His countenance *is* like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth *is* most sweet, yes, he *is* altogether lovely.” The legs support the weight of the whole body. We expect a house with marble pillars to be big, majestic and strong. We would not expect a small wooden house to be supported by marble pillars. The Lord Jesus Christ is building no ordinary house, but a temple fit for God to dwell in! Believers are regarded as living stones. We are told in 1 Peter 2:5, “you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” While on earth, we are saved to worship and serve God. The Lord does not leave His saved people to their own devices. Instead, He sustains them by His grace, providing them strength and support, like the strong marble pillars. The pillars sit on secure and precious gold foundations which cannot be moved, even in the strongest earthquake. The Lord will ensure that even the gates of Hades shall not prevail against His church (Matt. 16:18). In other words, death itself will not be able to prevent Him from building His church. We know that the present passage is a reference to life on earth because the pillars are also compared to the cedars of Lebanon. We have already seen a number of times that Lebanon is connected with earth. When all God’s elect are gathered together on the last day, the church of Jesus Christ will be perfect. The heavenly city of Jerusalem will need no temple, “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev. 21:22)”. We see now that Jesus Christ, to us, is “all and in all” – the all-sufficient Saviour (Col. 3:11).

His mouth

How does the Lord sustain His people on earth? The chief way is by, and through, His word – “His mouth *is* most sweet, yes, he *is* altogether lovely.” Consistent with the teaching of the rest of the Bible, there is much emphasis on the word of God. Like honey, which is sweet, and which strengthens, so is Christ’s word. The Psalmist says “How sweet are Your words to my taste, *sweeter* than honey to my mouth (Psalm 119:103)!” We have seen a number of times already that the mouth, the lips and the tongue are references to speech, or words. Without the word of God, there is no possibility of Christians continuing in their faith. We are saved by the hearing of God’s word. “Faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of

God (Rom. 10:17).” We are sustained in our walk with God by the same word. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).” How we must value the word of God more!

Altogether lovely

Having come to the end of the description of the groom, the bride says, in verse 16, “Yes, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem!” The bride is no longer cold in heart. She is no more sluggish and slow. She desires to proclaim the beauty and worth of her beloved. Similarly, the Lord is altogether lovely to the Christian. The Lord alone is the beloved of the church. We would not want any other to compete with Him, for He is without comparison. You ask why we would not listen to the teaching of other religions, why we would not consider other faiths – here is the answer. Since we have found the Pearl of great price, why should we look for other pearls and other gems? Jesus Christ is our Friend, yea, more than a friend! We want to proclaim Him to all. We want all to come to know Him as well. You can see that we are well on the road to recovery from the backslidden state. Our hearts are warm again. Our love for the Lord has been rekindled.

11.5 Conclusion

When our hearts grow cold toward spiritual things, when we backslide in our Christian life, there is only one recourse for us – that is, to look for Jesus Christ again. We seek Him in the company of God’s people, and we seek Him in His word. We come to hear His word proclaimed, regardless of whether it is a “teaching service” or a “gospel service”. It might seem that the preacher is attacking you through his preaching. He might come across as harsh and lacking in compassion when, in fact, he is being faithful to the Lord, and to His word. Preachers who say nice things to please their hearers are not faithful watchmen of the Lord. You must listen to faithful preaching, and continue to come to hear God’s word preached. Soon, the beneficial effects of God’s word will be experienced by you. You will find God’s word soothing. It will be balm to your bruised soul.

Faithful preaching will show you much of Jesus Christ. The Lord, in all His beauty and strength, will be revealed. As you ponder on

the person and work of Christ, you will be revived in your soul. Soon, you will be reveling in His love. Spiritual strength will be channelled to you. The Spirit of God will fill you. In no time, you will be declaring to many the unsurpassed beauty of your Lord.

Do you find what we say alien? Are you asking “What *is* your beloved more than *another* beloved?” We will answer with the words of another who had experienced the love of the Lord, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal. 2:20).”

Part VII

THE CHURCH MILITANT

6:1-10

Daughters of Jerusalem

- 1 Where has your beloved gone,
O fairest among women?
Where has your beloved turned aside,
That we may seek him with you?

Shulamite

- 2 My beloved has gone to his garden,
To the beds of spices,
To feed *his flock* in the gardens,
And to gather lilies.
3 I am my beloved's,
And my beloved *is* mine.
He feeds *his flock* among the lilies.

Solomon

- 4 O my love, you *are as* beautiful as Tirzah,
Lovely as Jerusalem,
Awesome as *an army* with banners!
5 Turn your eyes away from me,
For they have overcome me.
Your hair *is* like a flock of goats
Going down from Gilead.
6 Your teeth *are* like a flock of sheep
Which have come up from the washing;
Every one bears twins,
And none *is* barren among them.
7 Like a piece of pomegranate
Are your temples behind your veil.

8 There are sixty queens
And eighty concubines,
And virgins without number.

9 My dove, my perfect one,
Is the only one,
The only one of her mother,
The favorite of the one who bore her.
The daughters saw her
And called her blessed,
The queens and the concubines,
And they praised her.

Daughters of Jerusalem

10 Who is she who looks forth as the morning,
Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
Awesome as *an army* with banners?

Twelve

The Beauty Of The Church

We have been studying this book of allegory, the Song of Solomon, which concerns the love relationship between Christ and His church. We arrived at Chapter 5 which is about *Backsliding* and its *Restoration*. Chapter 6 is about “Christ’s Love for the Church Militant”. We shall cover the first ten verses of the chapter, which is about “the Beauty of the Church Militant”. As the backslidden church searches for Christ, she is not only restored to spiritual health, but also brought to realize how much she is loved by the Lord. The same may be said of the individual believer who is restored from his backslidden state – he is brought to realize how much he is loved by the Lord. This occurs in a situation in which the church or the believer is actively serving the Lord. Unlike in romantic love, in which the couple seek to be alone together, the church or the believer will be actively engaging the world while serving the Lord.

We often use the word “militant” when describing the church that is actively serving the Lord in the world. The word is used in contrast to the portion of the church that is in heaven, which is described as the church triumphant. Believers who have gone to glory are no more struggling with sins and no more engaging in spiritual warfare in the world. They have triumphed over sins and the world, and are reigning in heaven with the Lord. In contrast, that portion of the church on earth is still engaged in spiritual warfare using spiritual weapons such as the word of God and prayer. The believers on earth struggle against sins in their lives, and face opposition from unbe-

lievers as they seek to preach the gospel. They are often persecuted for their faith as well. In the midst of such spiritual warfare, the Lord draws near to assure them of His love. There are two sections to this message.

12.1 Drawing Near To Christ (vv. 1-3)

We consider, first, the church drawing near to Christ. The present chapter can be understood correctly only if we remember it is a continuation of the previous one. The bride was backslidden and had come to “the daughters of Jerusalem” for help. In Chapter 5:8, the bride has said to them, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I *am* lovesick!” As we have noted, “the daughters of Jerusalem” are the seekers, new believers, and adherents in the church. The church is constantly bringing others to hear the word of God so that there is this constant stream of seekers and new believers found in its midst. At this point it is good to ask ourselves when was the last time we brought friends and relatives to church to hear God’s word. We are to bring God’s word out to others, and we are to bring people in to hear the word. It is one thing just to invite them, it is another to bring them with you to church. Often, those invited will politely tell you that they will consider your invitation, or they might even say they would come, but you invariably find that they do not show up. If you are to see them in church at all, you will need to fetch them. If each member of the church were to bring one other person, the church would be doubled in number in no time. However, we remind ourselves that it is not mere numbers that we are looking for, but our desire is for the word of God to be heard by others. That way, we would have a constant stream of adherents in the church. We would then have the joy of seeing one or two of them converted constantly.

Why restoration is highly desirable

The bride had asked the daughters of Jerusalem whether they had seen the groom, and that if they were to see him to please tell him that she was lovesick and longing for him. The daughters of Jerusalem had responded by asking, in the words of Chapter 5:9, “What *is* your beloved more than *another* beloved, O fairest among women? What *is* your beloved more than *another* beloved, that you

so charge us?" Their questioning caused the bride to ponder on the splendour of the groom so that her spirit was lifted up again. Similarly, the backslidden believer who is asked about his Lord will be brought to a spirited declaration of His splendour and worth before others. Soon, as he ponders on Christ's goodness and greatness in His person and work, the backslidden believer would be warmed in his heart. The cold winter would have been driven away, and the sunshine of the spring season will be seen in his life again. It is the Lord Jesus Christ whom we must focus upon. It is His greatness and glory that we should meditate upon. As we ponder upon His person and what He has accomplished for His people, we are turned from self-pity and self-centredness to admire Him and to consider the great work He is doing in the world. We would no longer be thinking of *our* work for Him. Instead, the focus would be upon *His* work that we are doing. Note the subtle difference in the ways Christians refer to their service to God. Is it God's work that we are doing, or is it our work for God?

The fact that we are willing to involve the adherents in the church speaks well of us. Although they are not yet added to the membership of the church, they should be made to feel welcome. They are unable to attend the members' meetings and vote in the decision-making process, but they should be able to participate in most ministries of the church. The church that does not involve such adherents misses out on much that they can contribute. In our present passage, we see the bride restored to spiritual health by the questioning of the daughters of Jerusalem. Even if unintentionally, the daughters of Jerusalem have been providentially used by God to effect the restoration of the bride. If we put on an air of superiority, and are so self-reliant that we despise the help of others, we are not going to be used by God to help others. Well-trained missionaries know this well. If they have the attitude of superiority over the people in the mission field, they will be constantly giving directions and talking down to them. They will not gain the respect of the people. However, if they genuinely treat the people with respect, and are not too proud to seek their opinion or help, their ministry on the mission field will become more effective. We may be the spiritual father, or elder brother or sister, to seekers and young believers, but our esteem in their eyes will grow if they see that we are like them, and in need of their help in some ways. It is as we decrease that Christ is

increased in the eyes of those we are ministering to.

That leads us to Chapter 6:1, when the daughters of Jerusalem ask, “Where has your beloved gone, O fairest among women? Where has your beloved turned aside, that we may seek him with you?” The bride has extolled the glory and greatness of the groom. This has prompted the daughters of Jerusalem to ask this question, from which two things must be noted. Firstly, we note that the daughters of Jerusalem intuitively know that the groom cannot be far from the bride. They ask, “Where has your beloved turned aside?” They did not say, “Where has your beloved gone?” To turn aside carries the idea that He is just around the corner – not far away. If the groom is as the bride has described him, it is not possible for him to totally forsake the bride. In the same way, we can be confident that the Lord will never leave nor forsake His people, just as He has promised. He has laid down His life for His people, and He has purchased them with His blood. We belong to the Father and are the apple of His eye. Furthermore, God is faithful while His people are unfaithful. Our God cannot lie. What He has promised, He will carry out. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are awakened to the realization that the Lord cannot be far away.

Secondly, we note that the daughters of Jerusalem express the desire to come along with the bride to look for the groom. We have noted that in romantic love, many couples like to keep to themselves instead of interacting with other people. While that is understandable, Christian couples should learn to be more outward looking and be sensitive to the needs of others. It is legitimate to spend time together away from others, but we must have time for others as well. We live in a world in which many are bruised and wounded. Many are lonely and heavily laden with trials and responsibilities. The more we experience the love of God in our lives, the more we want to share that love with others. We want others to know our Lord as well. Here, the bride discovers that the daughters of Jerusalem are excited and keen to look for the groom with her. In the same way, we would be pleasantly surprised that those we minister to are willing to know more of the Lord. They are willing to have Bible studies with you and to come with you to special meetings in church. They are keen to discuss spiritual things and will appreciate the books you give them to read. Instead of thinking negatively all the time that

people are not interested in spiritual things, and that they will be antagonistic, we will be pleasantly surprised by the level of interest shown and the number of people who show such keenness to know more. If there are those who are hostile and reject our goodwill, there are others who will respond positively. The church that looks out for opportunities to bring the gospel to others will be blessed by God.

Throughout this passage, we see the church militant actively serving the Lord. In verse 4, God's people are described as "*an army with banners*". In verse 10, they are described as "*awesome as an army with banners*". In verse 12, the spirit of the bride is described as "*the chariots of my noble people*". When the church is thus described, we have to conclude that it is restored to full spiritual health. Such spiritual health is highly desirable. How may such a state of health be achieved? The answer, of course, lies in a restored relationship with the Lord.

Where the Lord may be found

Where is the groom to be found? When asked, the bride is jolted to the realization that there is one place where she is sure to find him. Of course, he has to be in their trysting place – the place where they have spent many pleasant hours together. Verse 2 says, "My beloved has gone to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed *his flock* in the gardens, and to gather lilies." It is the garden described in Chapter 4:12-14, "A garden enclosed *is* my sister, *my* spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Your plants *are* an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices ..." We have seen that this is the description of the church. The church is in the world, but it is not of the world. It is pictured as enclosed by a high wall all around. The flowers and spices are planted in orderly rows, such that it is so pleasant to behold, while the fragrance of the plants waft in the air. The fragrance represents the service and prayer of God's people, like the smoke of incense in the Old Testament temple rising to the throne of God in heaven. The Lord is well-pleased with the service of His people. As He observes the love between His people, and their service to Him, "He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied (Isa. 53:11)." His love is poured forth upon His people,

and it overwhelms them. The bride expresses the “joy inexpressible” that only those who experience it know of. We are told, in verse 3, “*I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine. He feeds his flock among the lilies.*” Such is the ecstasy and contentment of the Lord’s people conveyed by these words!

When the Lord was on earth, He could be found by His disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, or in the Garden of Gethsemane outside the city. The upper room was the place of meeting when He was ministering in the city. The Garden of Gethsemane, just outside the city, was where He and the disciples often went to – to pray and to rest. When Judas came with the temple police to arrest Him, he knew where the Lord could be found, namely, the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas betrayed the Lord on sacred ground. The point we are making is that the Lord can be found in “the garden enclosed”, which is the church. Every gathered church is a “garden enclosed”, a place of spiritual refuge for God’s people in a world that is generally hostile to the Christian faith. You do not find the Lord in the shopping mall, or the golf course, or the cinema. While it is legitimate to find recreation in such places, within reason, we would not associate these places with the presence of the Lord. Instead, the Lord is to be found where He is feeding the flock, i.e. where the word of God is taught and preached. He is found in the garden gathering the lilies. We have seen, in Chapter 2:1, the divine and human natures of the Lord portrayed by the roses on the plateau and the lilies in the valleys, “*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.*” In Chapter 2:2, God’s people are described as like a lily among thorns, “*Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.*” Like a gardener harvesting lilies to decorate the home, the Lord is gathering in the converts to build up His church. A similar idea is conveyed by the building of the temple of God, in 1 Peter 2:5, “... you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

The upshot of all that we have learned up to this point is the importance of returning to the place of prayer and worship, to seek the Lord in the midst of His people. You cannot expect to be restored to spiritual health and regain the joy of salvation except in the midst of God’s people.

12.2 Experiencing Christ's Love Afresh (vv. 4-10)

We consider, in the second section, the church experiencing Christ's love afresh. There are Christians who are not quite convinced of the importance of finding the Lord in the midst of His people – the church. They choose to read the Bible on their own, and to witness to others on their own. They cut themselves off from God's people, attending church only sufficiently to be noticed by others. They make no attempt to interact with others or to be involved in the life of the church, preferring to keep to themselves, and to leave as soon as meetings are over. You may claim that you are doing no harm to anyone. You may even claim that you are doing things right, when in reality you have a bad spirit. In fact, a root of bitterness is growing in your heart, coupled with selfishness and self-pity. No true Christian will remain long in such a state without being chastised severely by the Lord. We are told in Hebrews 12:7, "If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?" We are told further, in Hebrews 12:12-13, "Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be *dislocated*, but rather be healed." Let these words be God's appeal to you to return to Him! Come, seek the Lord in the midst of His people! As you do so sincerely, you will be restored, and Christ's love will begin to be experienced again.

The beauty of the church

One way by which this comes about is knowing the Lord's love for the church. Like a dotting father praising his beloved daughter, or rather, like a lover praising his beloved, the Lord praises the church for her beauty. We are told in verse 4, "O my love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as *an army* with banners!" This is a composite picture, describing the beauty of God's people, as seen by the Lord. Tirzah was a beautiful city in Ephraim, in northern Israel. In the period of the Kings, after the reign of Solomon, at least three kings made Tirzah the capital. It was a peaceful city, with fresh air, and surrounded by vast expanse of scenic landscape. This is the first aspect of the picture, depicting the church of Jesus Christ. Next, the church is compared to the city of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was surrounded by walls,

seated majestically on top of a hill, and elevated on high ground. As we look at the city, we can imagine the flags fluttering on the walls, while the watchmen guarded the city. People would come in and out of the open gates with a sense of purpose – either to go to the farms outside the city, or to do business in the city. When night comes, the gates would be closed so that no intruder can come in, while the citizens sleep in peace. The next aspect of the church is conveyed by the picture of an army encamped on the fields. The tents are arranged in order, the banners flutter in the wind, while the general is seated on his horse, conferring with his captains. The soldiers march up and down, while others are busy at their own tasks. This awesome army is ready to march and to do battle with the enemies. Just as the army of Israel brought fear to the enemies in the days of Moses, the church is portrayed as busily engaged in the work of missions. The church is described as beautiful like Tirzah, majestic like Jerusalem, and awesome like an army poised for battle. This is the church militant.

The external beauty of the bride has been described. The next few verses reveal that the internal beauty of the bride lies at the base of the external beauty. In other words, the external beauty of the bride arises from the beautiful and strong personal characteristics of the bride. So beautiful is the bride that the groom has to say, in the words of verse 5, “Turn your eyes away from me, for they have overcome me.” This is similar to Chapter 4:9, where the groom says, “You have ravished my heart with one *look* of your eyes.” This is to show how deeply the Lord loves His church. Verses 5 to 7 are virtually a repetition of Chapter 4:1-3, “Your hair *is* like a flock of goats going down from Gilead. Your teeth *are* like a flock of sheep which have come up from the washing; every one bears twins, and none *is* barren among them. Like a piece of pomegranate *are* your temples behind your veil.” The hair covers the head, which is the centre of thoughts. The thinking or doctrine of the church, and the believer, is orderly like the wavy hair of the bride. The beautiful and even teeth are seen because the bride is smiling. This portrays the warmth and joy of the church. The temples are partially hidden behind the veil, showing that the church is modest, humble, and dignified despite her standing before God and her knowledge of the truth.

The church is made beautiful by the Lord. She is precious in the

sight of the Lord. The world may think nothing of the church, yet it is that powerful and efficient machine to accomplish His purpose on earth. The external beauty and usefulness of the church arises from her inner, spiritual, beauty and strength. What constitute the inner beauty and strength of the church, or the individual believer? It is her grasp of doctrine and her strength of character. A believer who knows correct doctrine and upholds spiritual values is beautiful and useful in the Lord's sight. Are you such a believer?

The worth of the church

Next, the worth of the bride is described in verses 8-9, "There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her. The daughters saw her and called her blessed, the queens and the concubines, and they praised her." We know that Solomon had many wives and concubines during his reign, many of whom were pagan. This was against God's law and frowned upon in Scripture. We are told, in 1 Kings 11:3-4, "And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David." However, this book of the Song of Solomon was inspired by the Holy Spirit with the intention of teaching spiritual truths, and must not be compared to Solomon's polygamy. Instead, we should see verses 8 to 9 as a deliberate exaggeration to convey certain spiritual truths. Here is a palace with not one queen but sixty, assembled together with eighty concubines and their unmarried daughters. They are all so beautiful that you have great difficulty pointing out which of them is the most beautiful. Then, it is announced that the bride is coming in. As she arrives, you are awestruck by her unsurpassed beauty. None of the women and ladies present can compare with her in beauty. She is simply incomparable! Such is the way the Lord looks upon the church. She is most beautiful, with none who can compare with her. As to her worth in the Lord's sight, she is like the favorite daughter of the favorite queen. She is the most precious among all the princesses. None of the queens, concubines and princesses dare to compare themselves with her. None dare to usurp her place. Everyone of them acknowl-

edges her as the beloved of the Lord. That is the worth of the church to the Lord. She is the apple of His eye.

In verse 10, we arrive at the crest of the crescendo, “Who is she who looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as *an army* with banners?” Like music that is increasing in volume, we now arrive at the peak. Everyone stands at the sidelines, admiring the bride. She is fresh and warm as the morning. She is serene and clear as the full moon. She is bright as the sun. She is awesome as an army poised for battle. She combines all the superlative qualities which show that she belongs to the groom. This is the picture of the church being prepared for the day when the Lord will gather all His people to Himself. We are reminded of Ephesians 5:25-27, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” The sanctification of the church is brought about by the Spirit of God working in her through His word. While the church is not yet perfect, either quantitatively or qualitatively, the potential and certainty of it becoming perfect is not in doubt. The time will come when the full number of God’s elect will be called in. The time will come when the church will be free from sins. If the church is to be ready for the day of marriage, she must feed richly on the word of God and apply the word to her life. Spiritual growth and transformation take place only when the believer grows in understanding of, and obedience to, God’s word. It is as we obey the word of God that the Spirit of God works in us. It is as we labour to serve God that He works in us mightily. The apostle Paul says, in Colossians 1:29, “To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.”

12.3 Conclusion

We have seen that the present passage is about the beauty of the church militant. The church militant must be militant. The church on earth must be actively serving the Lord. There is no such thing as the church militant that is passive. The healthy church is one that is infused with the power of the Holy Spirit to serve the Lord. For

the power of the Spirit to be experienced, the church must seek a close walk with the Lord. Since the church is made up of individual members, they must draw near to the Lord and be willing to obey Him. This is especially directed to the backslidden Christian, who must seek the Lord, in the word of God, and in the company of God's people. It is to your own good that you are quickly restored to good spiritual health. Those who fall away from the faith and never return to the Lord in repentance only prove themselves apostates, i.e. they have never been true believers. We are addressing those who are true believers, who have backslidden. Do not wait for the Lord to chastise you severely to turn you back to Himself. All true believers will feel miserable when they do not have the sense of the Lord's presence. Like the bride, they would be desperately seeking for Him to find Him. This passage is teaching us that we are to seek Him where he will be found, namely, in the midst of His people. Come to church regularly, to hear the word of God expounded. You will find the Lord there. If you come with the right spirit, you will soon be restored to full spiritual health.

We have placed the primary importance on coming to hear God's word, rather than on your service to the Lord. It is as we hear God's word that we are built up in our understanding and in our faith. It is in the pages of Scripture that we meet with the Lord. It is then that we would respond in thanksgiving and praise. It is then that we would give of ourselves willingly to Him in service. You cannot remain long in the church, merely growing in head knowledge of the truth. The truth will strengthen and comfort those who are submitted to the Lord. It will trouble those who resist God's will and refuse to obey Him. You will either finish life on earth as a poor specimen of Christian, who barely manages to limp into heaven, or you will submit yourself to the Lord and be escorted triumphantly into the presence of the Lord. "Each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is (1 Cor. 3:13)."

What a joy it is to be healthy, and to be contributing to the health of the church. The Lord loves the church and looks upon the healthy church as beautiful – yes, so beautiful as to lavish superlative praise upon her. The individual believer who is spiritually healthy may appropriate the Lord's praise for himself. Are you one of those who are numbered in the praise of the words:

*Who is she who looks forth as the morning,
Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
Awesome as an army with banners?*

6:11-13

Shulamite

- 11 I went down to the garden of nuts
 To see the verdure of the valley,
 To see whether the vine had budded
 And the pomegranates had bloomed.
12 Before I was even aware,
 My soul had made me
 As the chariots of my **willing** people.

Daughters of Jerusalem

- 13 Return, return, O Shulamite;
 Return, return, that we may look upon you

Solomon

- What would you see in the Shulamite –
 As it were, the **company** of the two **armies**?

