

Song of Solomon – ch 6: v.13 – ch 8: v.4 **The Witness of Love**

NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

On our journey through The Song of Solomon we have arrived at the fifth canticle. This is perhaps the first time I have heard of, let alone taken part in, teaching being given on this somewhat interesting book of the Bible. It is indeed a book that presents quite a challenge in terms of how to tackle it. For many, it is probably a bit like a manual for a boiler, which you possess. It has a few bits that you look at when you have to, but really it is someone's else worry, if it's ever seriously needed.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for the book being a challenge is its content, which I am sure has come up during talks on the four Canticles already covered. Although this may have been discussed previously, I want to just run through it again as there is no other book of the Bible quite like it. The vivid descriptions given by the bride and the bridegroom regarding their love for one another, and how they feel about each other, are always tricky to handle, especially when in public ministry.

The fifth canticle, that I am covering in this talk, is no exception. So, the questions that naturally arise are: What is its purpose? What are we to gain when we read this particular book? And this particular passage? Should it be reserved for consideration only in books written to help with marriages? Should we only ever consider the spiritual significance of the book, trying to slide past the parts where it is clearly describing two people very much in love? I have even heard said about it that it should only ever be studied privately and only once you are married. If so, I would have to, at this point, apologise to any single person who is listening to me!

Unfortunately, I think taking such lines of thinking has led to the whole book being somewhat abused by some taking odd verses here and there for the sole purpose of justifying all sorts of things within marriage – or even outside of marriage. Often, because it is hardly looked at, the real lessons from this book are hardly seen. Alas, what a pity it is to have a part of the word of God misused, ignored, or even overlooked! After all, The Song of Solomon is there in the Bible and, as such, all of it is for the benefit of every believer; and ultimately, it points to Christ. I wonder what the Lord Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, had to say about this book? I doubt He skipped over it because He was embarrassed or thought it inappropriate! Therefore, we can learn many things from this book, be they practical or spiritual. We can also be sure that it is not just for a select group of Christians, but for all who are looking to learn of the Lord Jesus, no matter what their marital status might be.

I intend to give a brief overview of our canticle today, just ironing out what each bit is and the context of it. A look through the various speakers, and the context of their comments, should help us better understand the significance of their statements. Following that review, there are some specific lessons I would like to bring out about what this teaches us about our relationship with

Christ. Then, there are some final points that I feel are worth mentioning about the text before concluding the topic.

An Overview of the Canticle

This canticle follows the full reunion of the bride and bridegroom. In terms of the story, the Shulamite woman is now fully restored as King Solomon's bride. In the previous canticles, they have been together with no hindrances and following their reunion, we now pick up with the daughters of Jerusalem opening the scene of this canticle in the first half of the last verse of Chapter 6:

“Return, return, O Shulamite; Return, return, that we may look upon you!”

The daughters are keen to see the Shulamite again. This is the first and it seems to be the only time the term Shulamite is used. The meaning of the name “Shulamite” is peace; and it is the female equivalent of the name “Solomon”, which means the same. How fitting that peace is used following the full reunion of the bride and bridegroom! The women were keen to see her again, indeed, to look on her once more. But probably also to hear the bridegroom himself, who had been so vividly described in earlier chapters. Following their request, we have the bride's response in the second half of the last verse of Chapter 6:

“What would you see in the Shulamite – As it were, the dance of the two camps?”

There is almost a hint of surprise in this response. Why do they see anything in me? This seems to be the overriding thought of the bride. It could be suggested that the bride here is assuming that they want to see if there is a disparity between the bride and bridegroom – he a king, and she someone brought up from comparative poverty. Following this there is something of a spontaneous proclamation of delight from what the women of Jerusalem see, as recorded in the first five verses of Chapter 7:

“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 skilful workman. Your navel is a rounded goblet; it lacks no blended beverage. Your waist is a heap of wheat set about with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. 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. Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel, and the hair of your head is like purple; a king is held captive by your tresses.”

In this response the women of Jerusalem have seen that the Shulamite is now very much the bride of Solomon. Her beauty is a reflection of her position and of the affection that the bridegroom has for her. This section is very much the reason why we entitled this canticle, ‘The witness of love.’ These observers can see how much the bride now belongs to the bridegroom; and that they are indeed one. Following this we have the voice of the bridegroom again, who goes on to echo these thoughts in the next four verses:

“How fair and how pleasant you are, O love, with your delights! This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts like its clusters. 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, and the roof of your mouth like the best wine."

