

James Philip Bible Readings

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SONG of SOLOMON

- 1) 1:1
- 2) 1:1
- 3) 1:1
- 4) 1:1
- 5) 1:1-7
- 6) 1:1-7
- 7) 1:1-7
- 8) 1:8-11
- 9) 1:12-17
- 10) 2:1-7
- 11) 2:1-7
- 12) 2:8-17
- 13) 2:8-17
- 14) 2:8-17
- 15) 2:8-17
- 16) 3:1-5
- 17) 3:6-11
- 18) 3:6-11
- 19) 3:6-11
- 20) 4:1-6
- 21) 4:7-12
- 22) 4:7-12
- 23) 4:13-5:1
- 24) 5:2-8
- 25) 5:2-8
- 26) 5:9-16
- 27) 6:1-3
- 28) 6:1-3
- 29) 6:4-13
- 30) 6:4-13
- 31) 7:1-9
- 32) 7:10-8:4
- 33) 8:5-7
- 34) 8:8-14
- 35) 8:8-14

SONG of SOLOMON

I) I:I

No one who attempts a serious study of the Song of Solomon (or 'Song of Songs', as its opening verse calls it) with the help of suitable commentaries can fail to become aware that interpretations of it, both as to its form and its substance, have varied widely down the history of the Church. Some interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, have treated it as allegory, others as drama, others still as a type of the love of Christ for His Church, and still others as a song which celebrates the dignity and purity of human love. E.J. Young, in his 'Introduction to the Old Testament' has some very helpful things to say, and it will be useful to consider the observations that he makes about this 'literal interpretation' of the Song. 'It is didactic and moral in its purpose. It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-given standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is. This, however, does not exhaust the purpose of the book. Not only does it speak of the purity of human love, but, by its very inclusion in the Canon, it reminds us of a love that is purer than our own. By its very presence in the Canon (for, in the last analysis, it is God who has put these books in the Canon, not man), it reminds us that God, who has placed love in the human heart, is Himself pure. In my opinion, we are not warranted in saying that the book is a type of Christ. That does not appear to be exegetically tenable. But the book does turn one's eyes to Christ. This is certainly shown by the history of interpretation in the Christian Church. The book may be regarded as a tacit parable. The eye of faith - as it beholds this picture of exalted human love - will be reminded of the one Love that is above all earthly and human affections - even the love of the Son of God for lost humanity.'

2) I:I

Here is a further comment from E.J. Young: 'If the Song is primarily a love song, and not an allegory, what reason is there for its inclusion in the sacred Canon? In answer we would say that God has placed this Song in the Canon in order to teach us the purity and sanctity of that estate of marriage which He Himself has established. When we read the Song of Solomon, our hearts will be purer, and we shall realize all the more the heinousness of that temptation which would lead to unfaithfulness among those who are married. Since the purpose of the book is not mere entertainment, but is ethical and didactic, we may understand why God has given it to us. For even the faithful servant of the Lord is tempted to break the seventh commandment. In the polygamous ancient world and in the sophisticated modern world, unfaithfulness may easily be regarded as something light and trivial. But when we Occidentals turn from the calloused sinfulness of our daily world and carefully read the Oriental imagery of this portion of Holy Scripture we are blessed, and we are helped. So long as there is impurity in the world, we need and need badly the Song of Solomon.'

The New Bible Dictionary speaks in similar vein when it says that the Song 'serves as an object-lesson illustrating the rich wonders of human love. As biblical teaching concerning physical love has been emancipated from sub-Christian asceticism, the beauty and purity of marital love have been more fully appreciated. The Song, though expressed in language too bold for Western taste, provides a wholesome balance between the extremes of sexual excess or perversion and an ascetic denial of the essential goodness of physical love'.

3) I:I

As to the actual substance of the Song and its message, two different constructions have been placed upon it. One is to maintain that there are two principal characters in the Song, Solomon and the Shulamite. The other is that there are three: the Shulamite, her shepherd lover and Solomon the king. In this latter interpretation the Shulamite is represented as remaining faithful to her shepherd lover and husband despite the attempts of Solomon the king to beguile her, and resisting all his pressures to win her affections for himself. This has been held by scholars of note and has undoubtedly points to commend it, particularly if Solomon is seen as a type of the world and its seductions, and the shepherd a type of Christ, with the Shulamite representing the faithful soul persevering in faith, love and obedience under the pressure of temptation. It has to be said, however, that such a view has never commanded general acceptance, and the traditional view, which holds that there are two principal characters, Solomon and the Shulamite, has been the main line of interpretation, and is the one which we shall follow in these Notes.