Thirteen

The Power Of The Church

From the *beauty* of the church militant, we move on to consider the *power* of the church militant. This book of allegory has shown us that the church, represented by the bride, i.e. the Shulamite woman, is well loved by the Lord. The bride may also represent the individual believer. The bride had backslidden spiritually, but had quickly sought the groom in his garden. The backslidden believer must seek the Lord in the midst of His people, i.e. in the church, in order to be restored. You might wonder how the bride, which represents the church, goes to the church to seek the Lord. That is a problem if you are fastidious – wanting to be exact, finding fault with the smallest inconsistency. To be precise, we may say that both the bride and the garden represent the church in its various conditions. The bride emphasizes more on the individuals who make up the church, while the garden represents the gathered church in worship and serving the Lord in the world. In the garden, the Lord is feeding the flock and gathering in the lilies. In other words, in the midst of God's people, His word is preached and souls are saved. In the place where the Lord is present, where prayer and praise rise up like the fragrance of herbs in the air, the backslidden believer soon recovers. He is restored to spiritual health and takes his place among the other believers, so that the beauty of the church becomes obvious to all. We know, of course, that the church will never be perfect while on earth. However, in the eyes of the Lord, she is as good as perfected. When stragglers are catching up with the other sheep, when the sick are

restored to full health, the flock of the Lord's people is beautiful and awesome to behold. In the words of verse 10, she "looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as *an army* with banners." It would not be long before the power and vitality of the church militant is noticed by all. This is what we find taught in the present passage.

13.1 Drawing Near To Christ (vv. 11-12)

In the first section, we consider the church drawing near to Christ, covering verses 11 to 12. We must take a look at verse 10 again. There are two things conveyed to us about the backslidden believer who has been restored to full spiritual health. Firstly, the beauty of his Christian character will become obvious. He is like the warm and bright morning sun, whose joy and bright disposition affects everyone positively wherever he goes. There is also a certain sweetness and serenity about him, like the full moon shining in the quiet night. He is calm and stable, not irritable and agitated. He is the opposite of a person who is stressed up with the many cares of life, or one who is burdened with apparently insurmountable trials. Secondly, the vitality and quiet strength of the person is noticeable. He is like the bright afternoon sun, driving away the gloom of an overcast sky. He is also like the well-ordered army, with the banners around the camp fluttering in the wind. Here is an army well-groomed and well-equipped, ready to do battle at a moment's notice. It is impressive, and it is awesome. A young boy dressed smartly in scout or cadet uniform looks "cool". He is impressive, neat, and tidy. However, the army we are considering is not merely impressive in looks, but also in the power packed into it. We become aware that it is an efficient fighting machine capable of doing a lot of damage to the enemies. It is well able to protect the citizens of the country, and to efficiently carry out whatever task is assigned to it. If a natural disaster were to occur, this army is able to quickly mobilize itself in relief efforts. The restored believer who is at the peak of spiritual health will show forth both the qualities of spiritual beauty and spiritual might. The church that is walking closely with the Lord will be admired and respected by bystanders because of these two qualities.

Sharing in the Lord's burden

This paves the way for us to consider verse 11, "I went down to the garden of nuts to see the verdure of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded *and* the pomegranates had bloomed." The soul that is restored to Christ and walking in close fellowship with Him will share in the burden of his Lord. He will be in the garden. He will take an interest in the Lord's work. He takes the initiative to examine the garden of nuts, while admiring the verdure of the valley. He examines the vine to see if they have budded, and the pomegranates to see if they have bloomed. This reminds us of Nehemiah viewing the walls of Jerusalem, to see what needed to be done (Neh. 2:11ff.). A new church member will get to know the inner workings of the church. A restored believer will have a concern for the welfare of the church. He will be learning how things are done, what need to be done, and what to expect in the Lord's work. If things are not in place, he will put them right. If things are not functioning as they should, he will try to get them working again. There is the joy of learning, and there is the joy of serving. But when backsliding begins to set in, his heart grows cold towards spiritual things and towards the Lord's work. If he does not quickly return to the Lord, by seeking Him in the company of God's people, he will be allowing his heart to harden. Soon, he will be truly backslidden – in heart and in life. He will become thoroughly worldly and hard to restore. The Lord will have to chastise him severely to restore him. We do not want to be in such a situation. Backsliding in a new believer is painful to behold. Backsliding in a more mature believer is grievous to the Lord. Soon, he will face the painful process of spiritual discipline. Is anyone's heart growing cold? Are you losing the joy of your salvation? Return to the Lord! Seek Him till you find Him!

Filled with the Spirit

The restored believer is thankful to the Lord for His mercy. He is happily busy in the Lord's work. He has no time to think of himself and the petty issues of life. He serves his Lord happily with fellow believers, and they mutually encourage one another. Together, we are concerned for the spread of the gospel and the growth of God's kingdom. Soon, we are looking forward to the fruits, just like the farmer who has toiled long and hard in his orchard waiting for fruits to be seen on the trees. It is while we are joyfully serving the Lord

that we are caught up with His love and experience the power of His Spirit. That is the picture given in verse 12, "Before I was even aware, my soul had made me *as* the chariots of my noble people." You must remember that the chariots of old were the equivalent of the tanks of today. In a battle, the chariots were powerful war machines, from which the soldiers shoot arrows and cut down the enemies. Along the axles of the chariots, extending from the wheels, were metal blades which mowed down men and horses. While the tanks of today are powerful and strong, they are slow and cumbersome. The chariots were fast-moving and agile. This imagery is even more vivid when we think of the chariot of fire which swept up Elijah into heaven. Two things people around us will notice. First, the joy and love in God's people will be noticeable. Second, their effectiveness and single-mindedness in the Lord's work will also be noticeable. These had been noticed earlier, in verse 10. But now, there is a greater measure and deeper intensity to these two characteristics. People are drawn to the church, at the same time that they are in awe of the church. This is the Lord's doing. We read of this in times of revival. We read of this in the book of Acts. In Acts 2:46-47, we find these words, "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." Just a few verses earlier, in verse 43, we have, "Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles." Although the age of signs, wonders and miracles is past, the same God works powerfully in, and through, His people in times of revival.

The filling of the Spirit is not manufactured by men. It cannot be artificially produced by human techniques or psychological manipulations. It comes to believers who are walking closely with the Lord – obeying His commands and serving Him out of love. We are told, in verse 12, that it happened "before I was even aware". The heightened joy and love in God's people will be very attractive to onlookers. The effectiveness and single-mindedness of believers will lead to much useful work done for the Lord. It will not be surprising if our work for the Lord is blessed with conversion of souls. We may rightly expect such fruit from our labour for the Lord.

Similarly, when a true spiritual revival occurs, it will be the sover-

eign work of God, and not the product of human planning and effort. There will be plentiful fruit – there will be many conversions at about the same time – with much spiritual interest in many people, all because of the activity of God’s mighty Spirit. We will realize that it is not by our effort that all these occur, although God’s people will be earnest in prayer and busy in spreading the gospel. God will own the preaching of certain individuals by blessing it with much fruit, but the onset as well as the momentum of the revival will obviously be the work of God. The chariots in motion pictures the mighty stirring of the Holy Spirit in the midst of God’s people.

Willing workers

Another point to be noted in verse 12 is that “the chariots of my *noble* people” may be translated as “the chariots of my *willing* people”. When the Holy Spirit works in the life of a believer, it will affect other people. We will find willing people in the church to serve the Lord together. It is like what is found in the messianic psalm, Psalm 110:3, “Your people *shall be* volunteers in the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, You have the dew of Your youth.” In this gospel age, the Lord’s people are volunteers, i.e. willing workers. We do not find unwilling workers in the Lord’s service. To be more precise, those who serve the Lord should not do so unwillingly. The work done for the Lord is acceptable to Him only when done willingly. We are reminded again of the Parable of the Talents, in which the man with one talent buries his talent in the ground. His heart is unwilling. He is described as wicked. We do not want to be such. Yes, there are Christians who serve the Lord unwillingly, but they soon learn that that is not pleasing to the Lord. In the Old Testament, Jonah was an unwilling servant of God. Here, we are considering those who are filled with the Spirit of God. One characteristic of their lives is that they serve the Lord willingly. The point made in verse 12 is that the Spirit-filled Christian will be the vehicle of drawing other believers together, so that they serve the Lord as one body. There is that mutual interplay of support and encouragement to one another. We, therefore, do not see one chariot moving, but many chariots moving. What a beautiful picture of the Spirit-filled church we have here!

Doing what is right

On the individual level, we must learn the importance of acting according to what we know to be good, right, and true, instead of acting according to our emotions. When you sense your heart growing cold towards spiritual things, you must seek the Lord in the midst of His people until He is found. Then, your heart will warm up again. You will find the joy of salvation returning. There will be the likelihood of being filled with the Spirit beyond normal so that you experience “joy inexpressible”. In 2 Chronicles 31:20-21, we read this of King Hezekiah, “Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and true before the LORD his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did *it* with all his heart. So he prospered.” Hezekiah did what was good, right and true before the Lord, and he was blessed. If you were to act according to your feelings, you will find yourself unwilling to come to church when your heart grows cold. No, you must not act according to feelings, but according to what you know to be good, right and true before God. Often it is that even a faithful servant of God is cast down with despondency and fear. These are two weapons often used by Satan to render a useful servant of God ineffective in his service. We find that happening to Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Elijah had been faithful to God, but he ran away in fear from wicked Queen Jezebel, and was cast down in despondency. Fear and despondency! These are twin brothers often found together. If you fall into fear, despondency is not far away. If you fall into despondency, fear will not be far away. You will fear men. You will fear for your own safety, or your own reputation. You will fear for your career or your loved ones. Before too long, despondency sets in as well. Satan uses these two weapons to cripple many otherwise useful Christians. Beware of acting according to your emotions! Do what is good, right and true. Since it is good, right and true that you seek the Lord in the midst of His people, why don’t you do it? Here is the promise of the filling of the Spirit to those who seek the Lord in the midst of God’s people.

13.2 [Caught Up In Christ \(v. 13\)](#)

We have considered what happens when a believer seeks the Lord, in verses 11 to 12. We now proceed to the second section of this

message, which covers verse 13. Here, we must not be misled by the headings found in certain versions of the Bible. When we began our studies in the book of the Song of Solomon, it was noted that the chapters, verses, and headings have been added by scholars as aids to the readers. The headings in this book are notoriously misleading. As in verse 10, verse 13 should be seen as the words of the daughters of Jerusalem and other onlookers. The first part of verse 13 says, "Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon you!" For the first time in this book, the bride is identified as the Shulamite. There have been those who propose that this is a mis-spelling of "Shunammite". In the Bible, there are references to two women from Shunam. One of them is Abishag, the young Shunammite woman, in 1 Kings 1, who was brought in to take care of King David when he was old. The other is the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4, whose son Elisha raised from the dead. There is no good reason to associate the bride in the book of Song to either of these women. She might have been another woman from Shunam, but there is a better explanation for the name of "Shulamite". The name is actually the feminine form of "Solomon", very much like "Augustina" is the feminine form of the name, "Augustine". In this book of allegory, the woman is betrothed to Solomon. She is legally his wife although, according to Jewish custom, they would not live together until the wedding day. Since this is a book of allegory, and since the woman is betrothed to Solomon, should we be surprised that she takes on the feminine form of the name for "Solomon"? The name reflects the fact that she belongs to Solomon. She is suited to be his wife. She is Solomon's "better half" – we would say today.

Moving on

The Shulamite, of course, represents the church which is the bride of Christ. We have seen, time and again, the bride being described as lovely, and loved by the groom. In verse 10, the bystanders have admired the beauty of the bride. In verse 12, we have seen how the church stands out in her beauty and power – bringing a sense of admiration and awe in the onlookers. The Spirit-filled church is depicted as an army of chariots moving in orderly array. The church is both beautiful and energized with power. As the chariots begin to move, it dawns upon the onlookers that they are being left behind. A sense of dismay, and even panic, begins to grip them. "Hey, the

chariot is moving away from us!” They begin to run after the chariot. They begin to call out to the Shulamite, “Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon you!” However, there is no sign that the chariots are slowing down, or that the Shulamite is returning. What is this passage saying to us? It is saying that the church cannot wait for those who linger long in this world. Among the daughters of Jerusalem, i.e. the adherents in church, are those not yet committed to Christ in faith. You admire the church. You are attracted to her doctrine. You are not antagonistic to the church nor do you reject her teaching. You are, in fact, quite attracted to her, but you have not actually committed your life to Christ to be part of His church. You are not ready to be baptized. The church has been patient to you, ministering to your needs. You say nice things about the church, but you claim that you are not ready to be part of the membership. You are content to be on the sideline, and be an observer. There comes a point when the church refuses to wait for you, or to be held back by you. In following the Lord, we cannot wait for anyone. You would remember the Lord Jesus Christ teaching about those who give excuses for not becoming His disciples, in the Parable of the Great Supper. In Luke 14:18-20, we read that, “The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’ Still another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’” These people will not taste the great supper of the Lord.

Two armies

As you observe the chariots rolling away, the other sections of the army also begin to move. Those riding on horses, those carrying the banners, and those marching on foot – all begin to move. The whole army marches resolutely forward. The command has been given. There is work to be done. Then, as you watch – you can’t believe your eyes – there seems to be another army marching side by side with the first one! They are actually marching in unison! They are marching in the same direction, with the same sense of purpose. They are friends, not foes. They are marching forward to face the common enemies. This is found in the second half of verse 13, “What would you see in the Shulamite – as it were, the dance of

the two camps?” The word translated “dance” can be translated as “company” while the word translated “camps” can be translated as “armies”, as seen in the King James version of the Bible. The second half of verse 13 then reads, “What would you see in the Shulamite – as it were, the company of the two armies?” Let us say more about the last word “armies” or “camps”. As noted already, “armies” is better because the focus is on the soldiers on the march, not the soldiers at rest, in camps. The first part of verse 13 already conveys the idea of movement, which is continued in this second part. In the original Hebrew, the word translated as “armies” is actually “Mahanaim”, which was the name of a place, first encountered in the Bible in Genesis 32. In that passage, Jacob was on the way back to Canaan with his family, after spending twenty years working for his uncle, Laban, in Mesopotamia. Jacob was bringing his large family, servants, and flock of animals into potentially dangerous territories. Jacob also was fearful of meeting his brother Esau. We are told, in Genesis 32:1-2, ‘So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is God’s camp.” And he called the name of that place Mahanaim.’ Jacob did not see two or three angels, but hundreds, and even thousands, of them. They were encamped next to his camp. God gave him a sight of His angels in the invisible realm. They were there to protect Jacob and his family, and servants. What could not be seen by human eyes normally were seen by Jacob on this occasion because God wanted to reassure him of His divine protection. The word “Mahanaim” means “two camps” or “two armies”.

A similar situation is encountered in 2 Kings 6. The nation of Israel was surrounded by the Syrians. The Syrian army was so huge that the servant of the prophet Elisha was afraid. In verses 16 to 17, we read of what Elisha did: ‘So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who *are* with us *are* more than those who *are* with them.” And Elisha prayed, and said, “LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain *was* full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.’ The spiritual realm exists side by side with the physical realm. The spiritual realm is as real as the physical one. Just as Satan is active in the invisible realm, God is active as well. Satan attempts to hinder the work of the gospel, but God will ensure that His work will not be frustrated by Satan.

God's faithfulness

Coming back to the Song of Solomon, Chapter 6, we see in the second half of verse 13 two armies moving forward to do God's work, instead of one. One army is made up of God's people – the church. The other is the army of God's angels, accompanying God's people. The spiritual truth being conveyed by these words is that God will protect His people from all dangers, and provide divine help as they serve Him. Did not the Lord promise to be with His people to the end of the age, in the Great Commission? Based on the passages we have referred to, and the teaching found elsewhere in the Bible, some Christians believe that God literally provides angels to help His people. Others would look upon the Lord as being present with His people by His Spirit, to protect and strengthen them. We can quite safely say that both views are true, for the Lord is present with His people by His Spirit, and He also has angels carrying out His work in the world. In John 14:15-17, the Lord says, "If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you." This is for the comfort of God's people. They are to know that God has promised never to leave nor forsake His people (Heb. 13:5). God is faithful. He will never break His promises. Furthermore, He is all-powerful and in sovereign control of all things. He is able to fulfill all that He has promised to His people. In contrast, man is unfaithful, and often breaks his promises. Man is also weak, and not in control of his circumstances. You might remember your promises and have a desire to fulfill them, but situations have changed since you first made the promises. Now, you find yourself unable to carry out your promises even though you want to. That is why we must learn to say, "God willing", in all that we promise, or plan, to do in the future.

We see, now, that verses 11 to 12 are best understood as spoken by the bride, while the first half of verse 13 is best understood as spoken by the daughters of Jerusalem. The second half of verse 13 is best understood as spoken by the groom. Solomon was the one who provided the bride with two armies of escorts. Spiritually speaking, the Lord is the One who makes the church an army on earth, while providing an army of angels in the invisible realm to

guard and help the church. As in verse 10, the beauty and power of the bride stand out. However, in verse 10, the bride is seen in her passive state. The emphasis is on her beauty, although the vitality and potential in her are noticeable. Here, in the second half of verse 13, the emphasis falls upon the power of the bride. The bride is on the move like an army – yea, as two armies! The church is portrayed in her dynamic state, actively serving the Lord in the world. This is the church militant, i.e. the church on earth. The church militant is militantly at work, bringing the gospel to the unconverted, and building up the people of God in the faith. We are reminded of the words of the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”

13.3 Conclusion

We draw to a conclusion. The spiritually healthy church, or believer, will be sharing in the concerns of the Lord, just as the bride will be tending the garden of the groom. We work towards producing fruit in our service to the Lord. In the Bible, spiritual fruit comes in the form of growth in Christian graces as well as advance in the gospel. Growth in Christian graces – such as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – mentioned in Galatians 5:22, come to us only when we learn correct doctrines and obey the commandments of the Lord. Advance in the gospel comes from being involved in the life of the church. The daughters of Jerusalem need to be ministered to, while the bride marches forward as an army. In other words, our gifts are to be used for the edification of the church, while we get involved in spreading the gospel and planting churches. All these are possible only when we are integrated into the life of the local church.

As we get involved in the life of the church, the Lord will bless us with His presence and power. We might even become so filled with His Spirit that great joy and effectiveness are seen in our service to Him. We might even be blessed with true spiritual revival

as we serve Him. For this to happen, we will need to watch against allowing a root of bitterness to grow in the heart. We might, in fact, say it is pointless to become members of the church if we are unwilling to serve the Lord. How would we be different from professing believers who refuse to become church members? In fact, there are non-members who have a better spirit than unwilling members and are, therefore, used by the Lord despite not being members. These said, we must see the importance of church membership if we are to be blessed by the Lord.

We end by noting that discipleship is ultimately a matter between yourself and the Lord. If you have true faith, there will be true obedience to God's word. If you are a genuine disciple of Christ, you will want to submit yourself to His lordship. We do not want to please men but our Lord. We want to do whatever is good, right, and true. Just as "time and tide wait for no man", in the matter of obeying the Lord, we wait for no man. We care not for man's opinion. We seek not man's approval. We are so conscious that time is rolling past. The years have flown by. We are that much nearer the time of meeting with the Lord. Friends, come, join us in the army of God!

Part VIII

THE CHURCH MATURING

7:1-9

Solomon

- 1 How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
O prince's daughter!
The curves of your thighs *are* like jewels,
The work of the hands of a skillful workman.
- 2 Your navel *is* a rounded goblet;
It lacks no blended beverage.
Your waist *is* a heap of wheat
Set about with lilies.
- 3 Your two breasts *are* like two fawns,
Twins of a gazelle.
- 4 Your neck *is* like an ivory tower,
Your eyes *like* the pools in Heshbon
By the gate of Bath Rabbim.
Your nose *is* like the tower of Lebanon
Which looks toward Damascus.
- 5 Your head *crowns* you like *Mount Carmel*,
And the hair of your head *is* like purple;
A king *is* held captive by *your* tresses.
- 6 How fair and how pleasant you are,
O love, with your delights!
- 7 This stature of yours is like a palm tree,
And your breasts *like* its clusters.
- 8 I said, "I will go up to the palm tree,
I will take hold of its branches."
Let now your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
The fragrance of your breath like apples,
- 9 And the roof of your mouth like the best wine.

Fourteen

Beauty In Maturity

In this book of allegory, the church that is well-loved by the Lord Jesus Christ is portrayed as not only beautiful but also powerful. We may say that she is energized by the Spirit of God. Like chariots of war carrying willing and enthusiastic soldiers, the church desires to serve the Lord in the world. As the chariots begin to move, the onlookers come to the realization that they are being left behind. They begin to panic and call out to the bride in the words of Chapter 6:13, "Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon you!" This is a picture of adherents to the church who admire what Jesus Christ is doing in the lives of the believers, but would not commit themselves to Him. They say nice things about the church and are attracted to the Christian faith, but they are not prepared to commit themselves to Christ. The church would have to move on and pass these people by. We have been patient with them, answered their doubts, borne up with their criticisms, and helped them to the best of our ability. There comes a point when we cannot wait anymore. We do not want to be held back. We want to follow the Lord and do His work. We know that it will not be to our good if we stop and return to them. They will only gape at us, admire us, and say nice things to us. In practice, we will continue to be as patient as possible with them, but we do not want to be held back in our walk with God.

As the chariots begin to move, the other parts of the army stir, align themselves, and begin to move. The whole army is now march-

ing on. This is a picture of the church actively serving the Lord. As you observe her, to your amazement you see not one army but two! They are marching in unison, heading in the same direction, to accomplish the same objective. There is actually one company of two armies – “Mahanaim”, according to Chapter 6:13. One army is the church of Jesus Christ on earth, while the other army consists of the angels of God who help the church. The angels are there to help God’s people. We are given the assurance that Jesus Christ will build His church and “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it”. You can cut down a few believers here and there, and burn down a few churches and the Bible, but you will not be able to eradicate the Christian faith from the earth. God has determined that every one of His elect will be called into His kingdom by the gospel. The church will always exist on the earth until Jesus Christ comes again. Nothing can stop the spread of the gospel and the winning of souls to Christ. When the Christians in China were severely persecuted in the last century, and all foreign missionaries driven out of the country, everyone thought that the church there had been wiped out. However, when the country opened up again, to everyone’s amazement, the Christian faith had spread and there were millions of Christians! The truth of what Tertullian, an early Christian leader, said had come true in China – “The blood of the Christians is the seed of the church. The more you mow us down, the more it shall grow.”

Continuing from Chapter 6, we come to Chapter 7 in which Christ’s love for the maturing church is described. There is a certain amount of repetition of what have been encountered in the previous chapters but, this time, we see the church portrayed as the bride who has matured. We are not saying that the bride has grown old, but only that she has matured. It is as though the young girl, whose beauty was already noticeable, has now grown up to be the truly beautiful lady that we expected her to be. She is sweet, stable, and capable. She is ready for marriage. This is a picture of the church that is mature in understanding and experience. It is also a picture of the believer who has matured in the faith and is full of vitality and usefulness. This is not the picture of a person who is old in age, languid in life, and lacking in motivation for active service. Rather, it is the picture of a believer – whatever his or her age – who is well-grounded in the teaching of the Bible, gracious in character, and willing to serve the Lord. He can be entrusted with responsibilities,

is well-developed all-round, and can do things efficiently.