There is, of course, a difference here in that the bridegroom is able not only to view this in his bride, but he is able to actually enjoy it fully for he has a much more intimate knowledge of her beauty and loveliness. This particular aspect of knowledge of her is one that the daughters of Jerusalem are not able to appreciate. The bridegroom's words lead to the bride's response, and it is her words that finish off this canticle for us, from verse 9 of Chapter 7 to verse 4 of Chapter 8:

"The wine goes down smoothly for my beloved, moving gently the lips of sleepers. I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me. Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages. 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. 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. 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. 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. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases."

The majority of this section consists of words spoken to the bridegroom. We see that her understanding of her bridegrooms' affections for her have fully developed. Not only does she enjoy his affections towards her, but she now knows how much he enjoys her. She also longs to be with him and instigates the plans for them to be alone together, as well as wanting to be able to publicly show that they are one together. The final words in the last two verses of this canticle are spoken to the daughters of Jerusalem. In them, the bride is effectively saying that now she is with her beloved, her priority is to spend time with him and not to be called away to be with her friends whenever it pleases them.

Lessons on Our Relationship with Christ

As I have looked at this passage, there are three points that have jumped out at me in terms of our relationship with the Lord Jesus. It is generally accepted by Bible expositors, that the bridegroom is a picture of Christ. But the identity of the bride is not so clear cut. There is a strong case to say that she represents the Remnant of Israel rather than the Church. However, in this section the distinction makes no real difference to the lessons that can be gained from it. Because we are dealing with the restored bride and bridegroom relationship, the two are interchangeable.

I will start from the back end of our passage by looking at the bride's desire to be close to her bridegroom. She initiates the thoughts of how they can spend time together. Earlier in the book there was a reluctance in her and the bridegroom had to work to win her interest. Now we see that she requires no such coaxing, and her desire is to be close by him. The spiritual challenge for us is to ask how far are we from being like her in our relationship with the Lord Jesus? It was only when she reached this point of irresistible desire that the name of peace, Shulamite, was used of her. Is our desire to be with the Lord? A desire not only in terms of our future hope, but a day-by-day desire of taking time to be in His presence and understand more of His love for us. This is an essential point, because it is only when this is right, that the next two lessons can become properly

effective. For these other two lessons rely on a knowledge of Him that can only really be gained by time spent with Him.

The second challenge is our understanding of His view towards us. God, in His wisdom, has used an analogy of intimacy in a marriage to help us understand the nature of His thoughts towards us. We have seen that the bride worked this out in chapter 6 verse 10. There is a progression in her statements throughout the book, starting in chapter 2 verse 4,

“His banner over me [is] love.”

Then in chapter 6 verse 3,

“I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.”

But Chapter 7 verse 10 is different again, as she says:

“I am my beloved’s, and his desire is toward me.”

The chapter 6 verse is better known and, perhaps to our ears, sounds like a more unified statement of someone in love. So why is the last statement more important? It is because it reflects her better understanding of the mind of her bridegroom. Chapter 6 shows that she knew her status to him, but by chapter 7 she actually knows how he feels about her. This is our challenge – do we really spend enough time with the Lord to understand how He feels about us? Sure, we know He died on the cross for us... but do we really know it? I heard a statement made the other day that is pertinent to this. When we see the Lord face to face, the only thing we will be embarrassed about is that we had no idea just how much He loves us. I know it is unlikely that embarrassment will be a feature of our lives in heaven, but the point is a good one. Our determination here and now should be to lessen the chasm that exists between our knowledge of His love for us and what we actually experience of it.

Perhaps some may question as to why we should bother? But it leads to the final lesson that jumped out at me. It is the fact that we are a witness to the beauties of Christ. The comments about the woman from the daughters of Jerusalem seem almost spontaneous. What is interesting is that from this it could be inferred that this made them want to know the bridegroom more. She reflected him. She had already told them how great he was, and then she was able to show it - another challenge for us! How much do we reflect the Lord in our lives? Do our friends see anything of the beauty of Christ in us? Alas, reflecting Christ in the world in which we live is likely to be met with hostility and rejection. But, to those who see us day by day, or know us better, can they see Christ through our walk, our behaviour, and what we say? Do they, through us, want to know Christ more? This can only be achieved by us knowing Him and that can only be done by us wanting to be with Him.

Other Lessons

I remember listening to someone speaking about marriage and his whole talk was around the Fruit of the Spirit. His point was that someone who is living life in which the Fruit of the Spirit is evident, will do ok in a marriage. But someone who has all the best advice and ideas for a good marriage, but who is failing to live a life that shows the Fruit of the Spirit, will have a bad marriage no matter how many good ideas they may get. I believe that is the case here. If this talk were to stop here, you have already had the more valuable of the points I raise. But there are still some more lessons that I would like to bring out before my time runs out.