4) I:I

The commentator Delitzsch gives a reasonable and practical analysis of the Song which will be helpful for us to follow in our study of it. He divides it up into the following six 'Acts':

- (i) The mutual affection of the lovers, 1:2-2:7 with the conclusion, 'I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem'.
- (ii) The mutual seeking and finding of the lovers, 2:8-3:5 with the conclusion, 'I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem'.
- (iii) The fetching of the bride, and the marriage, 3:6-5:1 beginning with, 'Who is this...?' and ending with, 'Drink and be drunken, beloved'.
- (iv) Love scorned, but won again, 5:2-6:9
- (v) The attractively fair but humble princess, 6:10-8:4 beginning with, 'Who is this...?' and ending with, 'I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem'.
- (vi) The ratification of the covenant of love, 8:5-14 beginning with 'Who is this...?'

It will help our study considerably to read through the entire Song, following the above outline, before turning to a detailed examination of the various sections, to which we shall turn in tomorrow's Note and in those that follow.

5) 1:1-7

This book is well named 'The Song of Songs', for as Hudson Taylor says in 'Union and Communion', 'There is no song like it. Read aright, it brings gladness to the heart, which is as far beyond the joy of earthly things as heaven is higher than the earth. It has been well said that this is a song which grace alone can teach, and experience alone can learn. Our Saviour, speaking of the union of the branch with the vine, adds, 'These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full' (John 15:11). And the beloved disciple, writing of Him who 'was from the beginning', who 'was with the Father, and was manifested unto us', in order that we might share the fellowship which He enjoyed, also says, 'These things write we unto you, that your joy might be full'. Union with Christ, and abiding in Christ, what do they not secure? Peace, perfect peace; rest, constant rest; answers to all our prayers; victory over all our foes; pure, holy living; ever-increasing fruitfulness. All, all of these are the glad outcome of abiding in Christ. To deepen this union, to make more constant this abiding, is the practical use of this precious Book.'

6) 1:1-7

It is clearly the bride, the Shulamite, who is speaking in these verses, as she gives expression to the desire and longing of her heart for her beloved. The language is rich and beautiful, and full use should be made of all available alternative translations to catch every nuance of meaning in the words used. All love poetry has a beauty of its own, and this is no exception, for this is the expression of human love at its best, but it gains immeasurably in significance in the illustration it gives of the love relationship between the soul and its Saviour. We must be careful here, however, lest the human and Divine become wrongly mixed and confused. Our love for the Saviour is not erotic love - but erotic, human love, is an illustration of the Divine (we also need to be careful in our understanding of the word 'erotic'. As so often used today it carries a dubious and unpleasant meaning, but in its classical sense it refers to human love at its best, and it is in this sense we use it here. The Greek word 'Eros' means love or desire, in contrast to 'Agape', divine love. C.S. Lewis's fine book 'The Four Loves' has much to say on these themes which should be compulsory reading for all Christian people). There is another 'caveat' also to be given here: we must beware of the merely sentimental in the expressions we use about our relationship with Christ. Words such as 'precious' and 'lovely' can become so easily debased and devalued. And to those who are really in love with the Saviour their use is seemly, but are more appropriate within the secret intimacies of fellowship and alone with Him, than in public, when they can sound merely fulsome and more than a little a display of self-regard and an implied claim to a deeper spirituality that is not matched in the life.