As we study the chapter, we must note that a literal interpretation will lead to at least two major problems. Firstly, the description of the lady is grotesque and unacceptable. An example is in verse 2, “Your navel is a rounded goblet”. A goblet is a round and deep drinking vessel with a handle. No lady would like her beauty to be focussed on her navel that is large, round, and deep like a goblet! Similarly, we are told, “Your waist is a heap of wheat.” Is that the picture of a beautiful lady, whose waist bulges like a heap of wheat? Secondly, we are faced with the problem of carnal imagination. The book of Song is part of the Bible, which is the word of God. It is a spiritual book meant to teach truths that lead to faith in Jesus Christ, to stir up aspirations for holiness, and to instill godly living. However, if the book is taken literally, you will need to imagine a naked bride engaged in whatever carnal activities the mind conjures up. No, this is a spiritual book, intended for spiritual edification! We must interpret it as a book of allegory, following proper rules of Bible interpretation, so as not to go wild in allegorization.

14.1 The Constituent Parts (vv. 1-5)

We consider, first, the constituent parts of the mature church, covering verses 1 to 5. Normally, we would draw the picture of a person starting from the head, down to the body, and then the legs. In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar saw in a dream a magnificent image which is described from the head down. It has a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of partly iron and partly clay (Dan. 2:31-33). In our present passage, the bride is described from the feet up to the head. This must have been done deliberately, contrary to expectation, for a purpose. It must have been for the purpose of emphasizing the spiritual lessons taught in this passage.

The legs

We begin with verse 1, which says, “How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O prince’s daughter!” How strange! Why should a lady’s feet be regarded as beautiful? Even if they appear beautiful because clad in the beautiful sandals, it is still odd that the focus should be upon the feet. Yes, today there are those who compare the beauty of

the legs of ladies, but we have yet to come across those who would compare the beauty of the feet! Yet that is done here, but for a spiritual purpose. The Old Testament must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament. We are told in Romans 10:15, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” The feet that are beautiful would bring the gospel to others. These are the feet of a grown-up lady, who wears sandals – perhaps comparable to the shoes of Cinderella. This is not a young girl, nor a teenager. This is a seasoned young lady who has gone through much in life – taking care of her father’s sheep and goats, and being bullied by her half-brothers to do their share of work (Chap. 1:8, 6). This is a lady who had experienced loss of assurance and backsliding. The watchmen of the city had been kind to her, and also beaten and humiliated her. This is the picture of a mature church, or a mature believer, who has undergone much trials, and has experienced the sweetness as well as the bitterness of spiritual growth. The mature church, or believer, is now focused on preaching the gospel and carrying out the Great Commission. This service to the Lord is seen as beautiful because it is carried out well – in accordance to biblical teaching, with the right motive, and efficiently.

Verse 1 goes on to say, “The curves of your thighs *are* like jewels, the work of the hands of a skillful workman.” The thighs of the bride are not fat and flabby, but lean, muscular and strong – as though carved by a skillful workman. In Chapter 5:15, the groom is described as having legs like “pillars of marble set on bases of fine gold”. Strong legs are necessary to carry the weight of the person. In this case, the preaching of the gospel requires travelling to meet with people. Together, the feet and legs speak of mobility and strength. The mature church or believer does not want to be distracted from the preaching of God’s word, from winning souls to Christ, and from planting local churches. God’s work must be done in God’s way. The approach has to be biblical, the motives must be right, and the objective must be clear. There are those who attempt to preach the gospel in unbiblical ways, such as by appealing to the emotions of the hearers or requiring the altar call. There are those who have the wrong motives of seeking for numbers to swell the ranks of the church or to compete with other churches and other religions. There are those who have the wrong objectives of extracting professions

of faith from hearers or spreading the gospel thinly and extensively. Our aim should be to make disciples by the preaching of God's word, followed by their incorporation into the life of the local church. The local church should also seek to plant other local churches. All these should be done with the motive of love for God and man. The mature church or believer will be beautiful in this aspect of the spiritual life, namely, in the carrying out of the Great Commission.

The abdomen

We move on to verse 2, to consider the abdomen: "Your navel is a rounded goblet; it lacks no blended beverage. Your waist is a heap of wheat set about with lilies." The goblet is rounded, implying beauty and volume. We know that the sphere is the shape that takes the most volume. The goblet is used for drinks such as wine or fruit juice. Here, a mixed fruit juice is referred to. It is a beautiful and refreshing drink, able to quench and satisfy those who are thirsty. There is no ingredient missing. Everything is just right. Then, we have the waist that is compared to a heap of wheat. The wheat speaks of plentiful food. The lilies add beauty to the pile of wheat. It also speaks of service in the world. We have seen that believers in the world are like "a lily among thorns" (Chap. 2:2). The food found in the bride is laced with the beauty of service. Together, the drink and the wheat tells us of the plentiful and satisfying spiritual food found in the midst of the church or in the believer. Since the church or believer is mature in the faith, there is depth and proportion in the teaching found there. Anyone hearing the teaching in the church will be fed well with plentiful food that is deliciously prepared. It is like feasting at a banquet fit for a king. The person is not fed with watery porridge that is plain and unsatisfying. The mature believer is a wise teacher of the word, who is able to answer the questions of an enquirer. He has much to contribute and holds truth in proportion.

The ability to hold the truth in depth and proportion is so important. There are many Christians who lack depth of understanding in Bible knowledge and spiritual experience. They are what we regard as immature believers. There are other Christians who know certain aspects of truth well, but fail to hold all truths in proportion. They focus on some truths and neglect others, or they have been selective in their study of the Bible such that they become experts in some

truths but lack knowledge in other important truths. For example, there are Christians who are experts on creationism versus evolution, or who emphasize the importance of the family to the point of almost idolizing it. These are unbalanced Christians who often upset others by their constant emphasis on their areas of expertise. They become unhappy or disappointed when others do not share the same interest. Of course, some Christians need to be specialists in some subjects. We need such people to counter attacks on the Bible and the Christian faith. However, such Christians are useful and helpful only if they are spiritually mature. Unbalanced Christians are not beautiful to behold, just like an athlete who has one arm twice the size of the other due to unbalanced training. A mature church or believer is balanced and proportionate. Earlier, the beauty of the bride's legs have been praised. Now, the beauty of her abdomen is praised. This shows that souls won to Christ by the preaching of the gospel will find plentiful food in the midst of the church. The mature believer is able to preach the gospel well and also to nurture the faith of the new believer.

The chest

We move on to verse 3 to consider the chest: "Your two breasts *are* like two fawns, twins of a gazelle." As in Chapter 4:5, we must not focus on the literal breasts. We know that some artists like to paint half-naked women with their breasts exposed. Our purpose is to determine the spiritual meaning that is being conveyed. Just as the hair which covers the head represents the thoughts or doctrine of the person, so also, the breasts which lie on the chest point to the seat of emotion. The mature church or believer is not lacking in emotions, but the emotions are under control and developing well in a balanced and proportionate way. We know that the human personality consists of the three basic faculties of mind, affection, and will – all of which must develop well and proportionately. Otherwise, the person will become unbalanced. One who is highly emotional is unstable. One who acts rashly will regret his actions. One who is full of head knowledge but lacks consideration for others will appear harsh and opinionated. All three faculties must develop well and proportionately if we are to be stable and useful in the Lord's service.

The mind is primary. We must know correct doctrine and al-

low our will and emotions to be regulated by what we know to be good, right and true before God. Here, the focus is on the chest, which is associated with the seat of emotion. It shows that the mature believer is full of compassion and love for others because he has tasted the goodness of God. We love God because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Love for God will lead to love for man. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." That is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-38)." We are not talking about sentimental feelings. Instead, we are referring to the love, joy and peace seen in a mature Christian. What is seen in the Christian spills over to others he interacts with. James tells us that the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (James 3:17).

The head

We now consider the head, which is described in verses 4 to 5. Verse 4 says, "Your neck *is* like an ivory tower, your eyes *like* the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose *is* like the tower of Lebanon which looks toward Damascus." No lady would like to be described like that! However, being an allegory, we must capture what is actually being taught. The neck is strong, reliable, and dignified. It holds up the head. Otherwise, the head will flop down like that of a newly born baby. It is milky white like ivory, adding dignity to the head that is held up high. The head is the centre of knowledge and control. It is held up high and firmly by the neck. We are reminded of the local church, which is "the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:5)". The church functions as the pillar and the foundation, to uphold the truth. Similarly, the gospel is to shine on the lampstand. The lamp must not be hidden under the bed or in a basket. The light of the gospel is to shine far, and everywhere. Here, in the Song of Solomon, the neck holds up the head. This is to show the resolve and effort of the church in upholding the truth. For that to be done, the church has to be doctrinally clear and strong. The members have to be those who love the Lord and honour God's word. It is in such a church that many souls find refuge, just like the mustard seed that has grown into a big tree, which now shelters many birds of the air (Matt. 13:31-33). Like a lighthouse that guides

many ships to safety, the church that holds high the truth will guide many souls to the safety of God's kingdom.

The eyes are described next. Unlike the earlier passages where the eyes of the bride are compared to the eyes of a dove, here, the eyes are compared to the pools, or fish ponds, of Heshbon. The city of Heshbon was supposed to have a beautiful palace called Bath Rabbim which was surrounded by fish ponds. Today, many buildings around the world have pools in the garden. The buildings definitely look more impressive with the pools of water included. Examples include the Taj Mahal in India, and the Capitol Building at Washington DC. The temple in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus Christ also had pools in the garden. The clear water of such pools give the impression of calmness and tranquility. Spiritually, we would need to consider two factors, namely, the effect and the function of the pools. The effect is peace and tranquility. The mature bride of Christ exudes a quiet confidence because she knows what she believes, and who she belongs to. She has a good grasp of doctrine, and seeks to behave biblically. She cannot be moved away from adherence to the time-tested doctrines of the Confession of Faith and the Catechism of the church, which are rooted in the Bible. She also knows that she belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has died for her and will never leave her. She will not flirt with the world, nor allow worldliness to spoil her spiritual beauty. Are we such a church?

The clear water of the pools also speak of transparency and receptivity. Light goes through. Light is received. We can see into the water. The church does not harbour sins, nor engage in clandestine activities that are shameful to reveal. Gospel work is to be done transparently, and the message of salvation is to be proclaimed "openly to the world (John 18:20)". Money for gospel work must be handled carefully to avoid quarrels which divert our attention from serving the Lord. Individuals involved in gospel work should be able to say honestly, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel (Acts 20:33)". Of course, we do not have to reveal to the world all our plans and what we have been doing. There are those who have no right to know privileged information. We are to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16)". In a digital age, we are to be extra careful in what we reveal to those who have no right to know, so that gospel work is not harmed or hindered through our carelessness. There is value in being transparent, and information

must be spread for the benefit of others and in order that others can pray intelligently for us. But the Lord has warn us that we are “as sheep in the midst of wolves”. Beware of what you post on Facebook and other social networking sites!

The clarity of the pools also speak of receptivity to teaching. The eyes are the windows of the body, allowing light to come in. The Lord said, in Matthew 6:22, “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light.” We claim to have good eyes, which allow light to come into the body. The question is, “What sort of light do we allow into our body?” All too often, we watch too much television, we read too much of the news of the world, and we hear too much of the views of worldly people. There is such a thing as “acquired tastes”. By immersing yourself in the world, and drinking in too much of the views and values of unconverted people, you have acquired a taste for worldly things. Every faithful pastor is concerned for church members who are content with attending church only once a week. What you learn from the Bible is minimal compared to what you have been exposed to in the world. We are not saying that everything in the world is necessarily bad, but you have grasp the point we are making. The situation is made worse by those who are unteachable. We expect those who have learned much to continue learning. Otherwise, you will stagnate and become stale spiritually – like the Dead Sea, with its high concentration of salt, which does not allow anything to grow. We are to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world (Matt. 5:13, 14)”. We can maintain our proper saltiness and keep the light shining only if, at the same time, we are “a garden enclosed (Song 4:12)”. In the garden enclosed, the Lord and His people are present. We are immersed in a spiritual atmosphere. We are fed spiritually from God’s word, and we are strengthened by our fellowship with other believers.

We see, now that the eyes of the bride are compared to the pools in Heshbon for good reasons. The mature church or believer is calm and tranquil because of her spiritual maturity. She is bright and clear, showing her purity of life and teachability in character. Are you such a Christian?

We move on to the nose, which is also described in verse 4, “Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon which looks toward Damascus.” By this time, you would have been convinced that this is a book of

allegory. Otherwise, you will have to put up with this description of the bride's beauty, which is not at all flattering! Next to the eyes, the nose is the most fussed over part of the face. Plastic surgery is performed on the eyes and the nose of many a rich lady for beauty. Here, the Tower of Lebanon appeared to be the chief landmark in Damascus. It was noticeable from a distance to any traveller heading toward the city. Cities tended to be sited on hills or high ground for strategic reasons. We are reminded again of what the Lord said in Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden." The church bears witness to the Lord by holding high the word of God in a spiritually dark world. It is a place of refuge for the many confused people, and the many bruised and broken souls, of the world. The light of the gospel is a welcome sight to weary travellers. As we point people to Jesus Christ, they will find rest in Him, for He has said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matt. 11:28)." Are we such a church?

We come, finally, to the hair, described in verse 5, "Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel, and the hair of your head is like purple; a king is held captive by *your* tresses." We have noted that the hair of the bride represents the thought life or doctrine she holds to. In Chapter 4:1 and Chapter 6:5, the bride's hair is described as like a flock of goats coming down Mount Gilead. We have assumed that the colour of her hair is black, like most goats. We know that sheep are generally white, while cattle are generally brown. The bride's hair could have been of another colour, but the important point being made is that her thought life is orderly and full. She is a lady who is willing to submit to the authority of her husband. She is clear and orderly in her thoughts, allowing her life to be controlled by truth rather than by emotions. In the present passage, the colour of her hair is clearly mentioned as purple, or covered with a piece of purple scarf. In western countries, purple is the colour of royalty, just as yellow is the colour of royalty in the East. This has been the case since time immemorial. In the Gospels, the Lord was clothed with a purple robe by the soldiers – in mockery of Him as "the King of the Jews". The bride is so beautiful and dignified that the king is moved with love for her, who is fit to be his queen.

This high view of the church should not be lost sight of by be-

lievers in all generations. The world may despise the church and persecute the Christians, but the Lord looks upon her as most beautiful and loves her dearly. The church is purchased by His blood and belongs to Him. Harming God's people is like striking Him in the pupil of His eye. "He who touches you touches the apple of His eye," says Zechariah 2:8. Being well-loved by the Lord, the church should submit herself to the constant cleansing of His word so that we may be presented to Him as "a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:26)". The church should be clearly seen as separate from the world, although she is in the world. She belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. She cannot afford to be worldly. Sadly, this is the situation with many churches today. There was a time when doctrine was watered down in many churches. Then, the worship services began to incorporate worldly elements. This was accompanied by worldly methods of evangelism. Today, even the church buildings are made to appear like karaoke lounges with space-age designs. The aim is to be "relevant", to attract the youths, and to be seen as being up-to-date. It all began with the head, i.e. with the doctrinal and teaching aspects of church life. When the centre of knowledge and control was infiltrated by the world, it did not take long for the rest of the body to be infected. We would issue a call to those who are caught up in such churches – "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you (2 Cor. 6:17)."

14.2 The Overall Beauty (vv. 6-9)

We now come to the overall beauty of the bride, and how it affects the groom, covering verses 6 to 9. Now that each tree has been examined in detail, we must stand back and look at the forest as a whole. As the Lord looks upon the mature church, or believer, He is pleased with her. Why is this so?

Accepted for what we are

Firstly, it is because the church or believer is what she is. We have often heard the expression, "to be accepted for what you are". We have been accepted by the Lord despite being unworthy. The Lord continues to take delight in the church for what she is. Verse 6 says,

“How fair and how pleasant you are, O love, with your delights!” To recognize beauty is one thing, but to be delighted with what is beautiful is another. A young lady may have physical beauty, and even beauty of character, and is admired by many. Her beauty might excite the selfish desire in some to want to have her, but she is out of bounds to them. Here comes her grandmother, who has nothing selfish as she shows forth her delight in her beloved grand-daughter! You can see the difference in the two situations. The Lord has made us what we are, and He continues to sanctify us by His word. As we grow in spiritual maturity, and become balanced, proportionate and useful, He takes great delight in us.

Bears the family resemblance

Secondly, the Lord takes delight in the church or believer because she bears the family resemblance. She has spiritual life and, therefore, produces spiritual fruit. She is godly and is like her Father in heaven. She is taking on more and more the image of Jesus Christ. Verse 7 says, “This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts *like* its clusters.” In the desert, palm trees provide shade and fruit. Where there are palm trees, there is bound to be water. That is because palm trees grow well in oases and places which have an underlying water table. In the Bible, the fruitful palm tree is a picture of the righteous man of God who is useful in God’s service. Psalm 1:1-3 says, ‘Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither, and whatever he does shall prosper.’ The Lord takes delight in such believers.

His workmanship

Thirdly, the Lord takes delight in His fruitful church because of what He has put in to make her what she is. This is like a farmer taking delight in the trees he has planted and nurtured. In verse 8, the groom utters these words, ‘I said, “I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches.”’ A fruit tree that bears no fruit disappoints the farmer. A fruit tree that bears plentiful fruit delights the farmer to the extent that he wants to climb up to get some fruits

for himself. The Lord often speaks of the need for fruitfulness. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed that fell on good ground bears fruit and produces: “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (Matt. 13:8)”. The Lord expects faithfulness and a willing heart in our service to Him. Furthermore, that is possible only if we abide in Him, as He says in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” Throughout the book of Song, we have seen how the bride struggled to keep near the groom, depicting the struggles that a believer goes through in his spiritual growth. Now that the bride has grown to maturity, she is producing much fruit. This is not to say that mature believers are spared spiritual struggles. We are only saying that the spiritually mature believer is more stable in the faith and more useful in the Lord’s service. The Lord takes delight in such a believer.

Edifying to others

Fourthly, the Lord takes delight in the believer who is spiritually refreshing and edifying to others. The second half of verse 8 and verse 9 say, “Let now your breasts be like clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and the roof of your mouth like the best wine.” One who has eaten apples will have fresh breath. One who has drunk wine will smell of the wine. We do not have to argue over whether it is right for believers to drink wine, and how much alcohol must be in the wine before its consumption is regarded as sinful. We just briefly note that drunkenness is condemned in the Bible and it has led to much misery in many families in many cultures, even up to today. We must focus on what is taught in the present passage. The mature believer is fruitful in His service to the Lord. Since the breasts refer to the seat of emotion, while the mouth and the breath refer to the words that are uttered, we conclude that the mature believer is full of compassion towards others and his words comfort and strengthen others. There are people who are caustic, whose every word pierces your heart, leaving you smarting each time you meet with them. Such people are very unedifying to be with. Of course, we would not want to be with those who have the opposite effects upon us – those who flatter you and say things that make you wary because the devil is lurking behind those words, to puff you up in pride so that you would fall before too long. No, here is a believer

who ministers comfort and encouragement to others in a most natural way. He is very edifying to have around. The Lord takes delight in such a believer.

14.3 Conclusion

We must now stand back and ask ourselves two questions as we close. Firstly, are we the type of believers described in this passage? They seem to be a rare species of people today, but they may be found. Such people are knowledgeable, humble and refreshing to have around. They are non-judgmental, but compassionate, understanding, and edifying to others. Look out for them. They are the Lord's precious children. Then, looking at it from the corporate point of view, are there churches like that today? Are we such a church? May the Lord make us to be such!

Secondly, should we not be aspiring to be such believers, and to be such a church? There are many Christians who are so inconsistent in their walk with God. They are full of zeal for a moment, and then lose their zeal. They are interested in learning for a moment, but soon lose the interest. They are helpful in the church, but quickly lose their concern for the welfare of others. Are you such? Should you not commit yourself to the Lord, and learn to be more consistent? How are we to grow to spiritual maturity if we are so inconsistent? Let us be persevering in our walk with God. Let us be consistent Christians.

As we close, we want to be reminded of the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:12-14, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

7:9-13

Shulamite

9 *The wine goes down* smoothly for my beloved,
Moving gently the lips of sleepers.

10 I *am* my beloved's,
And his desire *is* toward me.

11 Come, my beloved,
Let us go forth to the field;
Let us lodge in the villages.

12 Let us get up early to the vineyards;
Let us see if the vine has budded,
Whether the grape blossoms are open,
And the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.

13 The mandrakes give off a fragrance,
And at our gates *are* pleasant *fruits*,
All manner, new and old,
Which I have laid up for you, my beloved.

Fifteen

Consistency In Maturity

The Lord loves the maturing church for good reasons. She is His workmanship, and she is beautiful. In Chapter 7:1-9, the beauty of the church is seen from two main angles. Firstly, the church is strong and reliable. She is strengthened by the Lord and becomes useful and reliable in His service. Secondly, she is balanced and proportionate in her spiritual growth and understanding of doctrine. She is not clumsy and awkward. Her overall beauty – of character and usefulness – is pictured as a healthy palm tree growing tall and strong, and bearing abundance of fruit. The church, of course, is a reference to God's people considered corporately. We are not referring to the place where they meet, but to the individuals who know Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Since the church is made up of such individual believers, they also partake of the characteristics of the church. Everything we have learned about the church must be applied to the individual Christian. The beauty of the church and the individual believer is shown by a pleasing consistency. Unlike the new believer who may be full of zeal in outreach but lacking in knowledge, or who knows certain doctrines well but is ignorant of the doctrinal controversies of the past and the pitfalls that he might fall into, the mature believer is well-grounded, knowledgeable and stable. He is also reliable and able to do things well. You might question the propriety of using the term "mature Christian" because a Christian is always maturing and will never arrive at true maturity, until we arrive in heaven. For our purpose here, the mature Chris-

tian is one who has matured to some degree and is still maturing.

In Chapter 7:9-13, the consistency of the mature church or believer is shown in four areas. To be consistent is to be steady and regular, and to act according to what is claimed. An inconsistent person changes his actions quickly and unpredictably. He is not reliable and hard to be trusted. The mature believer is consistent in his faith and in his spiritual life. Firstly, there is consistency in private communion with the Lord, covering verse 9-10. Secondly, there is consistency in service to the Lord, covering verse 11. Thirdly, there is consistency in self-examination before the Lord, covering verse 12. Fourthly, there is consistency in giving to the Lord, covering verse 13.

15.1 Consistency In Private Communion (vv. 9-10)

We consider first the consistency of the mature believer in his private communion with the Lord, covering verses 9 to 10. The overall beauty of the bride has been portrayed by the fruitful palm tree in verses 6 to 9. The tall and dignified tree, with spreading branches and abundant fruit is beautiful for landscaping purposes as well as for providing food. Trees are often cultivated for their looks, for their fruits, or for their shade. The beauty of the tree has been discussed. Here, the fruitfulness of the tree is the focus of attention. The groom who owns the garden is so pleased with the tree that he climbs it to pluck the fruit. The fruit makes up the meal that he now enjoys, together with the apples of the garden and the wine made from grapes of the same garden. Everything is exquisite! Today, wine is so high in alcohol content that there is much abuse in drinking it. Here, the picture conveyed is the rightful enjoyment of the fruits harvested from the garden. This portrays the Lord's delight in the maturing church. The Lord has the right to enjoy the fruit of His labour. In Isaiah 53:11, the coming Saviour is described as follows: "He shall see the labour of His soul, *and* be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities." Jesus Christ's death on the cross will make atonement for the sins of His people, so that those who repent and believe in Him will be forgiven by God. His work of saving His people has been success-

fully accomplished, as shown by His resurrection. More and more of God's chosen people are being called out from their lives of sin by the gospel. More and more, the church is becoming complete, while being sanctified by the word of God. The Lord takes delight in His church!