Naturally this passage provides us with an excellent example of marriage. Earlier chapters may have raised certain issues and problems that may occur, but this passage is one where the couple

are fully in tune with one another. This is the standard to which all marriages ought to attain. We need not worry about whether we live up to the rather ostentatious descriptions, it is the mindset that is important. I would proffer the following points:

- Couples must have an exclusive mutual desire for each other's company. When I consider relationships that have broken down, there is more often than not someone else in the picture. In such cases the breakdown occurs because that someone erodes the relationship, and eventually it breaks. The Bible describes marriage as a man and a woman becoming one flesh. This goes beyond a mere physical act, to include that mutual desire to be a unified entity.
- They both reflect the other to those outside their relationship. The question that this should raise is whether that is apparent to other people? The Daughters of Jerusalem knew that their friend was the bride of Solomon just by looking at her and by how she spoke of him. Can people say that of our marriages? A successful Christian marriage must have it that the most important person to each is their spouse. Where friends or relatives carry more importance, we see the problem mentioned in my first point.
- Solomon and his Shulamite both understood how each felt about the other. I think this is a very important issue in our society today. We live in a time when the focus is always on 'me' in terms of what I feel, what is best for me, and so on. I do wonder if a better knowledge of your spouse's feelings toward you would influence more of the decisions you make. Perhaps that would make adultery be less likely, for instance, if the knowledge of your spouse's love were more at the forefront of your mind. Some may argue that sometimes the other spouse does not have the right thoughts and thus it leads to these things. My point here is to a move away from a me-centred or a me-focussed relationship to one which understands the mindset of one's spouse.

There is then the question as to whether this canticle is of any use to Christians who are not married. I mentioned earlier that I had once been told that this whole book should be reserved for people who are married. But I am not convinced by that argument. It would seem odd for the word of God to contain something that requires a certain life status (other than being a believer) to be of use. We must consider the primary reason for this book. It is often considered a helpful reference point for what is allowed in terms of sexual intercourse within a Christian marriage. There is some truth in that. But the primary function is for us to learn something about God and about the Lord Jesus. We know that all Scripture points to Him. In a way, The Song of Solomon is therefore a parable for us – an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And this Canticle then is most helpful because the ideal state has been reached and hence it teaches every believer how we should think of our Lord Jesus. The main lessons that I have pointed out are not merely lifestyle choices, the equivalent of choosing an ice cream flavour, for example, rather they are regarding our desires for, and emotions towards, God.

So, we see from all this that all believers can gain from this book because it is something each can all relate to. For those who are married we will acquire an additional understanding but also a realisation of our great privilege and responsibility. Married couples in the Church are real living examples of its greater spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus. Christian marriage should provide tangible evidence of what Christ and His bride's relationship is like to those who may struggle to appreciate it. A challenging thought to those of us who are married that this is one of the responsibilities we have!

But for single people the lessons are similarly practical. Throughout the book, there are witnesses to parts of what is going on between the bride and the bridegroom. I find the daughters of Jerusalem's descriptions of the bride in this canticle most remarkable. Ultimately, we have to consider the thoughts that are behind their statements, they had a desire to know what the

bridegroom was like. Sometimes there can be a tendency to sadness by the unmarried due to their longing for something they have not been granted from the Lord. The Song of Solomon suggests two things. First, and despite the discomfort it may cause, it is important for single people to be around Christian marriages because of what they represent; and also what they can teach about the relationship we have to Christ. But the second is more important, because it shows us that we all can have something better, that is, an individual relationship with Christ and know His love (see Ephesians 3:17-19). There will be no marriages in heaven except the one between Christ and His Church, and we can, and should be, in the enjoyment of that now.

My final point is regarding the physical descriptions in this canticle. I have read, and sometimes with concern, how this book has been taken to justify this, that, and the other within a marriage. I have no desire to go into any detail, but I will say that verses 7 to 10 of chapter 7 describe something of the physical union between the two. This aspect of marriage is natural and entirely expected; and clearly it is presented as a good and healthy thing. But it does seem to strike me from today's passage, that their fullest joy is reached because their relationship is at its closest, most mutual in understanding and harmony, in terms of their eagerness to please the other. So much of the misguided use of such passages emphasise the physical only, looking to justify a particular desire someone may have. But this misses the point which the whole book leads to, that is, when the actual relationship is healthy, this is where the most physical fulfilment is achieved.

Conclusion

I trust my thoughts on this canticle have been useful. As I said at the beginning, it is not a common topic, but it has been given to us for our benefit and greater understanding of God, so we should not neglect it. But in all that I have said today, the best outcome would be for us all to be brought closer to Christ in our walk here for Him.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on The Song of Solomon – Canticles, The Witness of Love, talk number T1262.

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