The bride responds to the the love of the groom by giving of herself freely to him. We have seen this happening before, in the earlier chapters. Here, the response of the bride has a definite quality of consistency not seen in those earlier chapters. She is now more mature. She is now more fruitful in her life, and more steady in her relationship to the groom. We are told in the second part of verse 9, "*The wine goes down smoothly for my beloved, moving gently the lips of sleepers.*" The bride willingly provides the wine, to please the palate of the groom. This speaks of the love of the church for the Lord. We love the Lord only because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). The Lord showed His love by willingly dying on the cross for us. By His perfect sacrifice for His people, their sins are atoned for. Our guilt before God is cancelled. The Lord's righteousness is regarded as ours. God declares us no more guilty because of Christ's death for us. We are forgiven and accepted by God because of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross for His people. Do you understand how a sinner is saved? Do you know why Christ had to die on the cross? Have you come to Him in repentance and faith? Too many professing Christians claim that they love the Lord when they have not understood how they are saved. If they do not understand how they are saved, can they possibly be saved? When there is ignorance or shallowness of understanding on such basic matters, there will be no deep gratitude to the Lord for salvation. There is, therefore, hardly any consecration in those who claim themselves to be Christians.

Compared to the bride in the present passage, she behaves so differently. Verse 10 says, "*I am my beloved's and his desire is toward me.*" She revels in the love of the groom, and she gives of herself to him. This is expected of those who understand the way of salvation and have experienced the goodness of God in Christ. The teaching of Scripture is that we are totally lost in our sins. We deserve eternal damnation from God for our sins against Him. There is no possibility of anyone saving himself. God has to show His mercy to us before we can be saved. His mercy is shown by sending His only begotten

Son to this world to die as the substitute for those He intended to save. Salvation is the free gift of God to underserving sinners. If you have experienced His mercy in Jesus Christ, you will be grateful to Him and to His Son. You will want to give of yourself to the Lord. You will seek to know Him more and more through the teaching of Scripture. You will grow in usefulness in His service. You will not hold yourself back from serving the Lord willingly. Unwilling service is never acceptable to the Lord. Think of the Parable of the Talents, in Matthew 25. There are the five-talent man, the two-talent man, and the one-talent man. The man with one talent said to his master, "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is* yours." The man was rightly condemned as wicked and lazy. Think of how you would express yourself to someone you love. You would willingly seek to please him or her. You would spend much time together. You would talk to each other much. Here, we have the bride representing the mature church or believer. The mature believer would keep constant communion with his Lord. There will be regular time spent in prayer and in the reading and meditation of the word of God. He is growing in spirituality and transforming more and more to be like the Lord. There will be consistency in such private communion with the Lord in the mature believer.

15.2 Consistency In Service (v. 11)

Secondly, we see consistency in the church as she serves the Lord. In verse 11, we are told, "Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages." You might be wondering why the bride should invite the groom to go forth to the field and to stay in the villages. After all, they are not married yet. How could they be behaving as though they are already married? Before your imagination takes you too far, please remember that Solomon, who is the groom, has his retinue of servants, soldiers and counsellors with him. The bride also has the daughters of Jerusalem with her – the maids-in-waiting. She is not alone. Jewish couples who were betrothed to each other would be regarded legally as husband and wife, but they would not live together until the wedding day. Furthermore,

we must keep in mind the fact that this is a spiritual allegory of the Christian life. How should we understand this verse?

Note that the word “villages” is in the plural. It is used in connection with going forth to the field. The field speaks to us of the place of ministry. Today, we would refer to the mission field of any particular missionary. Our church would have a mission field to serve in, namely the country in which we are located. The bride is inviting the groom to go forth to the field, showing her keenness and enthusiasm for the groom to see where she labours. Believers who are committed to serve the Lord by carrying out the Great Commission would constantly bring the work before the Lord in prayer. They would pray for the Lord’s presence in the mission field, and for His blessing upon whatever gospel endeavours they are engaged in. The villages speak of the need to travel from one place to another, and the need to lodge overnight in these places. We are reminded of the Lord travelling from place to place to preach. We are told in Mark 6:6, “Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching.” The Lord also sent out His disciples two by two to preach. That entailed travelling from place to place, and the need to lodge overnight. Travel in those days was not as comfortable as today. There were no motorized vehicles, no tarred roads, and no five-star hotels to lodge in. The disciples had to put up with discomfort, and rejection by the people they went to. They had to be exposed to the elements. They were also exposed to some degrees of danger from robbers and enemies of the gospel. Down the centuries, many missionaries have had to put up with similar discomfort and dangers as they served the Lord in foreign lands.

What about us today? Do we serve the Lord with enthusiasm? Are we prepared to put up with discomfort and dangers? We know too well that many Christians today take the Lord’s work too lightly. We complain too much, and are unwilling to bear up with deprivation and hardship as we serve the Lord. Many Christians are not prepared to get out of their comfort zone. Everything must be to their own convenience before they would budge. Modern Christianity is characterized by laziness, lack of zeal and complacency. There are the exceptions, but they are rarely found. The younger believers think that older believers should take the lead before they would join in. The older believers think that they have done their share of work for the Lord, and it is now up to the younger ones to serve Him. There is a tendency to swing to extremes – either to be exclusively

pious, or to be exclusively activistic. A mature believer would seek to be pious as well as being active in the Lord's service.

The wrong conclusion often is drawn from the incident between Martha and Mary in Luke 10. Martha is portrayed as being activistic, while Mary is portrayed as pious. The Lord's admonition of Martha is taken to be a "minus point" for her, while Mary is regarded as gaining a "plus point". The conclusion is wrongly drawn that it is better to be learning from the Lord rather than to serve Him when, in reality, the Lord was only admonishing Martha for worrying over-much. It wasn't a case of Martha being wrong serving everyone, and Mary being right learning from the Lord. The Lord's actual words, in Luke 10:41-42 are, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." The problem was that she chose the wrong time to serve, and in an unhappy spirit. She could have done it later. On the part of Mary, it wasn't that she was not going to serve. She would serve later, but learning from the Lord took the priority at that time. What we are saying, then, is that it is not a choice between service and learning, but a matter of priority between the two. Learning from God's word takes the priority over service to God. Both are important, but learning from God's word must come first. If you focus only on service, you will soon run out of energy and motivation, just like a car that runs out of fuel. We often hear of Christians who seek for a church where they can serve, instead of a church where there is good teaching. We hold to a different view, believing that you must seek out a church where there is good teaching, and service will naturally follow. Those who only learn right doctrines, without a desire to serve, display a distorted type of faith. Those who focus on service while despising the importance of doctrine display a distressing ignorance of true faith. A mature believer knows the importance of learning right doctrines, followed by active service to the Lord. Spiritual maturity is shown by sustained communion with the Lord, such that there is consistency in service to the Lord.

15.3 Consistency In Self-examination (v. 12)

In the third area, the mature believer is consistent in self-examination before the Lord. The bride again takes the initiative to say to the groom, in verse 12, “Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine has budded, *whether* the grape blossoms are open, *and* the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love.” In the old days, and in farming communities today, people woke up early to get as much work done as possible. Once the sun was high in the sky, it would be too hot to work. The principle involved is that those who work hard will reap the rewards. Today, there are still people who think negatively of you if you wake up late to work. They do not realize that times have changed, and it is possible that the nature of your job requires you to stay up till late at night to work, which means that you will wake up late the next morning. The important thing is that you need to work hard in order to see fruit from your labour. Here, the bride does not examine just one tree, but each tree in turn. She works with the purpose of seeing the plants blooming, so that fruits will be seen after that. She is not merely examining the plants, with no aim in mind. Hard work is needed to trim the plants, to remove the weeds, and to fertilize the ground, but it is done with the clear aim of seeing fruit in due time.

This is where we must ponder upon the way we work. Do we work with clear objectives in mind, or do we merely waste time doing things that are trivial, and accomplishing nothing in the end? Young people will need to take this to heart. Since you have to study to pass your examinations, why not work hard to pass well? This applies to adults as well. Most of us work to earn a living. Since we have to work, can we not do our work well and be a good witness to others? Of course, in anything that is good, right and true, there is the danger of abuse or taking things to extremes, and misapplying what we are saying. There are those who are “workaholics”, who appear to be “married to their work” and neglect their families. There are those who are conscientious at work, but neglect their own spiritual welfare. In fact, it is work for the Lord that we are primarily concerned with here. We want to serve the Lord well, realizing that our spiritual life affects all other areas of life. Daily self-examination will be helpful so that we do not overlook anything that needs attention. That is why we advocate being consistent in keeping daily devotion

with the Lord. You do not have to spend hours reading the Bible and praying each day. You need only fifteen minutes to read the passage for the day, and to commit the day to the Lord in prayer, before your set of for work. You need only five minutes each night to ponder on the day's work and to pray. Families must ensure there is family devotion. Apart from daily devotions, weekly self-examination is of utmost importance to the believer. Unless hindered by providence in life, or circumstances in your work, it is important that believers attend church to hear the word of God, to meditate, and to pray. We immersed ourselves so much in the world, interacting with unbelievers, and receiving input of information and values from them, knowingly and unknowingly. We spend too little time with God and His people. It is of utmost importance that we keep the Lord's day, and spend time with the Lord's people, while engaging in worship and service to the Lord. The Lord's Supper should not be neglected, for it is designed for meditation and self-examination.

We note that, in verse 12, the bride invites the groom to come along as she examines the plants in the garden. Furthermore, the bride says, "There I will give you my love." It is hazardous to do work for the Lord without seeking His presence and blessing. It is so easy for us to begin well and to quickly go astray. Often, we go astray in heart before it shows outwardly. We begin with the noble aim of doing all things to God's glory, but we quickly go astray by thinking that it is *our* work, done in *our* strength, by *our* wisdom. Soon, we forget who we are serving, so that the Lord is not with us in the work, and we are no longer doing it out of love for Him. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, the Lord promises to be with His people "to the end of the age". However, when we do not seek the Lord's presence in prayer, we will not find Him present with us. It is no wonder that we get unduly irritated, frustrated, and disappointed when things do not go well. It is because we are treating God's work as our work. No doubt, believers are often upset when there are problems in the church. That is because we love the Lord and our lives are so much intertwined in His work. However, there is a subtle difference between being upset because of love for the Lord and being upset because we are treating His work as *our* work.

Let us learn to do all things out of love for Him, to God's glory. Let us learn to invite the Lord into all that we do for Him. This

requires constant self-examination, which must be done with the Lord's presence as well. The mature believer will be consistent in doing this.

15.4 Consistency In Giving (v. 13)

We move on to the fourth, and last area, of consistency in the mature believer, which is in giving to the Lord. Verse 13 says, "The mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our gates *are* pleasant *fruits*, all manner, new and old, which I have laid up for you, my beloved." The fruiting season has come. Some fruits need to be plucked while green, and then allowed to ripen. Jackfruits and bananas fall into this category. The mandrake is one such fruit. It is orange in colour and fragrant. It is supposed to be an aphrodisiac, containing a fertility-inducing substance. In Genesis 30, Leah and Rachel quarreled over some mandrakes. Other fruits such as grapes will need to be plucked when ripe. There are baskets of fruits, both old and new, lined up at the gates of the garden, by the bride, for the groom. How is the groom going to finish eating all these fruits? Ah, this is where you must understand! Have you not heard how the Chinese emperors encouraged the art of cooking such that Chinese cuisine is so well-known throughout the world? The cooks in those days would produce exquisite dishes of all kinds and have them laid before the emperor. The emperor only chose and tasted whichever dishes he set his eyes on. He did not even taste all the dishes, let alone eat them! He was the highest authority in the nation, and had the right to do that. Here, the baskets of fruits are laid up by the gates to welcome the groom. If you were welcomed like that, it would show that you were highly honoured. The Lord rightly deserves to be honoured by His people. We show our submission and honour to Him by bringing out the best that we have for Him. In addition to submission and honour, we show forth our love for Him. The church does not withhold anything from the Lord, for we owe our all to Him.

Consider the income that you gain from your work. The opportunity to work comes from the Lord. Your health comes from the Lord. Your life also comes from the Lord. All that you gain from your work, therefore, comes from the Lord. "The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm

24:1).” That is why mature believers would willingly give a tenth of what they earn to the Lord, in acknowledgement that everything comes from Him. Consider, next, the time that you have. You have time for this and that, but do you give time to the Lord? You adjust your time to suit company dinners and family functions, but do you adjust your time to hear God’s word? While company dinners and family functions are often one-off events, church meetings are regular. Our life should revolve around the church, with the Lord in the centre. Then, consider the gifts or abilities that God has given to you. Are you putting them to good use for the sake of God’s kingdom? Some Christians have done well and accomplished notable success in their career. Do not make the mistake of Nebuchanezzar, who claimed the credit for building up “this great Babylon”, “by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty” – as he said, in Daniel 4:30. God took away his kingdom, and consigned him to live with the beasts of the field. Don’t make the mistake of King Herod, who accepted worship as a god, and was struck down by God. “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap (Gal. 6:7).” We want to give of ourselves, and all that we have, to God. Everything is placed at His disposal. We do it willingly, generously, and privately. We do not want to parade our piety before the world. The mature Christian is marked by this quiet consecration to the Lord.

This leads us to one final thought, namely, that it is not possible to consider all that we have as the Lord’s if we do not consider ourselves as belonging to the Lord. This truth is brought out well in the case of the Egyptians who came to Joseph for food. In Genesis 47:18-19, the Egyptians said to Joseph, “We will not hide from my lord that our money is gone; my lord also has our herds of livestock. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be servants of Pharaoh; give *us* seed, that we may live and not die, that the land may not be desolate.” The Egyptians knew it was useless hiding their plight from Joseph. They knew there was nothing left with which to buy grain, except their bodies and their lands. They knew that Joseph alone could help them, otherwise, they would die. They were prepared to give everything to Pharaoh in exchange for life. This is the picture of how a sinner may be saved. He must come to

Jesus Christ, who alone can save sinners. Jesus Christ has procured salvation by His death on the cross. The sinner who comes to ask for eternal life from Him must willingly give of himself to God. We are told, in 1 Corinthians 6:20, “For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” The believer no longer considers himself as his own. Rather, he considers himself as belonging to Jesus Christ. As we mature in the faith, we demonstrate this by giving of ourselves, and all that we have, to the Lord. Our money is at the Lord’s disposal. Our home is for the Lord to use. Our time, energy, and abilities are given over to serve the Lord. If you are thinking of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ, this is the cost that you must pay – not just what you have, but your total self. This does not mean, of course, parting with all your wealth, or becoming a full-time preacher or missionary, but it does mean a giving of your all, in whatever your circumstances, to the Lord.

15.5 Conclusion

We must draw to a conclusion. We have seen that the mature church or believer is characterized by consistency in four areas, namely, in private communion with the Lord, in service to the Lord, in self-examination before the Lord, and in giving to the Lord. There are, of course, other areas of the Christian life where consistency is needed, but these four areas are sufficient to convey the main truth involved, namely, that the mature Christian loves the Lord and expresses it by a life of consistency in his walk with Him. We might summarize all that we have learned by these two words, namely, love and consistency. Firstly, there is love for the Lord. When there is true love, you will be prepared to do anything for the Lord. We do not risk our lives unnecessarily, but we are prepared to accept the risks that come with serving the Lord. In the world, calculated risks are taken – for example, in business. If worldly people are prepared to take risks for things that we regard as temporary and of limited value, why are we not prepared to take necessary risks for the Lord? Have we forgotten the sovereignty of God, or is this just a doctrine in the mind? If God is sovereign – controlling all things to the good of His people, and determining when and how we die – why should we

fear so much? We fear for our lives, we fear for our reputation, and we fear disruption to the comforts of life. Everything must be to our convenience before we would do anything in service to our Lord. Is that love?

Secondly, there is consistency in our walk with the Lord. A mature Christian will be consistent in his profession of faith, in his way of life, and in his service to the Lord. Here is someone who claims that he is willing to serve the Lord as a missionary in a foreign land, if it is clearly God's will for him. Are you really prepared to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary when you are too embarrassed to distribute tracts in the shopping mall? Are you too ashamed to be seen by your relatives and colleagues? Think of the Lord who gave up His glory in heaven to come to earth to save a sinner like you. Think of the humiliation he went through as He hung naked on the cross in the sight of all. Think of the agony He underwent to save you. Are you ashamed of Him? Are you not prepared to be identified with Him? Are you still thinking of "saving your face" and protecting your reputation? We do not want anyone to feel pressured to come to distribute tracts together with us. What applies to tracting applies to other avenues of service. We do not want you to feel guilty for not being able to join us. We would want those who take part to do so willingly, out of a heart of love for the Lord.

We see now how love for the Lord and consistency in our walk with Him are linked together. We see also how consistency is reflected in our lives. A maturing Christian is one who is consistent, reliable, unwavering, and ready to serve the Lord. He is not haphazard and irregular. May God help us to be the consistent Christians that we ought to be.

Part IX

THE CHURCH EXPECTANT

8:1-4

Shulamite to Solomon

- 1 Oh, that you were like my brother,
Who nursed at my mother's breasts!
If I should find you outside,
I would kiss you;
I would not be despised.
- 2 I would lead you *and* bring you
Into the house of my mother,
She *who* used to instruct me.
I would cause you to drink of spiced wine,
Of the juice of my pomegranate.

Shulamite to the daughters of Jerusalem

- 3 His left hand *is* under my head,
And his right hand embraces me.

Solomon

- 4 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
Do not stir up nor awaken **my** love
Until **she** pleases.

Sixteen

Gratitude In Expectancy

In this book of allegory, we learn of the love relationship between Jesus Christ and His church. Let us review the last couple of chapters in order to bring ourselves up-to-date. In Chapter 6, we learned of Christ's love for the militant church, i.e. the church that is actively serving Him on earth. In Chapter 7, we learned of Christ's love for the maturing church. In this last chapter of the book, we learn of Christ's love for the expectant church. The church lives in expectancy of Christ's return. The chapter is rich with spiritual food. There are simply too many beautiful scenes that we do not want to miss by rushing through it. Let us focus on the first four verses of this chapter here. We learn of the gratitude of the church towards the Lord as she awaits His return.

The passage shows three areas in which the church expresses her gratitude to the Lord. First, the church is grateful for salvation from the Lord, covering verse 1. Secondly, the church is grateful for sustenance from the Lord, i.e. for providing everything needful to keep her faith, covering verse 2. Thirdly, the church is grateful for succour, or help given in her need, covering verse 3. The key words are "salvation", "sustenance", and "succour". The last verse is a charge to all to maintain peace in the church.

16.1 Gratitude For Salvation (v. 1)

The first area for which the church is grateful is salvation in Jesus Christ. Verse 1 says, “Oh, that you were like my brother, who nursed at my mother’s breasts! *If* I should find you outside, I would kiss you; I would not be despised.” The last part of this verse is the key to understanding the passage. The bride is being despised. She is being bullied by her cruel half-brothers. This is alluded to in verses 8 to 9 of the present chapter. The ill-treatment has been going on for some time, in fact, for a long time. Let us recall the background of the bride. She is a country girl. She lives in very difficult circumstances. She has a number of older half-brothers, who have been bullying her. These older half-brothers were born to her mother by her first husband. When the husband died, the mother had remarried and had this daughter – the Shulamite lady, who is betrothed to Solomon. Solomon had set eye on her, and realized that she is such a beauty, beneath the external plainness of her dressing and the tan upon her. The Shulamite lady has grown up taking care of the vineyard and the sheep and goats of her half-brothers, neglecting the property left for her by her father. This we have learned from Chapter 1:5-6. Verse 6 of that chapter says, “Do not look upon me, because I *am* dark, because the sun has tanned me. My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, *but* my own vineyard I have not kept.” The next two verses of the chapter show that she is a shepherdess, taking care of the flock of sheep and goats that belong to her brothers. She has been cruelly treated by her half-brothers all these years, until she met Solomon and is betrothed to him. These are her half-brothers, for they are referred to as “my mother’s sons” instead of “my brothers”. A similar expression is found in 1 Corinthians 5:1, which says, “It is actually reported *that there is* sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife!” The expression “his father’s wife” means “his step-mother”. So also, here, “my mother’s sons” means “my step-brothers”.

Knowing Christ early

In the midst of cruel treatment from her half-brothers, she longs for the groom to whom she is betrothed. She wishes that he is her own blood brother, one who “nursed at my mother’s breasts”, for

she expects that her own blood brother would not treat her cruelly. If he were her true brother, there would be love between them instead of hatred. It is here that we should see the lesson for ourselves. The bride wishes that she has known the groom earlier, as her blood brother. Many of us who have been converted from a pagan background often wish that we were converted earlier. Unlike those who have been brought to Sunday School from young, who were taught the Bible from early, who have had believing parents to pray for them and to guide them, we grew up in heathen settings. We were exposed to all kinds of evil while growing up in the unhappiness of unbelieving homes. We are reminded of an incident in China when Hudson Taylor was a missionary there. He was asked by an old man for how long Hudson Taylor and his people had had the gospel. When told that it had been for hundreds of years, the old man exclaimed that it had taken that long before someone came to bring the gospel to China! The old man wished he had heard the gospel earlier. He wished that his parents and ancestors had had the opportunity to hear the gospel. In the same way, many of us wish that we were exposed to the gospel earlier. We have now come to faith in Jesus Christ and experienced the blessedness of being forgiven by God and living in His presence. Life without Christ was miserable. We interacted with unbelievers and shared in their uncouth and shameful lives. Some of us have sins of the past that we are ashamed of today. Thank God, there is forgiveness in Christ for all such sins! Do you appreciate your new life in Christ? Are you thankful for your salvation? Something is wrong if you do not value your faith in Christ. We need to be more thankful for the salvation given to us.

Of course, it is all in God's sovereign purpose that we are saved. It is not for us to choose where we are born, and when we come to faith. There are those who have had the privilege of being brought up in a Christian culture, having freedom to hear the gospel, and having friends and family members who have prayed for them, but who never appreciate all these. I once met an American man in Nepal who was seeking out a Buddhist monk to help him in his search for enlightenment. Today, not only do we have eco-tourism and medical tourism, but we also have "religious tourism". The man I met was so aggressively made-up in his mind not to have anything to do with the Bible. I decided not to say more, except to point out

that it is possible to throw away the true treasure in exchange for trash. While God sovereignly determines who hears the gospel and when, He holds us responsible for how we respond to the gospel and the spiritual benefits we have enjoyed. There are those who have been brought up in Christian homes, who have been exposed to the Bible early, and who have all the spiritual privileges that others do not have, but do not value them. There are others who, when converted, wished that they had been exposed to the Bible's teaching earlier. "Many *who are* first will be last, and the last first (Matt. 19:30)." You might argue that the experiences of life as an unbeliever will make us better people, that those experiences will help us to understand others better, and also make us appreciate salvation in Christ. While these may be true to some degree, we must not desire dark knowledge and carnal experiences. They affect our lives adversely. They are not necessary. We will not be worse off without these knowledge and experiences. Jesus Christ is sufficient for us. Our lives are complete in Him. We do not want to give excuses for remaining in sin. God holds us responsible for not coming to faith in Christ. If you have not trusted in Christ for salvation, it is time that you do so. Come to Him as soon as possible!

Blessedness of salvation

Consider the blessedness of salvation in Christ. The Shulamite wishes the groom could be her blood brother, believing he would treat her well and love her as his younger sister. For those of us who have come to faith in Christ, this has become a reality. We are referring to spiritual relationships, but they are nevertheless real. The Lord once pointed to those who believed in Him and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother (Matt. 12:49-50)." On another occasion, He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life (Mark 10:29-30)." You must understand that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God who came to earth by taking upon Himself true, sinless, human nature. He is truly divine and truly human, in one Person. By taking upon Himself perfect human

nature, He identifies Himself with us. He laid down His life on the cross to save His people. We who have believed in Him are bought by His blood. We belong to Him. He is the eternally begotten Son of God, while we are the adopted children of God. Jesus Christ is not only our Prophet, Priest and King, but He is also our Eldest Brother in the kingdom of God. We are expressing deep spiritual truths using human language. The reality of our relationship with God, through faith in Christ, cannot be doubted. God loves us as His children. Jesus Christ loves us as our Eldest Brother. How good it is to know that we have an Eldest Brother who is all-powerful and feared by our enemies! When oppressed, when under persecution, or when things do not go well for us in this world, we remember that Jesus Christ is on our side and that brings us tremendous comfort. We are truly grateful for the salvation that He has given to us. This is captured in John Newton's hymn:

*Jesus! my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.*

16.2 Gratitude For Sustenance (v. 2)

This brings us to the next area for which we are grateful, namely, that the Lord sustains us in the faith. The Lord gives us faith in Himself, and He continues to sustain that faith. Otherwise, we will weaken and go astray. In John 10:27-29, the Lord says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand." The Lord will ensure that His people are kept in the faith to the end of their lives. How does the Lord sustain us in the faith? We have mentioned already God's sovereignty and human responsibility in our lives. Here, we must see again how God works in us. He works in us love for Himself such that we will have holy desires. We will then act upon those holy desires. This is seen in verse 2 of our present passage, "I would lead you *and* bring you into

the house of my mother, she *who* used to instruct me. I would cause you to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate.”

The means of grace

The bride desires to bring the groom to her mother’s house. She is not ashamed of her simple house, nor of her humble background. True love is such that we share our lives with the ones we love without the need to hide any deficiency. True love also accepts whatever blemishes that are found in the person we love. This is not to say we condone sin and bad habits. These should be put right, however much our loved ones bear up with us. The bride had brought the groom to meet her mother before. This we have seen in Chapter 3:4. As a courting couple get to know each other better, they would want to introduce the loved one to the parents. It would be strange if your daughter hides her boy-friend from you. As parents, you will worry that your daughter should do so. Here, the bride is anxious that the groom should meet her mother. Remember that this is not the first time that he is meeting the bride’s mother. They couldn’t have been betrothed without the knowledge of the bride’s mother. The bride obviously loves her mother and has high regards for her. The mother is described as the one who used to instruct her. The bride is well brought up, capable, and spiritual-minded. It was the practice of Jewish mothers to teach their children the Scripture from young. The bride had been mistreated by her half-brothers, but her mother had been faithful. Her mother had distributed the inheritance fairly after the husband’s death, such that the bride has her own vineyard and her own flock of sheep and goats. This we have learned in Chapter 1. Here, the mother is well respected and loved because she loves her daughter and has taken care of her. She has been instrumental in molding her character so that the daughter is the lady she is now.

What does this speak to us of? In the book of Revelation, in Chapter 12, the woman represents the church, or God’s people in the Old Testament, who gave birth to the male Child, namely Jesus Christ. The devil, represented by the fiery red dragon, attempted to destroy the male Child, who was “caught up to God and His throne”. This is a reference to Christ’s resurrection from the dead and His glorification. Christ is now reigning with the departed saints in heaven. Meanwhile, the dragon tries to destroy the woman but she is pre-

served from harm by God. Knowing that he is unable to destroy the church, the devil turns his attention upon the believers – the offspring of the woman “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 12:17)”. The devil works through the unbelievers in the world to bring harm to the believers. Christians will always be hated and hunted by the unbelievers in the world, just as the bride in our passage is bullied and ill-treated by her half-brothers. Not all non-believers will show hostility in obvious ways toward the believers, but there is always the underlying tension between them. The Lord has warn us that the world will hate us just as it hated Him. However, as we have seen already, the Lord will ensure that none of His children are lost. Satan is able to destroy our bodies, but God alone can destroy body and soul in hell. Those who harm the Christians are touching the apple of God’s eye. God will deal with them accordingly in due time. There will be a day of judgement. God might act even before the day of judgement against those who dare to oppose Him.

However, we must come back to the passage and see that the bride desires to bring the groom to her mother’s house and entertain him there. This is the picture of the believer coming to the church to attend to the means of grace. We are not saved to live the isolated life of a hermit, nor the communal life of the monks in a monastery. Rather, we are saved to remain “in the world, but not of the world”. We are to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14). In order to be effective and useful to the Lord while living in the world, we must be integrated into the life of the church. There is safety in the church. There is warmth and love in the church. It is in the church that you receive teaching and find avenues of service to the Lord. It is in the church that your faith is sustained through the means of grace, namely, the hearing of God’s word, prayer, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Are you baptized yet? Are you committed to Christ as a member of His church? Our lives should revolve around the church. It is strange that believers should arrange their family life to revolve around the company they work for, or around the community they live in. While we acknowledge that we have responsibilities at the place of work and in the community we live in, should we not have our family life revolving around the church? Should not Christ be at the centre of our life, and our family be integrated into the life of His church? Happy are those

who grow up knowing the fullness and blessing of church life!

Given over to the Lord

Another thing to be noted is that the bride leads and brings the groom into the mother's house. That emphasis should not be missed. Normally, we would say the Lord is the one who takes the initiative to give us holy desires and leads us into avenues of service. Yet, it is true that, humanly speaking, Christians must take the initiative to serve the Lord. Here is where God's sovereignty and human responsibility come in. God saves us while we were "dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1)". "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2:8-9)." At the same time, we are taught the need to obey God's word and to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12)". If God is at work in you, He will give you the desire and the ability to act accordingly. The apostle Paul expresses this truth in Colossians 1:29, "To this *end* I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily." In the present passage, the bride leads and brings the groom into her mother's house. This expresses the truth that we want to bring the Lord into every aspect of our life. We want His presence in whatever that we do. If you are students, you should want the Lord to bless you in your studies. If you are in courtship, you would want the Lord to be present in your relationship. You would want the Lord to be in your home, and in your career. If you leave the Lord out, and do not desire Him to be present in any particular area of your life, you cannot expect to be blessed by Him.

The bride not only desires the groom to be in her home and to meet her mother, but she also desires to entertain him in a special way. She has kept the biggest of her pomegranates for him. Imagine how she had watched the pomegranates developing on the tree in the garden, observed which ones were developing well, and thought of which one should be kept for her beloved. The pomegranates have been plucked and are kept in the home. The smaller ones would be eaten by the family, but the biggest must be kept for her beloved! The pomegranate is clearly home-grown, for it is described as "my pomegranate". It is also the pomegranate she has reserved for her beloved. She is going to squeeze out the juice herself, in a day when

there is no electric fruit de-juicer. She is going to serve it with the spiced wine. In those days, the diluted wine was made more pleasant to drink by adding spices. She is going to give of her best to her beloved. Of course, she would! She has been ill-treated by her half-brothers. Life has not been easy. She is but a country girl. What is there in her that should make Solomon love her? Now she is deeply in love with the groom. She is going to give of herself totally to him.

She is going to give of herself totally to him ... What of ourselves? What of you and me? Do we give of ourselves totally to our Lord? Is there any compartment of your life in which the Lord is excluded? Do you hold back any part of your life from the Lord? If we are truly grateful for the salvation the Lord has given to us, we would want to give of ourselves to Him. If we are truly grateful for the sustenance of our faith, we would attend to the means of grace in His church and pray for His presence in all parts of our lives.

16.3 Gratitude For Succour (v. 3)

We come to the third area of gratitude, which is for the succour from Christ. As we have seen, that simply means we are grateful for the help He gives to us in our needs. Verse 3 says, "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me." This is a duplicate of Chapter 2, verse 6. When we covered that verse, comparison was made with Genesis 21:18 where God said to Hagar, "Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand ..." Ishmael was a heavy young man of about seventeen years old. How was Hagar to carry him? Note, however, that God only asked her to hold him with one hand. She was holding up her fallen son by the head, while hugging his body with her other hand. Some paintings depict Mary holding the body of Jesus Christ like that after He was crucified and taken down from the cross. We do not approve of representing Jesus Christ in pictures, not even when teaching children at Sunday School, for He is divine while His human nature is perfect. In so doing, we would be breaking the Second Commandment, and also falsely depicting His perfect human nature. The Bible gives us no account of how our Lord looked like, apart from the general description that He was "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3)", and the indication that He looked older than His age, for the Jews said of

Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham (John 8:57)?” That aside, we note that this is a portrayal of someone who is fallen, who needs help.

In daily life

The bride indicates that she has suffered more than she is prepared to say. This is consistent with what we know of this most gracious lady. She has been mistreated by her half-brothers, she has been working in the brothers’ vineyards while trying hard to find time to tend to her own vineyard, and she has been working as a shepherdess. She has also struggled against bouts of laziness and lethargy, and experienced grief in her relationship with the groom. She knows that all the while the groom has been longsuffering towards her, loving her despite the fact that she is so unworthy. The groom has drawn near to her, ministering to her in her needs, like an expert doctor and a loving mother. This is a depiction of the spiritual struggles of a believer in his or her walk with the Lord. Believers do face with trials in life. Often, this involves struggle in our faith. We are reminded of how Elijah served God well, only to run in fear from wicked Queen Jezebel afterwards and felt he wanted to die. God sent an angel to minister to his needs, giving him food and drink, allowing him to rest, and then sending him forth to do more work. Those who desire to serve God faithfully will encounter situations in which we are cast down, due to severe trials and our lack of faith.

In full-time service

Is it not true that the Lord has promised to be with His people “till the end of the age”? Note that the promise is given in the context of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.” The special presence of the Lord accompanies those who have given their lives to serve Him by carrying out the Great Commission. Of course, all of us should be involved in carrying out the Great Commission in some ways, by being integrated into the life of the church. The Great Commission is a command

from the Lord to the local church to plant local churches. Some are called to engage in this work full-time. Regardless of what you think, such full-time service will require self-denial and deprivation. There will be many times when loneliness and despair set in. There will be many occasions when they are attacked – in their person, in their reputation, and in their ministry. On such occasions, the Lord will have to draw near to sustain them. The missionary, CR Marsh, expresses this well in his poem:

*I wanted to sow in a fertile field
That bordered a pleasant land,
Where fellowships sweet their joys would yield,
And comforts be mine to command.*

*He gave me instead, a barren spot
In a land that was wild and drear,
Where peril and hardship must be my lot
Afar from all I held dear.*

*But I learned that the field of His choice was fair,
Far better than any beside,
For the Master, also, laboured there –
My strength, my Companion and Guide.*

Our present passage is telling us to look up to the Lord in prayer whenever we are cast down. The passage is also telling us to be thankful for the help the Lord gives us whenever we are in need. The Lord is always near us, but we do not sense His presence due to our lack of faith in Him. He wants us to pray so as to show our dependence on Him. His promise in Hebrews 13:5 is, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Keep a close walk with the Lord!

16.4 Conclusion

The passage ends with the charge to maintain peace in the church, saying in verse 4, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.” This is a repetition of Chapter 2:7 and Chapter 3:5. We have seen that this is better translated as “... do not stir up nor awaken my love until she pleases”. It is a charge

given to the adherents of the church not to disturb the peace of the church when she is seeking to be faithful to the Lord. No church is perfect, for the church is as perfect as the people that make up its membership. "A tree is known by its fruit (Matt. 12:23)." An honest and reasonable person will be able to tell whether a church is faithful to the Lord. If the church is being blessed by the Lord, if the word of God is preached faithfully and souls are saved while saints are edified, why disturb her peace? Why raise issues that are peripheral and insignificant?

In the time of Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic Church had gone astray and false teaching and human innovations were being propagated. Martin Luther had to shake the peace of the church by challenging all the unbiblical teaching and ceremonies introduced by the church. That was needful, and God used him to bring about the Reformation. Are you a Martin Luther to want to shake the church? Do you know the Bible's teaching and have you been faithful to God? Are you sure that the church is as unfaithful as you claim it to be, to want to challenge it? Are you a member of the church, in the first place, to give you the right to challenge it? These are some of the questions you would need to answer before you embark on any crusade against any church. We fear for some individuals who find fault with any church they go to.

Having said these, the challenge to adherents of the church is to consider being integrated into the church if you think it is faithful to God, and is being blessed in its ministry. Let us not forget the teaching of the present passage, which is that we should be grateful to the Lord for the salvation He has given to us, for the sustenance to our faith, and for the succour to us in our needs. The Lord truly has been good to us. He truly loves His people. Let us show forth our gratitude to Him in praise, worship, and service. While waiting for Him to return, let us show forth our love to Him in our lives and give of our all to Him. May God help us to be the believers we ought to be!

8:5-7

Daughters of Jerusalem

5 Who is this coming up from the wilderness,
Leaning upon her beloved?

Solomon

I awakened you under the apple tree.
There your mother brought you forth;
There she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.

Shulamite

6 Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love *is as* strong as death,
Jealousy *as* **unyielding** as the grave;
Its flames *are* flames of fire,
A **flame of Jehovah**.

7 Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love
All the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised.

Seventeen

Faithfulness In Expectancy

In Chapter 8 of this book of allegory, the church is expecting the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the first four verses, we have seen the church showing forth her gratitude to the Lord for her salvation, for sustenance in the faith, and for succour in times of need. Onlookers and adherents to the church are warned not to disturb the peace in the church, which the Lord has given to her. We now consider verses 5 to 7, which show the faithfulness of the expectant church. The church, while waiting for the return of Christ, is single-minded in her love for Him. The faithfulness of the expectant church is shown, first, by the response of faith to God's grace. It is then shown by the response of love to the Lord for His love to the church.

17.1 The Response Of Faith (v. 5)

We begin with the first section, which concerns the response of faith of the church to God's grace. We know that the word "grace" in the Bible means the unmerited favour of God shown to undeserving sinners. Sinners do not deserve the favour of God. Instead, they deserve eternal damnation for offending the Creator who has been good to His creatures. We were guilty in the sin of Adam, who was the representative head of the human race. When he disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit, he sinned on behalf of the whole human race who descended from him. We also inherited the sinful

nature of Adam and Eve, which causes us to break God's law in so many ways. We, therefore, are guilty for the many acts of sins we have committed against God. We deserve to be condemned to eternal hell for all these offenses against God. Yet, in His mercy, He sent His only begotten Son to this world to save sinners. Those who repent and believe in the Son of God will not perish but have eternal life. A sinner is saved, not by the good works he has done, or by any good found in himself, but by the mercy of God shown to him through Jesus Christ. Salvation, therefore, is by grace, through faith, in Christ alone. The church is made up of such individuals – those who are saved by grace, not by works. They rely on the Lord to be saved, and they continue to rely on Him to be saved. Faith is needed at the beginning of the Christian life. It is also needed in the rest of the Christian life. It is the continuing need of faith that we see in this passage.

Dependence on Christ

Verse 5 says, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?" Without introducing a new party, this may be seen as the words of the daughters of Jerusalem. Three things may be said about the church based on this verse. Firstly, we note that the bride is described as leaning on her beloved. The word translated "leaning" carries the idea of reclining for support. While we know that lovers tend to lean on each other to express their love and trust, here, the main idea being conveyed is that of a plant leaning upon a wooden support in order not to fall over. Spiritually, this is to convey the idea that the church, represented by the bride, depends on the Lord for its existence and sustenance. The universe came into existence by the creative act of God. The universe continues to be sustained by God, without which it would collapse and turn chaotic. We are told, in Hebrews 1:1-4, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than

they.” God spoke, and all things came into existence. His word was the agent of creation. His word is the Son of God. The Son of God who was the agent of creation continues to uphold all things by the word of His power. You might find this somewhat philosophical and difficult to grasp, but you should at least understand that the eternal Son of God was involved in creation and continues to uphold the whole of creation. When He took on perfect human nature, appearing on earth as the Lord Jesus Christ, He effected salvation by His death on the cross. Just as the universe depends on the Lord to continue existing and functioning, the church depends on the Lord to exist and to function as it ought. We live in a fallen universe, which is beginning to be redeemed with the redemption of God’s people. We are told in Romans 8:21, “... the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” The church in the world depends on the Lord to sustain her. Practically, that means we must feed on His word to be strong, and we must express our dependence on Him in prayer. On the individual level, the believer needs to lean on Jesus Christ, for if we do not abide in Him by faith, we can do nothing. The Lord says, in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

Separation from the world

The second thing we can say about the church is that she is separate from the world. We are told that the bride is “coming up from the wilderness”. The wilderness speaks of the world that is affected by sin. In the “high-priestly prayer” of John 17, the Lord says in verses 14 and 15, “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.” The church is made up of those who have been called out of the wilderness of the world. In the book of Revelation, in Chapter 12:15, we are told that the church, represented by the woman, “was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.” This is to say that throughout the gospel age, until Christ comes again, the church will be preserved from the attacks

of the devil. The church will face the onslaught of Satan, but it will not be destroyed. There might be periods in the history of the church when she is dented by persecution or heresy, but the Lord will ensure that she is restored to spiritual health. The children of the woman, i.e. the believers who make up the church, will be the target of the devil's attack, and many of them will suffer severely, but the church will continue to exist in the world. She will continue to bear witness to Christ. To be able to maintain a clear witness for Christ, the church must keep out worldliness and false teaching. The church should not bear the characteristics of the world, but should increasingly shed any vestige of remaining worldliness found in her. On the personal level, the believer should be growing in holiness instead of becoming more worldly. We are in the world, but we are not of the world. Not only that, we are to continually come out of the wilderness of this world, which means that, as the days go by, we should be growing in holiness and righteous living. Are you growing "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18)?"

Heavenly-minded

The third thing that can be said about the church is that she is heavenly-minded. Just as the bride is coming out of the wilderness and heading towards Jerusalem, believers are heading for their home in heaven. Solomon dwells in Jerusalem, and he has supplied the bride with "the daughters of Jerusalem" to accompany her. The bride is being taken to Jerusalem for the wedding. This speaks of the church in the world that looks forward to being gathered in heaven. Our home is not in this world. We are "strangers and pilgrims on the earth". In Hebrews 12:1-2, we are told, "... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." A heavenly mindedness is easy to detect in a believer. It should be an obvious characteristic of the church. Instead of attempting to become more like the world to attract the people of the world, we should maintain a certain chastity in order to remain attractive to those who are serious about spiritual things. We must maintain moral and spiritual purity if we belong to the Lord. Furthermore, we are to be deliberately useful to the Lord as we pass through this world. We are to be "the salt of the earth",

being a good influence in society. We are also to be “the light of the world”, bearing the message of the gospel high to direct the many weary souls to Jesus Christ, in whom they will find rest.

While on the way to Jerusalem, the bride is accompanied by the groom. This is to express the truth that the Lord is present with His church even though, bodily, He is in heaven. Again, we are confronted with spiritual realities in which are some elements of mystery that are hard to comprehend. Jesus Christ is God and Man in one Person. As the God-Man, He is in heaven. Being God, He is spirit and everywhere. We read in John 3:13, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven.” The Son of Man, while uttering these words on earth, could say He was in heaven at that moment. Note the present tense, “the Son of Man who is in heaven”. Now that the Son of Man, after His death and resurrection, is in heaven, He is also on earth by His Spirit. Before the Lord was crucified, He said this to His disciples, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you (John 14:14-18).” In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, the Lord ended by saying, “... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matthew 18:20 says, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” The presence of the Lord is a reality. He is present by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation by grace

The bride is the centre of attention. The bride is beautiful. The bride is being escorted by the palace retinue to Jerusalem. She is loved by the groom, and she loves the groom. Why was she chosen in the first place? Could there not be others who are equally beautiful, and maybe more beautiful? What makes her deserving of such privilege? Is it because of anything she has done to earn it? We already know the answer. It is not anything in herself, nor anything that she has done that caused Solomon to love her. Solomon has the power to have her, and to do as he likes with her, without having to make her his bride. Solomon could easily have passed her by, but he did not.

We are told in the second section of verse 5, “I awakened you under the apple tree. There your mother brought you forth; there she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.” This is spoken by the groom. While the intention is not to put down or belittle the bride, it has the effect of reminding her of her past. She was asleep under the apple tree when first met by the groom. No wonder the apple tree continues to have such significance to the bride. We recall Chapter 2:3 in which the bride praises the groom: “Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so *is* my beloved among the sons. I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit *was* sweet to my taste.” Coming back to our present passage, the bride is reminded of her humble background. She realizes that she is undeserving of the attention given to her.

Spiritually speaking, to be awakened from sleep is to be given spiritual life by the Lord. Just as Lazarus was given life by the hearing of the words of the Lord, when He called out, “Lazarus, come forth!”, so also we are given spiritual life when we hear the Lord’s voice in the gospel. We were “dead in trespasses and sins”, but the Lord has given us spiritual life. The note of gratitude is seen in those who are saved. We are saved by grace, not by our good works or by anything good in us. We are not to forget this, and we must ever proclaim it. Ephesians 2:4 says, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” This is followed by the well-known words of verses 8 to 9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

The centrality of the church

We must say something about the last part of verse 5 before moving on: “There your mother brought you forth; there she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.” This shows the centrality of the local church in God’s purpose. We have consistently considered the bride as representing the church or the individual believer. In verses 1 and 2 of the present chapter, the bride wished that the groom had been nursed

at her mother's breasts. Her mother used to instruct her. Here, in the present passage, the mother brought forth the bride. She gave birth to her, and raised her up. One way of looking at this passage is to consider the mother as the Old Testament church, which has given birth to the New Testament church with the coming of Christ, the groom. Yet, we would not limit ourselves to such a view, for the bride represents the church looked from the perspective of her constituent members. The mother may be regarded, therefore, as the church corporately considered, just as the garden in Chapter 6:2. The garden is the church corporately considered where God's word is proclaimed. In Chapter 4:12, the "garden enclosed" is the place where there is proper church government and discipline – the place of safety and refuge as well as the centre of gospel proclamation to the world. Here, the picture of the mother is the place of spiritual nurture for souls. It is God's will that the church be the instrumentality of spiritual birth to many people. In the church, the gospel is proclaimed and the word of God is taught. Preachers are sent forth to preach the gospel. When souls are converted, they are incorporated into the life of the church.

The church handles the word of God in these two basic ways – the gospel is preached so that sinners are saved, and the whole counsel of God is taught so that saints are built up in the faith. This may be easily proved. In Acts 20:20-21, Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." This shows that Paul preached the gospel to win souls to Christ. In verse 27 of the same chapter in Acts, we have, "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God." This shows that Paul builded up the faith of those who were converted. Then, consider the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. The command says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ..." This means the gospel must be preached so that souls are truly saved. They are then baptized, after which the next part of the command holds, namely, "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you". Although there is considerable overlap between proclaiming the gospel and preaching to build up faith, we must nevertheless keep this biblical distinction. The importance of this becomes clear when we realize that there are churches that

focus on building up the faith of believers to the near exclusion of preaching the gospel, and there are churches that focus on preaching the gospel without giving enough attention to building up the faith of believers. However strong the church may be numerically, it is deficient if one or the other aspect of the proclamation of God's word is missing.

Coming back to our passage, we note the emphasis of the place: “**There** your mother brought you forth; **there** she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.” The place was where the bride was first found, the place where she was awakened. This shows that the church must seek out people to hear the word of God. The church must deliberately seek out unbelievers to preach the gospel to them. The church should not be growing primarily by drawing other believers away from other churches. When believers do come from barren churches to get better spiritual food, we have no right to turn them away. However, it should not be a policy of the church to gain numbers at the expense of other churches. The kingdom of God overall has not grown by such an approach, and it tends to upset other churches. No, we must be mission-minded and bring the gospel to those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” so that we will have the joy of seeing God's grace operating in their lives. We will then be able to sing:

*By grace through faith in Christ alone,
A worm is spared ruin untold;
No more will sin be cause to mourn,
In that city paved in gold;
“Tis grace! ’Tis grace!” will I intone,
When gathered safe in the fold.*

17.2 The Response Of Love (vv. 6-7)

In the second section, we consider the response of the church to the salvation found in Christ. Those who understand the way of salvation wrought by God in Christ will be overwhelmed with gratitude. They will love the Lord because the Lord has shown His love for them by laying down His life to save them. They will want to live to God's glory. It is so important to understand the way of salvation. We know that the gospel may be summarized as “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”. The person and work of Christ must be made clear

to hearers. Not only must hearers know who Jesus Christ is, but they must also know how He saves sinners. All too often, Christians who witness to others do not make clear these two elements of the gospel message. Hearers are left unclear about the true identity of Jesus Christ, and they are left unclear how Jesus Christ accomplishes the salvation of sinners. It is often assumed that sinners are incapable of understanding a complicated message and, therefore, the message must be made simple. What happens is that the message is made so simplistic that it is no longer the true gospel. The love of God may be mentioned, Christ death on the cross may also be mentioned, and these are peppered up with sentimental stories to move the hearers to make a decision to “accept Him”, or to assent to what have been said. That is hardly the gospel, for the hearers are left without the understanding of God’s holy and just character, without a sense of their guilt against God, without a correct understanding of the love of God shown in the sacrificial death of Christ, and without an understanding of the cancellation of guilt in the sinner who repents and believes. How are sinners to find true peace with God if they have not understood their need of the righteousness of Christ? How are they to experience forgiveness for their sins if there is no true repentance and faith? It is necessary to sound forth this warning against sentimentalism and spurious faith. However, it is to be noted that when the gospel is properly preached, we would expect true feelings of gratitude and love, of joy and peace, to be experienced and seen in those who are saved.

From the earlier part of this message we have learned that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. The bride understands this truth too well. How does she show her gratitude? Of course, she loves the groom, but how is that love shown in her life? How does the church show her love for Christ? From verse 6, we see three characteristics of those who love the Lord: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love *is as* strong as death, jealousy *as* cruel as the grave; its flames *are* flames of fire, a most vehement flame.” Here, the grave is described as “cruel” when the better translation is “unyielding”. Furthermore, the last expression is literally “a flame of YAH”, or “a flame of Jehovah”. The verse can, therefore, be rendered as, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love *is as* strong as death, jealousy *as* unyielding as the grave; its flames *are* flames of fire, a flame of Jehovah.”

Three cravings

We may understand this verse as showing three cravings. First, there is a craving after assurance of Christ's love. This, of course, is closely related to the assurance of salvation. In fact, we can practically regard them as one and the same thing. The seal speaks of ownership, authenticity, and security. A sealed envelop shows that the content belongs to the one who owns it, that whatever in it is genuine, and that it has not been tempered with. The heart is regarded as the seat of feelings, of love, and of fond remembrance. When the bride desires to be set as a seal on the groom's heart, she is expressing her desire to be always and forever remembered by him. A believer would similarly crave for the assurance that he or she is well-loved by the Lord. The assurance of salvation is a precious gift of God which, sadly, is not the possession of every one of God's children. Of course, there are those who have no business to be sure of their acceptance before God. They are not born again of the Spirit. They do not show submission to Jesus Christ as Lord. There is a certain worldliness and self-importance in their lives that make us wonder if they are truly saved. However, there are also those who have every reason to be sure that their sins are fully forgiven, that they are accepted by God, and that the Spirit of God lives in them, yet do not have the assurance of salvation. These are the rare individuals but there are such around. They have repented of their sins before God. They are trusting in Christ for acceptance before God. They have a desire to live a holy life. Despite all these, they still question whether they are saved. If you are such a person, you must pray that God will give you true assurance of salvation. You must realize that, just like the bride in our present passage, the craving for assurance of salvation is itself a sign that you are saved.

Secondly, there is a craving for service to the Lord. This is seen in the words, "Set me as a seal ... on your arm". The arm speaks of power, and it speaks of work. For example, in Deuteronomy 26:8, we read that "the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm". This refers to the power of God. Believers will want to be useful in the Lord's work. We have been given the Great Commission. We know that the Great Commission is a command of the Lord to the local church, to plant other churches. Those who are converted should be integrated into the life of the local church by baptism, and in the local church they grow in faith

and usefulness in the Lord's service. Furthermore, all that we do for the Lord will come to nothing if He does not bless us. Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." All too often, there are misguided people who desire power from the Lord for the wrong reasons. Here, the desire for power is to serve the Lord. It is, in fact, better to use the word "ability". We want to have the ability to do useful work for the Lord. We often use the expression "the servants of God". If we are servants, we should serve. We should want to be productive in our service to God.

Thirdly, there is a craving for zeal for the Lord. Zeal for the Lord arises from a holy jealousy for His name. Just as there is such a thing as righteous anger, there is also such a thing as righteous jealousy. The Lord was righteously angry at sin, and its manifestation in the Jews of His days. We are told in Mark 3:5 that the Lord "looked around at the Jews with anger being grieved by the hardness of their hearts". Similarly, in the Second Commandment, we are told, "For I, the Lord your God, *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." God is righteously jealous of His holy name. We have here the love of the believer for the Lord. He is wishing that his love for the Lord may be as powerful as death and as strong as a burning flame, which is possible only if it is from God. He is wishing that his jealousy for the honour of the Lord's name may be as unyielding as the grave. Such love is seen in those who make a stand for the truth. Such zeal for the Lord is seen in a reformer. Where are such reformers today? We are reminded of the Lord who, while on earth, cleansed the temple off the money changers. His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up (John 2:17)." We are also reminded of what the apostle Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21)." If we imitate the Lord and the apostle, we would desire to have such zeal, which can only come from above.

Perseverance

We consider next verse 7, which says, "Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised." Much water

can put out a fire. Much water can also drown people. But love that is aflame can never be put out, or be drowned to death. Not even the greatest wealth will be accepted in exchange for love. If there is such love for the Lord, it is not only strong, but it is also steady. Not only is it steady, but it is also lasting. These, then, are the qualities of the love for the Lord that we should desire to have. It must be strong. It must be steady. And it must be lasting. We know too well that in life, love can be quenched by betrayal. Love can also be drowned by sorrow. Consider how many professing Christians you know who were once zealous for the Lord but have fallen away from the faith. Consider how many Christians you know who have turned cynical and are no longer serving the Lord actively after being hurt by other Christians. Consider also the Christians you know who are almost without faith in them because of some great disappointment or sorrow in life. We need perseverance in the faith. We need also perseverance in our love for the Lord.

The natural reaction of those who have been hurt is to withdraw and to isolate themselves. However, such a reaction does not solve the problem. It makes us not available for God to use. We nurse hurt in our inner selves, and struggle with self-pity as well as the possibility of bitterness taking root. It is also sinful as we are unable to truly forgive, and we lack faith in the Lord to avenge us. We must remind ourselves afresh that it is clearly taught in Romans 12:19-21, 'Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' Of course, knowing this is one thing, doing it is another. We have to bring our trials to the Lord, until this inner struggle is overcome. Perhaps these words are speaking to you. It will be good if you can bring yourself to God and seek His mercy for harbouring an unforgiving heart all these years. Your usefulness before God is crippled by a lack of forgiveness for the perceived wrongs done to you. The blessing of God is blocked from flowing freely to you by the root of bitterness. Bring all these to God. Seek His forgiveness in Jesus Christ's name. Let God avenge you. Let Him vindicate you in His own way, in His own time. Often, the expression "let go, and let God" is used to teach a wrong view of sanctification. Here, we may rightly say, "let go, and let God", and

you will be liberated from what has been crippling your usefulness all these years.

17.3 Conclusion

We must draw to a conclusion. Faith is needed to the end of our lives on earth. Faith will wean us more and more off worldliness. Faith will keep us focused on our heavenly home. We are such unworthy sinners saved by grace. We must respond to the Lord's love by exercising faith in Him.

Those who understand how they have been saved will have deep feelings of love, joy, peace, and gratitude. Love for the Lord must be shown in tangible ways. There must be cravings for assurance of His love, for power to serve Him well, and for spiritual zeal to be sustained.

The responses of faith and love are focused on the Lord. We would not want to be diverted from our love for Him. We want to be faithful to our Lord. With God's help, we will remain faithful.

*When any turn from Zion's way,
As some have seemed to do,
I hear my Lord and Saviour say,
"Will you forsake Me too?"*

*Ah, Lord, with such a heart as mine,
Unless You hold me fast,
I feel I must, I shall decline,
And prove like them at last.*

*No voice but Yours can give me rest,
And bid my fears depart;
No love but Yours can make me blest,
And satisfy my heart.*

*What anguish has that question stirred,
That I might also stray,
Yet, Lord, relying on Your word,
I'll never go away.
(John Newton, 1725-1807)*

8:8-12

Shulamite's brothers

- 8 We have a little sister,
And she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister
In the day when she is spoken for?
- 9 If she is a wall,
We will build upon her
A battlement of silver;
And if she is a door,
We will enclose her
With boards of cedar.

Shulamite

- 10 I *am* a wall,
And my breasts like towers;
Then I became in his eyes
As one who found peace.
- 11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon;
He leased the vineyard to keepers;
Everyone was to bring for its fruit
A thousand silver *coins*.
- 12 My own vineyard is before me.
You, O Solomon, *may have* a thousand,
And those who tend its fruit two hundred.

Eighteen

Consecration In Expectancy

We have contended that this is a book of allegory and must be interpreted as such. The normal historical-grammatical-and-theological method of interpretation must be applied to a book that is recognized as allegorical, just as it is applied to other categories of books in the Bible – be they historical, poetic, prophetic, or didactic. We avoid the so-called allegorical method of interpretation of the book in which bizarre ideas are introduced contrary to plain sense, context, and the analogy of faith. Rather, we would still ask, What does this text plainly mean? Plainly, of course, does not mean in a literalistic manner. We would ask also, “What does this text mean in context?” and “How does it compare with the teaching of other parts of Scripture?” We believe that the Bible is a spiritual book, intended for our spiritual edification. It cannot be intended to stir up lust and unworthy thoughts. Rather, we would consider what is meant to be taught spiritually.

We want to be reminded that, in the present chapter of the book of Song, the bride has reached the peak of her maturity, while waiting for the return of the groom. In a Jewish marriage, there is the betrothal in which the bride and groom are legally bound together as husband and wife, but they do not live together until the wedding day, when the groom comes to fetch her for the marriage supper. This custom has been used in the Bible to portray the relationship between the church and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord has gone to

heaven to prepare a place for His people. He will one day return to take the bride to be with Him. Meanwhile, the bride is waiting for His return. We have learned in Chapter 8:1-4, the gratitude of the expectant church. The church shows forth her gratitude to the Lord for her salvation, for sustenance in the faith, and for succour in trials. In Chapter 8:5-7, we learned of the faithfulness of the expectant church. The church is steadfast in her love for the Lord, refusing to be drawn away by even the offer of the most attractive riches of the world. In the present passage, which is Chapter 8:8-12, we learn of the consecration of the expectant church. The church desires to show forth her love for the Lord not merely by words, but by giving of herself totally to the Lord. That is what we mean by “consecration” – to be set apart unto the Lord. There are two sections to this message: first, there is reflection on past misery, covering verses 8 to 9; second, there is gratitude for present felicity, covering verses 10 to 12. The word “felicity” means bliss, or great happiness.

18.1 Reflection On Past Misery (vv. 8-9)

We begin with the first section, which is a reflection on past misery by the bride. Verse 8 says, “We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister in the day when she is spoken for?” To understand this verse, we must recall the family background of the bride which we have learned from Chapter 1. On the death of the father, the property had been distributed among the children. Each child was given a plot of land which was planted with grapevines. There was this girl in the family who had been exploited by her half-brothers. They had made her take care of their vineyards, such that she had no time to take care of her own. She had also to take care of the sheep and goats of the family. She became dark, due to constant exposure to the sun. She is now grown up, and ready to be married. Outwardly, she looked like any plain country lady when, in reality, she was a true beauty. She was spotted by Solomon when she was asleep under an apple tree. Solomon had fallen in love with her and courted her. She is now madly in love with Solomon and betrothed to him. She recalls the background she has come from.

Pretended concern

She remembers the time when her brothers discussed about her fu-

ture. She was still young, probably in her adolescence. What should they do for her in preparation for the time when she is ready to get married? They appeared so caring of her, when that was not the case. How mistaken she was at that time! She trusted them. They were her brothers, even if they did not share the same father. It turned out that they had their own agenda. They were thinking of gaining out of her - by making use of her. This is how we would think back of the past, when we were not yet converted. We were in the world. We were part of the world. We interacted closely with ungodly people. Not all of them were outrightly wicked. All of them still showed traces of God's image in them. Most of them were capable of kindness and generosity. Some were highly principled and even noble. However, to our great disappointment, they turned out to be self-centred at heart. There was a time when you thought you could work together as a team. You thought you were family. You believed in "one for all and all for one". When the crunch came, they chose to save their own skin and would not think of standing by you. Even good friends were capable of back-stabbing you. Even people you trusted would take advantage of you. You became disappointed and disillusioned. Some of us were badly burned in the world. We trusted certain people, but suffered badly when they failed us. Often, the loss of money, opportunities, and even health leave scars in our lives. Then, there are the broken relationships, and the thought that those people were capable of betraying you in the ways they did – all these were hard to bear. That is why we are not surprised to find unhappy people in the world. The world is a hostile place. Do not put your trust in mere man. Do not rely on unconverted people, with all their worldly ideals.

Selfish intent

Verse 9 of the present passage shows us the true situation of the world, while verse 8 shows the apparent situation. The half-brothers of the bride discussed among themselves, saying, "If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; and if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar." They were actually planning in advance what they would do to their young half-sister. "If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver." A wall is silent. It keeps people out. It makes people feel secure and homely, living within its confines. The half-brothers were waiting to see how

the little sister would develop. If she becomes a homely, quiet girl who is obedient and easy to control, they would “build upon her a battlement of silver”, i.e. they would put a high price upon her for whoever thinks of marrying her. They would ask for a big dowry for her such that she would either remain unmarried, and continue to be their servant, or be married off with such a high price that they would become rich through her. Now you know the true colours of the brothers! They had been thinking of gaining out of her. They were not truly thinking of her welfare. If you have heard them uttering the words of verse 8, you might think that they were so caring. Now that you have heard the words of verse 9, you are awakened to the realization that they were not such a straight-forward bunch of people after all! That was not all that they were planning. What if their sister turns out to be different from their expectation? What “if she is a door”, allowing people to come in and go out? What if she develops into an independent and outgoing person, who refuses to be under control? Then “we will enclose her with boards of cedar”. They were going to forcibly limit her freedom. They would not tolerate the nonsense of an independent young lady strutting in and out of the house. Practically, they would ensure that she remained as their servant, under their control.

That is what the world is like. It wants you to conform to its norms, and to accept its values. When you are like the people of the world, you will be liked by them. We were once very much like them at heart, and probably even in behaviour. When we were converted, our values began to change. We began to love the Lord, and to desire to live for Him. That was when the true colours of our friends and family members began to show. They could hardly conceal their dislike of you. They were capable of being so sarcastic and heartless in their criticism of you. You became the butt of their jokes. There were those who seemed to respect your individuality, and appeared tolerant of you. However, you must remember that being tolerant of you is different from accepting you for who you are. To tolerate religion is different from believing in the freedom of religion. The world is constantly exerting pressure upon you to conform to its image.

This is a reminder to all of us that the world is hostile to the people of God. Christians must remember the teaching of Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by

the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Christians are in the world, but not of the world. That is why you will not be accepted by the world, unless you can be made used of by the people of the world. This is not to say that you have to fear the world, for the world belongs to our God. Rather, we should have compassion for the world. The world needs us more than we need the world. The Lord has promised to be with His people to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4).” So, do not fear the world! Rather, be in the world to win it for Christ. But make sure that you are not pressed into the mold of the world. In order to continue being useful to the Lord in the world, we must retain our saltiness as “the salt of the earth”, and we must continue to shine as “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13, 14).

18.2 Gratitude For Present Felicity (vv. 10-12)

From “Reflection On Past Misery” we move on to the second section, which is “Gratitude For Present Felicity”. Reflecting on the past should cause us to be grateful to the Lord for what He has done for us. This is shown in verse 10, which says, “I *am* a wall, and my breasts like towers; then I became in his eyes as one who found peace.” The bride, who is now grown up and is of marriageable age, freely acknowledges that she is a wall, i.e. she is of a quiet demeanour, a homely character, one who is not an independent fire-brand. Instead, she is such a beautiful and gracious young lady, one who has found peace in Solomon’s eyes. She is full of compassion and love for others, yet her emotions are stable as towers (cf. Song 4:4-5).

Peace with God

Two things must be noted here. First, the bride indirectly shows that she did not have peace in her home. She was never truly happy. We have seen how she loved her mother, and wanted to take the groom to meet her, in verse 2 of this chapter. However, she was ill-treated by her half-brothers and life was miserable. On a deeper level, there was a restlessness that was not assuaged until she found peace. Misery arising from external circumstances is one thing, but a lack of peace is another. There are those who have everything in

life, and yet they have no peace in themselves. We know that the bride has found love in Solomon. Solomon loves her, and she loves Solomon, but is it not strange that what is focussed on here is peace rather than love? You might argue that to be in love means that you have found peace, but that is not a satisfactory answer. While “love is a many-splendoured thing”, you would hardly confuse it with peace. No, this verse is pointing us to the peace, or spiritual rest, that we find in Jesus Christ.

The second thing we must note is that the bride has not only found peace, but she knows that Solomon sees her as one who has found peace. We are told, “I became in his eyes as one who found peace.” It is one thing to think you have peace with God, it is another to know that God is at peace with you. Put another way, it is one thing to think you are a Christian, but it is another thing to know that you are accepted by God as His child. One can be mistaken about his faith or, rather, about his profession of faith. You must make sure that you are truly reconciled with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. We know from Galatians 5:22-23, that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Peace with God, through faith in Jesus Christ, is a manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit. That peace is what we must crave for, and it is found only in Christ. This is where we are led to examine ourselves again as to whether we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). It is not what you think of yourself, nor what others think of you, but what the Lord thinks of you. We do not want to be numbered among the many who, on the last day, call upon the Lord, “Lord, Lord, have we not done this in Your name, and done that in Your name ... (Matt. 7:21-23)” but are rejected by Him. Are you one of those who can say, “I became in Christ’s eyes as one who found peace”?

Willing surrender

Verses 11 and 12 show us the present state of the bride, “Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon; He leased the vineyard to keepers; everyone was to bring for its fruit a thousand silver *coins*. My own vineyard is before me. You, O Solomon, *may have* a thousand, and those who tend its fruit two hundred.” Everyone knew that Solomon was a mighty king, well-known for his wisdom and the glory of his kingdom. Here, we are told that he has a vineyard which is leased

out to keepers, for a thousand silver coins. This is to show us that the Lord expects His people to be fruitful, and to bring Him His due. The vineyard was used by the prophet Isaiah to represent unfaithful Israel, who failed to bring forth fruit. Isaiah 5:1-2 tells us, “Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: my Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected *it* to bring forth *good grapes*, but it brought forth wild grapes.” Both the passages in the Song of Solomon and Isaiah are reminiscent of the “Parable of the Landowner” told by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 21:33-46. There, the landowner finally sends his son to collect the dues, but the son is killed instead. This parable is meant to show that the nation of Israel would be rejected because of rejecting the Son of God. The Jews claimed themselves to be God’s people, but were not accepted by God. They did not bear spiritual fruit, showing that they were spiritually dead. Those who truly belong to God would trust in Christ alone for salvation. Their spiritual life will be seen by the spiritual fruit produced.

Coming back to the present passage, we see that the bride has been given a plot of vineyard by Solomon as well. This is not the vineyard she has inherited, for it has been laid waste by neglect for a long time. We would remember what she said in Chapter 1:6, “My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, *but* my own vineyard I have not kept.” That was in the past. The bride is reminiscing on the past, as we have seen in verses 8 and 9. Since being betrothed to Solomon, she has received this plot of land from him either as a betrothal gift or a love gift. She acknowledges that the land belongs to Solomon, and she willingly pays the lease of a thousand pieces of silver. Others have been leased the land on which they earn a living. The bride has been given the land as a gift, so that she can call it “my own vineyard”. However, recognizing that the vineyard has come from Solomon, she wants to pay dues just like others, in recognition that it has come from him. She does not want preferential treatment. Since she does not work on the land herself, she pays her workers two hundred silver coins.

Two things must be noticed. First, there is the understanding in the bride that whatever she has comes from Solomon. She indicates this by giving her dues. In the time of Abraham, it was already a

practice to give a tenth of whatever was gained to God as acknowledgement that everything had come from Him. That was why, when Abraham came back from rescuing Lot, he gave “a tithe of all” to Melchizedek, “the priest of the Most high God” (Gen. 14:18, 20). In the days of Moses, the nation of Israel was taught to tithe. Although the New Testament does not specify the amount we are to give back to God, Christians have generally used the Old Testament principle of the tithe as a guide. Secondly, we note that the bride pays to Solomon from a willing heart. Although she is betrothed to Solomon, she does not want preferential treatment. Instead, she wanted to set a good example to all. She employs others to work for her, and pays them their dues, but she would not reduce what she owes to Solomon. Not only does she refuse preferential treatment, but she refuses to give the excuse that she has to employ others to work for her. Compared to us today, do we give excuses for reducing what is due to God? In the New Testament age, we are required to give willingly, generously, and privately, i.e. without declaring to others how much we have given to the Lord. We are told in 2 Corinthians 8:12, “If there is first a willing mind, *it is* accepted according to what one has, *and* not according to what he does not have.”

The principles of giving should be extended to the whole of our life. Our life comes from God. Our health is from Him, and so are our abilities, and the opportunities to earn. We have been saved by grace, not by anything good we have done, or anything good found in us. As redeemed people, should we not consider all that we are, and all that we have, as from God? If we do, then let us show it in our lives. Unlike some churches, we do not want to be harping on the givings, and we do not set the percentage of earnings to give. We do not know what you give, and we do not want you to pledge how much to give. Let us willingly, generously, and privately give back to God according to what we have. We do not have to compare ourselves with others as to how much we are able to give, but it must be in proportion to what we have, and it must be given willingly. “Let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).”

The bride gives willingly to Solomon out of a heart of gratitude, and out of love. The payment of the dues for the vineyard is but only one expression of her love and gratitude. We know that she

has given herself over to the groom. She belongs to him, and awaits the day when he would come to take her to be his wife. Giving back to God a portion of what we have earned, or gained in other ways, is only one way by which we show forth our love and gratitude for our salvation. What about our time, our families, and our priorities? Here, we are treading on sensitive ground, but tread we must if we are to be faithful in the application of God's word. All too often, we give money for gospel work, but are stingy with our time and over-protective of our families. We seem to think that giving regularly to the Lord's work makes up for the failure to attend meetings in church regularly. We fail to see that we are the losers in the end because we miss the teaching from God's word. We think that it is sufficient to read the word of God ourselves and to pray in the privacy of our own homes, failing to see that it is required of us to attend church meetings regularly. Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us, "let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." We often miss out on the special blessing of the Lord's presence, for He has said, "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matt. 18:20)." A child who does not eat much will not grow well. A person who does not eat regularly will not be healthy. What applies to physical feeding applies to spiritual feeding as well. You can tell which church member is spiritually healthy, or growing well, by his or her attendance at church meetings. Whenever this issue is raised, we tend to become defensive, and think that attendance is all that is looked for by the church, failing to see that our spiritual health is at stake.

We come to another area which is even more sensitive, and that is your family. This applies particularly to Christian parents who love their children in the wrong way. This seems to be a phenomenon peculiar to this part of the world. You fail to see that you may be over-protecting your children. You are overly-concerned about their education, to the extent that you have forgotten that all you have come from God – including your children. You allow your attendance in church and your spiritual welfare to be affected by too much time spent in dealing with their education, and the extra tuition classes they take outside school hours. Consider how much

time, money and effort you spend for their physical and mental development compared to their spiritual development. Apart from extra tuition classes outside school hours, many parents would send their children to classes of various kinds, including music, swimming, dancing, mental arithmetic, art, martial arts, and others. But have you been concerned about their spiritual development? Do you send them to Sunday School regularly? Do you have family worship with them? Do you pray regularly for their salvation?

You would remember how Hannah, in the Old Testament, prayed for a son. When a son was given her, she dedicated him to the Lord and brought him to Eli, the priest, to be trained for service to God. Do you think Hannah did not love her son? We can be sure that she loved Samuel dearly, yet she recognized that the son was given to her by God. She did not want to hold back her son, but gave him freely to God. After all, she could visit him at anytime, and the son could come back to visit her. Today, most parents want their children to become doctors and engineers, but not to serve the Lord full-time. There seems to be the idea floating around that a pastor's sons should become pastors and missionaries, while the sons of other parents are not expected to become pastors and missionaries. I have been asked on a number of occasions whether any of my sons is becoming a pastor. I will be most willing and happy for all of them to become pastors, if that is God's will. We do believe in the need of God's calling before embarking on full-time service for Him. The point I am making, however, is that there is a general reluctance for parents to allow their children to serve God full-time. Not only is the pastor's vocation regarded as lowly compared to those of doctors and engineers, but their pay is low for a fact. Another reason might be the perception that the pastor's life involves high risks – a perception which we have unwittingly propagated due to our emphasis on pioneering work and missions. However, you must understand that our lives are in God's hand. How safe can you be in the city, or in your home? God is sovereign. He determines how, and when, we die. You might think it is safer working in the city compared to serving God in the jungles. However, death can come to us anywhere, and at any time. If it is not the time for us to die, God will preserve us. If it is His will that we die on the mission field, we would accept it. Far better it is to die while actively serving the Lord, than to die comfortably in bed with no burden to serve the Lord! Whether or

not your children end up serving the Lord full-time, my question to you is, “Do you love the Lord?” Many hesitate to answer this question because they are afraid that the response of the Lord might be, “Feed My lambs”, “Tend My sheep”, and “Feed My sheep”.

Sometimes, stories are helpful to nail truths to our mind. Here is a true story. Before returning from the United Kingdom, we visited a couple who were in full-time service to the Lord. We asked them if there was any last word of advice for us before we left. The man held out a coin in his hand, and then open his hand with the coin sitting on his palm. He told us that if we were to hold the coin tight in our fist, God will pry it open to take it, and it will hurt. If we keep our hand open, God can take it at any time, and put it back at any time. The coin is not ours. We are holding it as a steward of God. He has the right to take it and to give it back to us. The same applies to our children, gifts, time, properties, health, and life. If we are grateful for our salvation, and understand that everything comes from God, we will place everything we have at His disposal.

18.3 Conclusion

We must draw to a close. In the first section of this message, we have “reflection on past misery”. In the second section, we have “gratitude for present felicity”. We have learned that believers should be grateful for salvation in Christ, with all the accompanying blessing. We are to show our love to the Lord without reservation. This blessed life in Christ is what we want to share with our unbelieving friends. You live in God’s world. You have seen His goodness in the world, and in your lives. The world has been badly affected by sin. You would have experienced the miseries of the world as well. You must understand that there is no necessity to remain in the miseries of the world. There is hope in Jesus Christ. There is reconciliation with God through Him. By His death on the cross, He has done everything needful to save sinners. Come to Him!

*My God is good, He gave me life in Christ,
This rich and blessed life in Christ;
Though at this present time,
Suff’rings and trials are mine,
They are as nothing compared to what will be.*

*So come with me and live this life in Christ,
And live this blessed life in Christ;
Let men their charges bring,
And woes of all kinds spring,
We know God is for us, who can be 'gainst us?*

*The Lord is my helper,
I will not fear,
He'll leave not nor forsake His own;
The Lord is King,
With Him I'll reign!*

*By His Spirit, God gave this hope to me,
This sure and precious hope to me;
And when this world is done,
When heav'n and earth are one,
I will hear the song of those from sin set free.*

*So take my hand and share this hope with me,
And share this precious hope with me;
Though trials from Satan flood,
And foes may spill our blood,
Yet in all these things we are more than conq'rors.*

8:13-14

Solomon

13 You who dwell in the gardens,
The companions listen to your voice –
Let me hear it!

Shulamite

14 Make haste, my beloved,
And be like a gazelle
Or a young stag
On the mountains of spices.

Nineteen

Longing In Expectancy

The last chapter of the Song of Solomon describes the life and experiences of the maturing church. In a sense, the church will never truly be mature while on earth. We will arrive at full maturity only when we are in heaven. We are dealing with a maturing church, not a fully matured church. There is considerable vitality in the church, at the same time that there is an obvious mark of maturity in that there is the expectancy of Christ's return. We have seen that the expectancy of Christ's return is expressed by gratitude to the Lord, in Chapter 8:1-4, by faithfulness to the Lord, in verses 5 to 7, and by consecration to the Lord, in verses 8 to 12. There is another way by which the expectancy of Christ's return is expressed, and that is by longing for His return. This is what verses 13 to 14 teach.

One can expect Christ's return, and not long for His return. The maturing church is different – she longs for the return of the groom. This longing for Christ bears some similarity to the enthusiasm seen in a new believer, at the same time that there is a vital difference, namely that it is tempered by a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, while living in the midst of a hostile world. That difference might be put this way – the new believer is seeking to know more about the Lord, while the mature believer is seeking to know the Lord more. There is a vital difference between knowing *about* the Lord and *knowing* the Lord Himself. Of course, to know the Lord, you would have to begin with knowing about Him. However, there is much more to knowing the Lord than to know about Him. A

newly converted believer is overwhelmed by the mercy of God and is thankful for his salvation. He is enthusiastic in finding out more of God's word and desires to implement what he learns. Like a fresh university graduate, he looks forward to the things he can do in the world. He looks forward to his first pay cheque, to building up his career, and to having a family. An older person has experienced much in life. He has experienced trials and triumphs, he has passed the peak of his career, and he now looks towards retirement. A maturing church is quite unlike the older person who is looking forward to retirement. The maturing church is more like a person who is at the peak of his career, who has gained much experience, and is able to contribute much, but he is not quite ready to retire. He has more to learn, more to contribute, and more to look forward to. There is a quiet vitality in his life. He is able to do things better, and with greater efficiency. Returning to the picture of the bride, we see her longing for the groom's return, while showing forth her gratitude, faithfulness and consecration to Him.

A longing for Christ's return is a mark of the maturing church. How is that longing shown? The first way is by communion with Him while serving in the world. The second way is by anticipation of His return while waiting in the world.

19.1 Communion While Serving (v. 13)

Learning to pray at every stage

We consider first communion with Christ in the midst of service to Him. Verse 13 says, "You who dwell in the gardens, the companions listen to your voice – let me hear it!" These are the words of the groom to the bride. The bride who dwells in the gardens has companions – the servants and the maids who serve her. They listen to her. The groom wants to hear her voice as well! This is to show that the Lord desires His people to be in constant communication with Him. This truth has been expressed in the relationship between the bride and the groom throughout the whole Song of Solomon. We have to learn to commune with our Lord in prayer from the beginning of the Christian life. We must learn to commune with Him in the years of active service to Him. We must continue to commune with Him right to the end of our days. Just as we hear the Lord's

voice in the pages of Scripture, we must respond to Him in prayer. The Lord wants to hear our voices.

The bride has been introduced to us in the various phases of her life. From early, in Chapter 2:14, we read of these words, “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice *is* sweet, and your face *is* lovely.” The believer is grateful for the salvation found in Christ. He is the “Rock of Ages, cleft for me”. Shepherds and travellers caught in a sand storm would appreciate the shelter of clefts in the rocky mountains. The caves sheltered them from heat in the day, and cold at night. David, in his early years of fleeing from Saul, often sought shelter in caves. This is the picture of a believer seeking shelter in Christ, the Rock of our salvation. We are kept safe from the wrath of God for our sins. We are kept safe from the evil one and the persecution of the world. From early in our Christian life, we are made to realize that the Lord takes pleasure in hearing the prayer of His people.

In the growing years of our walk with the Lord, we continue to look to the Him in prayer. The bride was sought by the groom in Chapter 5:2, ‘I sleep, but my heart is awake; *It is* the voice of my beloved! He knocks, *saying*, “Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one ...” This shows the Lord desiring communion with His people. The bride has been taken out of the wilderness, from her mother’s home, where she had experienced oppression from her half-brothers. She now lives in Jerusalem, awaiting the day of marriage. The groom visits often, but she has slackened in her relationship with him. In the growing relationship between them, the bride has to learn to be faithful and consistent in her love, while preparing for the day of marriage. The maturing Christian has to learn faithfulness and consistency in his walk with the Lord.

Now that the bride is more mature and experienced, she continues to be reassured by the groom that he takes pleasure in hearing her voice. The groom says, in Chapter 8:13, “Let me hear it!” We are not to slacken in our prayer life. As the years go by, we ought to realize that we have not spent enough time in prayer. We have not sufficient faith in prayer. As we gain experience in our walk with the Lord, we realize that He does answer prayers. We are to cultivate trust in Him and express this in constant prayer to Him. Our Lord wants us to commune with Him often.

If our prayer life is so important, we need to take heed that we do not neglect it. Young believers must cultivate the habit of praying daily. You do not have to spend hours in prayer each time, but you should spend time each day in prayer. Spending fifteen minutes a day reading the Bible and praying is far better than talking about wanting to pray but never making it. It will be good if you learn to start the day with fifteen minutes of “quiet time” with the Lord. Then, before you sleep, recall the day’s work, thank the Lord for whatever have been accomplished, confess your sins, and commit to Him whatever else that needs to be done. It takes only ten minutes to do that. Once that habit is cultivated, you will no more be thinking of the length of time spent. Instead, you will be lost in your communion with the Lord, and experience often “joy inexpressible and full of glory”. Those with families should have daily family worship in which a portion of Scripture is read, followed by prayer. You will reap the benefits in the years ahead when your children grow up. From early, they learn the importance of cultivating the spiritual life. When converted, they will find worship a pleasure rather than a drudgery or a chore. God does hear the prayers of His people. Extending this to corporate prayer, do you not see the importance of coming to the prayer meeting in church? The Lord has promised His special presence where two or three are gathered together in His name. If we desire God’s blessing upon the ministries of the church, we should be coming to plead for it at the throne of grace. When we love the Lord, we want to be with Him and to be with His people. We come to hear His voice as the word is preached, but we also want to draw near to Him in prayer. He wants to hear our voices, too.

We have considered the desire of the groom to hear the bride’s voice, which speaks to us of the importance of prayer. Note that the bride is dwelling in the gardens, and her companions are listening to her voice. The word “gardens”, in plural, show that the bride not only takes care of the garden given to her by Solomon but also other gardens that he owns. Nearly all the occurrences of the word have been in the singular. In Chapter 4:12, we have, “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse ...” In verse 16 of the same chapter, we have, “Awake, O north *wind*, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden, *that* its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.” In Chapter 5:1, we have, “I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse ...” Indication that Solomon has

more gardens than the one he gives to the bride is found in Chapter 6:2, "My beloved has gone to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed his flock in the gardens ..." The bride has been given her own garden, as can be seen in Chapter 6:11, "I went down to the garden of nuts to see the verdure of the valley ..." In Chapter 8:12, we have, "My own vineyard is before me." While the bride has her own garden, which is planted with fruits and spices, she dwells in the midst of other gardens owned by Solomon. This fact conveys to us the spiritual truth that each of us has to serve the Lord in a local church while extending our service more widely, as we are enabled. We have our vineyard in which to serve, while extending our service to other vineyards as the Lord opens up the opportunities. Our own vineyard is our own church and the locality we live in. We serve the Lord by bringing the gospel to others, attempting to build up the church of Jesus Christ here. We are also to send out missionaries and to support missionaries elsewhere. We are to visit other places, to speak, to teach, and to encourage others. We are involved with relief works elsewhere. The local ministries are carried out hand-in-hand with the wider ministries. We do not meddle in the affairs of other churches, but we engage in co-operative efforts with them. In those ways, we mutually encourage one another. We are mutually refreshed and benefit from the interaction one with another. A church cannot live in isolation, for it will decline and decay from within. God is good. God is wise in giving us a place to belong to, and to serve, at the same time that He gives us opportunities of service elsewhere.

Another thing to note is that, in verse 13, the bride has companions who listen to her voice. These are the daughters of Jerusalem, the ladies-in-waiting of the bride, whom we have encountered throughout this book. Then, there are the servants who tend the vineyards, as we have seen in verse 12. These companions represent the seekers and new believers in the church. Non-believers are invited to church to hear the word of God. A number of them come regular, seeking to know more about Christ and the way of salvation. There are also new believers who have many doubts and questions. There is much for us to do to help these people. Some of these accompany us in the work we are involved with, although we would not engage a non-believer in teaching the Bible. As we interact with them, and do things together, they experience the love of the Christians and see

Christian principles being put into practice. Our hope is that many of them would be brought to true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. All in all, there is much to do in service to the Lord. It is in the midst of such busy service that we are called upon to commune with the Lord. How easy it is to be so taken up with service to the Lord to the extent that we forget who we are serving! How easy it is to do one thing at the expense of another. We learn from church history that the pietists focussed on cultivating the inner life – engaging in prayer, meditation and self-examination – to the extent of neglecting active service to the Lord. We learn also that there have been activists who are constantly doing so many things in God's name, but fail to cultivate a close walk with the God they claim to serve. We do not want to fall into any of these extremes. The healthy Christian life holds in balance both active service as well as holy living. The Lord is telling us, in the present verse, that while He opens up opportunities for us to serve Him, we are to spend time with Him in communion as well.

Three adverse consequences

Failure to hold in balance active service with personal piety will lead to adverse consequences, of which three are considered here. The first possible adverse consequence is that we begin to put our trust, and find comfort, in man rather than in God. We enjoy one another's company, and experience "the love of God which has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5)". While it is legitimate to enjoy fellowship one with another, it should be noted that that fellowship is maintained only when we are in constant prayer together. Otherwise, the fellowship soon degenerates into mere comradeship – the nice feelings experienced by people who share things in common, such as those who are in the scouts movement, or commandoes in the same unit. When we place too much dependence on human relationship, we dishonour the Lord and put ourselves in danger of being greatly disappointed by friends who fail us. Are there not many who have been badly hurt, and become cynical, because of experiencing problems in church?

The second adverse consequence is that our focus would shift to the garden, instead of being on the Lord. The garden may be beautiful, as indeed it is, if we have eyes to see. The church is the beautiful bride of Christ, despite its imperfection while in this world. Those

who have captured the vision of the Great Commission would have a strong sense of missions, which involves the local church planting other local churches. The Great Commission is the last command of Christ to His people before He was taken up to heaven. It is a command that encompasses all nations, for all time, until Christ comes back to judge the world. It is the means by which the whole number of God's elect is to be called out of the world. It is truly a great command. There is no better way to glorify God than to fulfill the Great Commission. All Christian work may be seen as subsumed under the Great Commission. Have you captured the vision? It is good if you have captured that vision. However, a danger lurks. Wherein lies the danger? The danger is in the work itself, minus the presence of the Lord. The danger comes when we begin to treat the work as our own work. The danger is that we fail to prayerfully trust the Lord as we seek to build up the church to His glory. Our dependence on the Lord is shown in our prayer. The work will be to God's glory when we constantly bring it before Him, for Him to bless.

The third possible adverse consequence of not being prayerful is that we begin to become this-worldly, thinking that everything in this world will last. Once we lose sight of the spiritual dimension, we would become more comfortable with the world. All we work for become rooted in this world. Soon, we will be more concerned about our comforts in this world rather than about kingdom work. Please do not misunderstand. The Bible is not against wealth and worldly comfort. The Lord does not ask us to live a stoic life of suffering and want. However, the attitude of mind makes all the difference. Whether rich or poor, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:21)". When we forget that we are only "strangers and pilgrims on the earth", we will not be able to live a single-minded life for God. Whatever your vocation may be, you are to live to God's glory. That can happen only when you are a person of prayer.

We see, then, that the prayer life is an indication of spiritual maturity. The prayer life is not meant to be paraded as a badge of piety, but pray we must if we love the Lord and know of our dependence upon Him. A prayerful attitude should underlie the life of prayer.

19.2 Anticipation While Waiting (v. 14)

Waiting for Christ

We move on to the second section, which is the anticipation of the Lord's return while waiting for Him. The church has waited long for Christ to return. No one knows when He will return, but return He will at the most unexpected moment. "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah *were*, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be (Matt. 24:36-37)." Despite the Lord's clear teaching on this matter, there have been those who predicted the return of the Lord, only to have their predictions proven wrong. We must not lose heart while waiting. The apostle Peter says, "But beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day ... But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up (2 Pet. 3:8, 10)." These two points are reaffirmed by the apostle – first, no one knows when the Lord will return, and second, the Lord will return unexpectedly. Let us take heart! Let us not be in despair! Let us not be impatient! The Lord will surely return.

The return of Christ is often thought of in terms of judgement to the world. That is right, and should not be overlooked or under-emphasized. There will be a day of judgement, at which all the dead will be raised. There will be the separation of the righteous from the wicked. Judgement upon the wicked will be pronounced, and God will be seen to be just in punishing sinners. Believers will be judged as well in the sense that all their sins will be made known to all, and they will be acquitted on the basis of Christ's death on their behalf. God will justify them because of the death of Christ for them. God "made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21)." Justice will be done, and will be seen to be done. We will enter heaven with deep gratitude for our salvation, and hearty praises to the Lamb of God. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing (Rev. 5:12)!"

We know that the Lord has gone to prepare a place for His people

in heaven. He has promised to return, to take His people to Himself. "In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know (John 14:2-4)." The book of Revelation describes the final gathering of all God's chosen people together with Christ as "the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9)". This will be preceded by the judgement of the world, where all wrongs will be put right, and all the wicked will receive their due punishment. The present universe will be melted down, and the new heavens and new earth created, in which righteousness dwells. Heaven will be on earth, and earth will be in heaven. The complete number of God's chosen people is described as the beautiful holy city of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. Then, "God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Three reasons

To the Christian, the Lord's return is to be looked forward to with great anticipation. It is a happy event for the redeemed of the Lord. This is expressed by the last verse of the Song of Solomon, which says, "Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices." Why should the church long for Christ's return? Firstly, because Christ is our "beloved". We love Him because He first loved us. We are saved by grace, through faith in Him. He has done everything needful to save His people, by His death on the cross. We know that we are undeserving of His love, which makes us all the more grateful for our salvation, and for all the benefits that flow from it. Nothing we do can make up for His love for us. Just as the bride longs for her beloved to return, we long for our beloved Lord to return.

The second reason why we long for Christ's return is suggested by the expression, "the mountain of spices". Peace and safety characterize the "garden enclosed" but the world is characterized by the "mountains of the leopards" which are also full of "dens of lions" of Chapter 4, verse 8. This is a hostile world, fallen in sin. Although originally created by God "very good", the effects of sin are notice-

able everywhere. Men do not seek to know God, let alone listen to Him. Christians are, at best, tolerated, if not outrightly persecuted by them. Be that as it may, we are placed in the world to bear witness to it. We are to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13, 14), until the Lord returns. The Lord has promised His presence, by His Spirit, while we serve Him in the world. We have work to do while on earth. We would want to serve Him well, for “the night is coming when no one can work”. At the same time, do we not feel the weight of sin around us, the tiredness of toil in our fallen bodies, and the oppression of the ungodly? Indeed, there are believers who have to face outright persecution for their faith all over the world. In view of these things, do we not yearn for the Lord’s return, so that “the mountains of leopards” will become “the mountains of spices”? Do we not long for the Lord to return so that “the mountains of Separation (Chap. 2: 17)” will no longer be between us?

The third reason why we long for Christ’s return is suggested by the gazelle, or young stag, which comes prancing over the mountains – there is a longing for change to come upon our decaying bodies in this sin-ravaged world. The groom is described as a young deer that bounces across the mountains with great energy and agility. Jesus Christ is the great constant – “the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8)”. The beauty of His character is reflected in the life of a believer, however faintly. When converted, we are enlisted into the army of the Lord. We willingly serve Him, just as is foretold in Psalm 110:3, “Your people *shall be* volunteers in the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, you have the dew of Your youth.” We become part of the church militant – “preaching the gospel of peace, and bringing glad tidings of good things (Rom. 10:15)” to others. The power of the Lord is reflected in the life of His people, who bring the gospel to others so that sinners are saved. At the same time, we are urged to keep close communion with Him. Chapter 2, verse 6, says, “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense.” As we keep a close walk with the Lord, He reveals to us the wide expanse of the terrain that still needs to be conquered by the gospel. From the vantage points of “Lebanon, the top of Amana, the top of Senir and Hermon” we are able to see the sweep of the mission field and to understand better

the situation, so as to evangelize more effectively. Time spent with the Lord will help keep our vision clear and our mission focussed. However, we are not able to remain young and energetic forever. As we grow older, our physical bodies slow down. We should ensure that our spirit is renewed day by day, such that we are more effective in the Lord's work. The maturing believer should become spiritually more beautiful by the day. We long for the Lord's return, when our frail and decaying bodies will be transformed to the likeness of the Lord's glorified body. More importantly, our character, which is being transformed into the likeness of His image, will finally be perfected. At His coming, "the mountains of leopards" will be transformed into "the mountains of spices". As in the enclosed garden of Chapter 4:12, the fragrance of spices will be everywhere. There will be no more mountains of separation between us and Him.

19.3 Conclusion

The expectation of Christ's return is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. No one can be a true Christian without believing that Christ will return to judge the world. Knowing and believing that Christ will return is one thing, anticipating His return is another. Are we anticipating His return? Are we preparing for His return? How should we be preparing for His return? We have learned that we must commune with Him in the midst of service. Christian service is important, but let us not forget that it is even more important to keep a close walk with the Lord through constant prayer. Our prayer should flow from a prayerful heart, i.e. from a spirit of dependence upon Him. Without Him we can do nothing. The Lord has said, in John 15:4, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." Practically, that means spending time with the Lord each day, even if it is for fifteen minutes. Once that is a regular affair, we would expect to see faces glow, as it were, with the Lord's presence. We would also expect to see your faces at the prayer meetings of the church.

We have learned also to anticipate His return while waiting for Him. He will appear at anytime. We are not fearful of His return. Instead, we look forward to His return, and that is because of various

reasons. Firstly, we love our Lord, for He loved us first. Secondly, we long for relief from the oppression of this world. Thirdly, we long to be transformed into His image. The apostle John lived to an old age, when he was cast onto the island of Patmos for His faith. He was the epitome of the mature believer, or the mature church, pictured by the bride in the last chapter of the Song of Solomon. The infirmities of old age was upon him, such that he would have wished for the energy and vitality of youth. He had experienced persecution for his faith. He had borne many trials and burdens of the Christian life, taking care of the churches. He had cultivated a close walk with the Lord, as “the disciple whom the Lord loved”. He wrote the book of Revelation to comfort and strengthen other persecuted believers. If there was a Christian longing for Christ’s return, it was him. He expressed this truth in Revelation 22:20, saying: ‘He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus!’

Part X

OVERVIEW

Twenty

An Overview

We have completed our studies of the Song of Solomon. It is such a rich book, revealing precious nuggets of gold and providing refreshing banquets to our souls. While we have benefited from studying the details, we do not want to lose sight of the wood for the trees. It is good, therefore, to stand back and consider the book as a whole. We shall remind ourselves of the nature of the book, make a review of the chapters, and consider the chief characters of the book.

20.1 The Nature Of The Book

The Song of Solomon is a love poem describing the relationship between the Shulamite woman and the groom, who is Solomon himself. Is this a literal story, or is it a spiritual allegory? In Chapter 1, we have “An Introduction” to this series of studies in which was argued that the book must be treated as a spiritual allegory. That has determined our approach towards the study of the book. As with other books of the Bible, it is important to begin by determining the type of literature we are dealing with – whether it is historical, prophetic, poetic, or didactic. Once that is determined, the normal historical-grammatical-theological method of interpretation must be applied to it just as with other books of the Bible. We would still need to take the texts plainly, to take the texts in context, and to compare Scripture with Scripture. To look upon the book as a spiritual allegory does not mean that we interpret it by the so-called allegorical

method popularly used by the Roman Catholics, in which multiple layers of meaning are found in each passage. The allegorical method of interpretation leads to bizarre ideas which we would reject. Instead, we consider this book to be part of Scripture which reveals to us spiritual truths that centre around the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation found in Him. Did not the Lord say, “all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me (Luke 24:44)”? To the Jews, “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” were the three main divisions of the Old Testament. The Lord was saying that the whole of the Old Testament spoke concerning Himself. The Song of Solomon is also part of the Old Testament. Solomon was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write concerning the love relationship between the Saviour and His church.

20.2 [Review Of The Chapters](#)

We shall now make a review of the various chapters of the book. There are eight chapters all together. Each chapter has been expounded in two parts, except for the last, which has been expounded under four parts due to the richness of its substance. We shall extract the conclusions to each part of our studies to have an overview of them here.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1, concerning “Communion With Christ”, is divided into “Desiring Christ” and “Longing for Christ”. Under “Desiring Christ”, covering Chapter 1:1-7, we learn that our desire for Christ should arise from His love for us, be focussed on His person, and be based on His redemptive work. We learn that Christians should desire Christ because He has made us righteous, redeemed us from our sins, and transformed us into new people. As the years pass, our zeal may appear to be less, but it is compensated by the greater depth and appreciation of spiritual experience. We want to know the Lord better, and we desire Him above all else. We must, therefore, resolve to want Christ above all else, and we must remember with gratitude what we are now, compared to what we were when unconverted. We must reach out to Him in faith, in prayer, and in His word.

Under “Longing for Christ”, covering Chapter 1:7-17, we learn that we must seek communion with the Lord in His word, and in the company of His people. As we do so, we expect the Lord to respond by giving us instructions, and by encouraging us to draw near to Him. We learn also of what it is like to enter into communion with Christ. The Lord will draw near to us to assure us of His presence and of His love for us. We will be induced to engage in personal devotions – by prayer and praise, by meditation upon Him and His word, and by acts of worship and service. We will then be caught up in the love of Christ, exchanging praises and assurances with Him. There may be much trials and sorrow in the world, but what does it matter if the Lord loves us and is with us?

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, we have “Prophecy Of The Gospel Age”. In the first part, which is about “The Church At Peace”, covering Chapter 2:1-7, we learn that the Lord has made the church beautiful, providing for her needs, and blessing her abundantly. When faithful believers feel weak in their service to Him, He will draw near to comfort and strengthen them. Individuals in the church are warned against disturbing the peace of the church. We come to realize that the church is well-loved by the Lord. We realize that we have not fully fathomed the love of the Lord. We need to delve deeper, and appreciate more, the love of the Lord for His people.

In the second part, we have “The Church Militant”, covering Chapter 2:8-17. We learn that what is prophesied in this portion of Scripture is already fulfilled, is being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled. The Lord has already come to redeem His people. The gospel is going out to all nations, calling out God’s chosen people. The church is responding in worship and in sanctification. The Lord will one day return for His people. We know that eternal blessedness awaits God’s people. We know also that when the Lord returns, He will judge the unbelieving people of the world.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, we have “The Precious Gift Of Assurance”. The first part is “Assurance Lost And Regained”, covering Chapter 3:1-5. We learn of the danger of losing the assurance of our salvation. Assurance of salvation is a gift from God that must be treasured and

sought after. Many factors may lead to a weakening and loss of assurance. The chief cause is indolence on the part of the believer. To find and keep assurance of salvation, we must seek the Lord in His word, renew our commitment to Him, and maintain peace and communion with the Lord. The assurance of salvation is a precious gift from God. We must seek and pray for it. It is to our comfort and good that we have a strong sense of assurance. Sadly, there are Christians who do not seek for it due to ignorance of this teaching. On the other hand, there are those who claim to have assurance of salvation when they have no reason to be sure.

In the second part, “God’s Seal Of Assurance”, covering Chapter 3:6-11, we learn of the promise of salvation by God to His people. Christ’s people are being called out of the wilderness of the world by the gospel. God has provided salvation for His church by the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ’s atoning death for His people. We must trust the preaching of the gospel to save souls. We must ponder the excellence of Christ more and more. We must also seek assurance of salvation in Christ, who is revealed in the word of God.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, we have “Christ’s Love For The Church”. In the first part, we have “Christ’s Estimate Of The Church”, covering Chapter 4:1-6. The Lord looks upon His church as beautiful, and He continues to sanctify her by the power of His Spirit, in accordance to His word. The church has so many qualities that make her beautiful in the Lord’s sight. That the world should miss seeing those qualities is understandable. That believers should fail to see those qualities is such a pity, for they miss the inner comfort of knowing the love of Christ for His people. The Lord loves us and sees so many things beautiful about us. The right response is for us to thank Him and attempt to be even more pleasing to our Lord by improving on our spiritual qualities.

In the second part, we have “Christ’s Delight In His Church”, covering Chapter 4:7-16. Christ takes delight in His church because of her active characteristics. These may be summarized under four key words – vision, devotion, consecration, and proclamation. Christ invites the church to have a lofty vision of the task set before her in the world. He takes delight in her devotion to Him. He takes delight also in her consecration to Him. The church responds with the deep

desire to proclaim His name to the world. How we are overwhelmed by His love for us! We owe to the Lord a debt of love which we are unable to repay.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, we have “Backsliding And Restoration”. In the first part, we have “Beware Of Backsliding!”, covering Chapter 5:1-8. There are three consequences of backsliding, including becoming spiritually barren, having the conscience seared, and losing one’s spiritual sharpness. These consequences are never pleasant. Any right-thinking believer would not want to experience them. Such consequences come from indolence, self-centredness, and procrastination in our walk with God. They come to us when we are complacent with regard to the blessing of God upon us. How good it will be to have sustained blessing from the Lord, to know His presence, to be filled continually by His Spirit. The children of God need not have to backslide. The tendency to backslide is always there. We must take stock of ourselves, and not allow that to happen.

In the second part, we have “Reaching Out For Restoration”, covering Chapter 5:9-16. When our hearts grow cold toward spiritual things, when we backslide in our Christian life, there is only one recourse for us – that is, to look for Jesus Christ again. We seek Him in the company of God’s people, and we seek Him in His word. We come to hear His word proclaimed, regardless of whether it is a “teaching service” or a “gospel service”. It might seem that the preacher is attacking you through his preaching. He might come across as harsh and lacking in compassion when, in fact, he is being faithful to the Lord, and to His word. Preachers who say nice things to please their hearers are not faithful watchmen of the Lord. You must listen to faithful preaching, and continue to come to hear God’s word preached. Soon, the beneficial effects of God’s word will be experienced by you. You will find God’s word soothing. It will be balm to your bruised soul. Faithful preaching will show you much of Jesus Christ. The Lord, in all His beauty and strength, will be revealed. As you ponder on the person and work of Christ, you will be revived in your soul. Soon, you will be reveling in His love. Spiritual strength will be channelled to you. The Spirit of God will fill you. In no time, you will be declaring to many the unsurpassed beauty of your Lord.

Chapter 6

In Chapter 6, we have “The Church Militant”. In the first part, we have “The Beauty Of The Church”, covering Chapter 6:1-10. The church militant must be militant. The church on earth must be actively serving the Lord. There is no such thing as the church militant that is passive. The healthy church is one that is infused with the power of the Holy Spirit to serve the Lord. For the power of the Spirit to be experienced, the church must seek a close walk with the Lord. Since the church is made up of individual members, they must draw near to the Lord and be willing to obey Him. This is especially directed to the backslidden Christian, who must seek the Lord, in the word of God, and in the company of God’s people.

We place the primary importance on coming to hear God’s word, rather than your service to the Lord. It is as we hear God’s word that we are builded up in our understanding and in our faith. It is in the pages of Scripture that we meet with the Lord. It is then that we would respond in thanksgiving and praise. It is then that we would give of ourselves willingly to Him in service. You cannot remain long in the church, merely growing in head knowledge of the truth. The truth will strengthen and comfort those who are submitted to the Lord. It will trouble those who resist God’s will and refuse to obey Him. You will either finish life on earth as a poor specimen of Christian, who barely manages to limp into heaven, or you will submit yourself to the Lord and be escorted triumphantly into the presence of the Lord.

In the second part, we have “The Power Of The Church”, covering Chapter 6:11-13. The spiritually healthy church, or believer, will be sharing in the concerns of the Lord, just as the bride will be tending the garden of the groom. We work towards producing fruit in our service to the Lord. In the Bible, spiritual fruit comes in the form of growth in Christian graces as well as advance in the gospel. Growth in Christian graces – such as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – mentioned in Galatians 5:22, come to us only when we learn correct doctrines and obey the commandments of the Lord. Advance in the gospel comes from being involved in the life of the church. The daughters of Jerusalem need to be ministered to, while the bride marches forward as an army. In other words, our gifts are to be used for the edification of the church, while we get involved in spreading

the gospel and planting churches. All these are possible only when we are integrated into the life of the local church.

As we get involved in the life of the church, the Lord will bless us with His presence and power. We might even become so filled with His Spirit that great joy and effectiveness are seen in our service to Him. We might even be blessed with true spiritual revival as we serve Him. For this to happen, we will need to watch against allowing a root of bitterness to grow in the heart. We might, in fact, say it is pointless to become members of the church if we are unwilling to serve the Lord. How would we be different from professing believers who refuse to become church members? In fact, there are non-members who have a better spirit than unwilling members and are, therefore, used by the Lord despite not being members. These said, we must see the importance of church membership if we are to be blessed by the Lord.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 is about “The Church Maturing”. The first part is “Beauty In Maturity”, covering Chapter 7:1-9. The maturing church is described in her constituent parts, and then looked at overall. A mature believer is knowledgeable, humble and refreshing to have around. He is not judgmental, but compassionate, understanding, and edifying to others. A mature church would show such characteristics. We must aspire to be such believers. We must aspire to be such a church. There are many Christians who are so inconsistent in their walk with God. They are full of zeal for a moment, and then lose their zeal. They are interested in learning for a moment, but soon lose the interest. They are helpful in the church, but quickly lose their concern for the welfare of others. Are you such? Should you not commit yourself to the Lord, and learn to be more consistent? How are we to grow to spiritual maturity if we are so inconsistent? Let us be persevering in our walk with God. Let us be consistent Christians.

The second part is about “Consistency In Maturity”, covering Chapter 7:9-13. The mature church or believer is characterized by consistency in four areas, namely, in private communion with the Lord, in service to the Lord, in self-examination before the Lord, and in giving to the Lord. There are, of course, other areas of the Christian life where consistency is needed, but these four areas are

sufficient to convey the main truth involved, namely, that the mature Christian loves the Lord and expresses it by a life of consistency in his walk with Him. We might summarize all that we have learned by these two words, namely, love and consistency. Firstly, there is love for the Lord. When there is true love, you will be prepared to do anything for the Lord. We do not risk our lives unnecessarily, but we are prepared to accept the risks that come with serving the Lord. In the world, calculated risks are taken – for example, in business. If worldly people are prepared to take risks for things that we regard as temporary and of limited value, why are we not prepared to take necessary risks for the Lord? Have we forgotten the sovereignty of God, or is this just a doctrine in the mind? If God is sovereign – controlling all things to the good of His people, and determining when and how we die – why should we fear so much? We fear for our lives, we fear for our reputation, and we fear disruption to the comforts of life. Everything must be to our convenience before we would do anything in service to our Lord. Is that love?

Secondly, there is consistency in our walk with the Lord. A mature Christian will be consistent in his profession of faith, in his way of life, and in his service to the Lord. Here is someone who claims that he is willing to serve the Lord as a missionary in a foreign land, if it is clearly God's will for him. Are you really prepared to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary when you are too embarrassed to distribute tracts in the shopping mall? Are you too ashamed to be seen by your relatives and colleagues? Think of the Lord who gave up His glory in heaven to come to earth to save a sinner like you. Think of the humiliation he went through as He hung naked on the cross in the sight of all. Think of the agony He underwent to save you. Are you ashamed of Him? Are you not prepared to be identified with Him? Are you still thinking of "saving your face" and protecting your reputation? We do not want anyone to feel pressured to come to distribute tracts together with us. What applies to tracting applies to other avenues of service. We do not want you to feel guilty for not being able to join us. We would want those who take part to do so willingly, out of a heart of love for the Lord.

Love for the Lord and consistency in our walk with Him are linked together. We see also how consistency is reflected in our lives. A maturing Christian is one who is consistent, reliable, unwavering, and ready to serve the Lord. He is not haphazard and irregular.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 is about “The Church Expectant”. There are four parts to this chapter. In the first part, we have “Gratitude In Expectancy”, covering Chapter 8:1-4. We should be grateful to the Lord for the salvation He has given to us, for the sustenance to our faith, and for the succour to us in our needs. The Lord truly has been good to us. He truly loves His people. Let us show forth our gratitude to Him in praise, worship, and service. While waiting for Him to return, let us show forth our love to Him in our lives and give of our all to Him. Adherents of the church are challenged to consider becoming integrated into the church, if it is faithful to the Lord and being blessed in her ministry.

In the second part, we have “Faithfulness In Expectancy”, covering Chapter 8:5-7. Faith is needed right to the end of our lives on earth. Faith will wean us more and more off worldliness. Faith will keep us focused on our heavenly home. We are such unworthy sinners, saved by grace. We must respond to the Lord’s love by exercising faith in Him. Those who understand how they have been saved will have deep feelings of love, joy, peace, and gratitude. Love for the Lord must be shown in tangible ways. There must be cravings for assurance of His love, for power to serve Him well, and for spiritual zeal to be sustained. The responses of faith and love are focused on the Lord. We would not want to be diverted from our love for Him. We want to be faithful to our Lord. With God’s help, we will remain faithful to Him.

The third part is on “Consecration In Expectancy”, covering Chapter 8:8-12. First, we have reflection on past misery. Then, we have gratitude for present felicity. We learn that believers should be grateful for salvation in Christ, with all the accompanying blessing. We are to show our love to the Lord without reservation. This blessed life in Christ is what we want to share with our unbelieving friends. Those who have not believed should understand that you live in God’s world. You have seen His goodness in the world, and in your lives. The world has been badly affected by sin. You would have experienced the miseries of the world as well. You must understand that there is no necessity to remain in the miseries of the world. There is hope in Jesus Christ. There is reconciliation with God through Him. By His death on the cross, He has done everything needful to save sinners. Come to Him!

In the final part, we have “Longing In Expectancy”, covering Chapter 8:13-14. The expectation of Christ’s return is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. No one can be a true Christian without believing that Christ will return to judge the world. Knowing and believing that Christ will return is one thing, anticipating His return is another. Are we anticipating His return? Are we preparing for His return? How should we be preparing for His return? We have learned that we must commune with Him in the midst of service. Christian service is important, but let us not forget that it is even more important to keep a close walk with the Lord through constant prayer. Our prayer should flow from a prayerful heart, i.e. a spirit of dependence upon Him. Without Him we can do nothing. Practically, that means spending time with the Lord each day, even if it is for fifteen minutes. Once that is a regular affair, we would expect to see faces glow, as it were, with the Lord’s presence. We would also expect to see your faces at the prayer meetings of the church.

We learn also to anticipate His return while waiting for Him. He will appear at anytime. We are not fearful of His return. Instead, we look forward to His return, and that is because of various reasons. Firstly, we love our Lord, for He loved us first. Secondly, we long for relief from the oppression of this world. Thirdly, we long to be transformed into His image. If there was a Christian longing for Christ’s return, it was the apostle John. He expressed this truth in Revelation 22:20, saying: ‘He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus!’

20.3 The Chief Characters Of The Book

The chief characters of the book are the Lord Jesus Christ and His bride, the church. They are portrayed by Solomon and the Shulamite woman. Let us look at some passages in this book concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of the Saviour is portrayed by His two natures – the divine and the human – in one Person. Chapter 2:1 says, “*I am* the rose of Sharon, *and* the lily of the valleys.” Both the rose and the lily are equally beautiful. The rose grows on the drier highlands, while the lily grows in the valley. As the perfect God-Man, the Lord is able to be the Mediator between God and man. He carries His human nature, now glorified, to heaven. “There is one

God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).” The Lord’s redeemed people are made beautiful by Him, so that they are described as “Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters”, in Chapter 2:2.

There is the invitation for us to come to Christ, to follow Him, in Chapter 2:10-13, ‘My beloved spoke, and said to me: “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over *and* gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth her green figs, and the vines *with* the tender grapes give a *good* smell. Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away!”’

The sanctification of the believer, and the church, is described in Chapter 2:15, “Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines *have* tender grapes.” The little foxes are the sins in our lives, which if not dealt with, will cause much havoc. The resolve of the church to wait for the Lord’s coming is expressed in Chapter 2:17, “Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Bethel (Separation).”

The power of our Saviour to save, and the certainty of His preservation of the saints, are portrayed by Solomon’s carriage or palanquin in Chapter 3:6-10, “Who is **she** coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant’s fragrant powders? Behold, it is Solomons couch, *with* sixty valiant men around it, of the valiant of Israel. They all hold swords, *being* expert in war. Every man *has* his sword on his thigh because of fear in the night. Of the wood of Lebanon Solomon the King made himself a palanquin: He made its pillars *of* silver, its support *of* gold, its seat *of* purple, its interior paved *with* love **for** the daughters of Jerusalem.”

The well-ordered church is described as “a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed”. It is a haven of safety and peace to God’s people. Chapter 4:12-15 say, “A garden enclosed *is* my sister, *my* spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Your plants *are* an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spike-nard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices— a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.” The

well-ordered church is also a mission-minded church, from which the fragrance of the gospel goes forth into the world. This is expressed in the next verse, “Awake, O north *wind*, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden, *that* its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.”

The church’s appreciation of the beauty and power of the Lord is described in Chapter 5:10-16, “My beloved *is* white and ruddy, chief among ten thousand. His head *is like* the finest gold; his locks *are* wavy, *and* black as a raven. His eyes *are* like doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, *and* fitly set. His cheeks *are* like a bed of spices, banks of scented herbs. His lips *are* lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His hands *are* rods of gold set with beryl. His **belly** *is* carved ivory inlaid *with* sapphires. His legs *are* pillars of marble set on bases of fine gold. His countenance *is* like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth *is* most sweet, yes, he *is* altogether lovely. This *is* my beloved, and this *is* my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem!”

The church expresses her love for the Lord, and her consecration to Him, in the words of Chapter 8:6-7, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love *is as* strong as death, jealousy *as* **unyielding** as the grave; its flames *are* flames of fire, a **flame of Jehovah**. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised.”

The longing for the Lord’s return was expressed earlier in Chapter 2:17. It now takes on a note of certainty, with the expectation that “the mountains of Separation” will become “the mountains of spices”, in Chapter 8:14 – “Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices.”

20.4 Conclusion

The theme of the book is Christ’s love for His church. The beauty of Christ’s character is reflected in the beauty of the church. The interaction between Christ and His church shows the constancy of God’s love for His people in Christ, and the inconsistency of the church in her love for the Lord. Despite the fickleness and weaknesses in His people, the Lord continues to be longsuffering towards them. We are raised to heights of ecstasy as we consider the beauty of Christ. We

are driven to the ground in gratitude as we contemplate His mercy to undeserving sinners like us. We resolve to spend our time on earth in grateful service to Him. We look forward to the dawning of the eternal days when we shall worship Him perfectly together with all the redeemed of the Lord, to all eternity.

May you find peace with God in Jesus Christ. May the joy and blessedness described in this book be yours.

This is truly the Song of Songs!

*The Song of songs to worship,
Our King, the Lord Jesus;
I sought Him not but He sought
Me in my darkest hours;
My restless soul He gave peace,
My nakedness He clothed;
The Rose of Sharon is He,
Whose righteousness I boast;
The Lily of the Valleys
Who brings joy, light, and cheer;
Our sins He purged, though away
He assures we are dear.*

*A garden enclosed are we
From Him is our beauty;
No merit in all our works,
Save what is our duty;
Should we not give of ourselves
To the Lord more fully?
How oft have I failed Him so,
Oh, what utter folly!
His Spirit I grieved away,
Now I seek His mercy;
O Lord Jesus, turn Your face
To me and have pity!*

*His voice we hear in words near,
To comfort, strengthen, cheer;
His Spirit fills His people
With joy and vision clear;
With love undying we serve
Our Lord who first loved us;
In weakness we cry to God
To give us fruitfulness;
May our fleeting days be spent
In Your love and mercy;
Until gathered to praise You
For all eternity!*

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Books by the same author, published by Good News Enterprise

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM
A study on the biblical form of church government

Organized in the best possible way and also 'pitched' perfectly. It maintains both interest and clarity exceptionally well. It certainly fills a serious gap in the available literature.

Dr. Peter Masters, Pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, UK.

It is a unique volume ... the contribution is enormously valuable. The section on Elders is superb. The book is so very, very good.

David Fountain, the late pastor of Spring Road Evangelical Church, Southampton, UK.

I have read the book three times, and still found it as refreshing as ever

Earl Blackburn, former pastor of Trinity Reformed Baptist Church, La Mirada, California, USA.

A clear, comprehensive presentation of all the relevant issues ... This is one of the few books of its kind available at the present time.

The Banner of Truth magazine.

A very useful and searching book. It is to be hoped that the book will achieve very wide acceptance as an important text book, helping pastors, elders and, indeed, entire churches to understand the biblical pattern for government among the churches of Christ.

Grace Magazine.

A GARDEN ENCLOSED

A historical study and evaluation of the form of church government practised by the Particular Baptists in the 17th and 18th centuries

Dr Poh is well-known as the founding pastor of the first Reformed Baptist Church in Malaysia (since 1983), in Kuala Lumpur. A former university lecturer, he authored *Keys of the Kingdom*, a key-study on biblical church government, published in 1995. This work is a scholarly survey which will be of immense interest to pastors and others in Calvinistic Baptist and independent churches. Dr Poh tells us of the key Baptist personalities of the 17th century, not omitting crucial non-Baptist - John Owen. He surveys the different streams of thought among them, particularly their views of the church. He traces the emergence of the eldership among them, deals with their confessions of faith, their various controversies, and also of their experience with associations (into the 18th century).

A conclusion addresses 'unsettled issues of the Reformed Baptists', bringing the book into the era of the post-1960s, and commenting on the more widespread desire to emulate the Particular Baptists' approach to government in our time. The conclusion also calls for caution over forms of associating with other churches.

This is a highly informative and valuable treatise, clearly expressed, that should greatly help the reader's grasp of the vital points of the Particular Baptist manner of government, and where it varies from typical Congregationalism. Those who have appreciated *Keys of the Kingdom* will sense how good a book this is.

Dr. Peter Masters, Pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, UK.

A BASIC CATECHISM of the Christian Faith

This is a basic catechism (or ABC) of the Christian faith from the Reformed Baptist perspective. While there is no necessity to apologize for articulating one's faith, it is a matter of courtesy to brethren of other communions to inform them of this fact from the outset. This will also help those seeking to know the Christian faith to be aware that there are differences between Christians on some non-fundamental issues. The Reformed Baptists are known for their desire to uphold consistently the Reformation principles of 'sola scriptura' (Scripture alone) and 'semper reformanda' (always being reformed). This Catechism should be appreciated from this perspective, namely, the desire to submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture in doctrine and in practice.

It is hoped that this Catechism, with the comments, will be well-used by Reformed Baptist churches, and that it will draw other churches to closer conformity to the Bible's teaching. This Catechism should be used alongside the opened Bible – in Sunday Schools, in house-to-house outreach, in Christian homes, in student outreach, in Bible Study groups, and in follow-up with new believers. May Christ have dominion "from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Psalm 72:8). Amen.