7) 1:1-7

Lines from well-known hymns readily come to mind as we read 2-4: 'There is no love like the love of Jesus' - 'Jesus, O how sweet the Name!' - 'How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds' - 'The love of Jesus, what it is, none but His loved ones know'. The phrase 'Thy name is as an ointment poured forth' is surely a very apposite description in this regard, and what follows this in 4, 'draw me, we will run after thee' is as true of the divine love as of human: just as the thought of one's beloved awakens and intensifies the desire to be as near to him as possible, so also does the thought of the Lover of our souls. Not only so, such desire awakens an instant response: 'The king hath brought me into his chambers.' Well might the believer be glad and rejoice at the sheer wonder of the divine love. This wonder is more than hinted at in 5, 6, in the Shulamite's awareness of her unworthiness ('I am black' occurs twice in these verses). The wonder of the divine condescension is that God, the Holy One, should seek the love and fellowship of our poor hearts. It passes all human comprehension that this should be so, and still more that He should set such high store upon our poor faltering and fitful love for Him - 'Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought' - and say of us 'Because he hath set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high because he hath known My Name' (Psalm 91:14). C.S. Lewis has a fine expression of this in his novel 'That Hideous Strength': 'This is the courtesy of Deep Heaven: that when you mean well, He always takes you to have meant better than you knew. It will not be enough for always. He is very jealous. He will have you for no one but Himself in the end. But for tonight, it is enough':

That Thou shouldst love a worm like me,
And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But music to my heart.

8) 1:8-11

The thought in 8 follows upon what was said in 7, where the Shulamite expresses her desire to be with her beloved, and is given direction towards him in 8. The association of ideas is a fruitful one in the illustration it gives of spiritual life. One with the good Shepherd, her heart goes out instinctively to the feeding of the flock. Her desire is to be with Him, not only in communion but also in service, to be where He is – service with Him as well as for Him. As someone has put it 'It prompts us to enquire and seek, without waiting for commands, where we may labour with this gracious King as a shepherd, and enjoy his society'. It is an incentive for service, whether at home or abroad, for where love for Him is, there will be the desire to share His burden for the world. Another has said, 'Those who would meet frequently with Christ must seek Him in the well-worn paths of faith, obedience, service and worship'. In 9, the Lover's appreciation of His beloved is expressed. When we are in love with Him, and dedicated to His service, and serve Him unstintedly with all our hearts, we are immensely attractive to Him - and indeed to the world. The imagery of the jewels and ornaments in 10, 11 indicates that the believer is 'of great price' to Him, and speaks of the adornment of grace. We sometimes use the phrase 'a lovely Christian' to describe a believer -lovely to us, but also to Him. One thinks of Paul's words in Ephesians 5:27 in this regard, when he speaks of Christ presenting to Himself 'a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing'. No less than this is His desire and intention for those He claims as His own!

9) 1:12-17

These verses, presenting a moving picture of the intimacies of human love, should not and need not embarrass either here or later in the book and, rightly and chastely read, will not. The spikenard in 12 indicates that the Shulamite is a sweet savour to her beloved, as indeed he is to her (13). The reference to myrrh may have a symbolic significance, and prompts the reflection that the wise men from the east brought myrrh among their gifts to the infant Saviour, foreshadowing His Cross. As the carol says, 'Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom'. We may learn from this that in the spiritual life to love Jesus in the way He wants us to means not merely that we should have tender and affectionate feelings toward Him, it is to love His Cross, and be prepared to take it up in discipleship. The real test of our love to Christ is not our avowal of faithfulness or our protestations of devotion, but our conformity to His death in our own personal experience, our dying to sin. Crucifixion, not testimony, is the criterion. If we do not love Jesus enough to share His death, we do not love Him at all, as He wants us to love Him. Spurgeon once said, 'There is a zeal - and, we may add, a love - which is rather the warmth of nature than the holy fire of grace'. The real reason why Simon Peter was so grieved when the risen Lord kept repeating His question 'Lovest thou Me?' was that he remembered the death he had refused to die. And what the Lord may be asking us in these verses is: 'is 'love' the right word to describe what you feel for Me?'

10) 2:1-7

The intimacies of human love begun in 1:12ff continues into these verses, in the sweet and tender dialogue that lovers reserve for themselves. It is the Shulamite, however, not her beloved, who is the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys; nor is she arrogating to herself any prideful title, and commentators suggest that she is expressing a deprecating modesty rather than anything else in the way she describes herself. She is thinking humbly of herself, as but a meadow-flower of Sharon. As Delitzsch puts it, 'Before the greatness of the king she appears diminutive, and before the comeliness of the king her own beauty disappears....' She is a tender flower that has grown up in the quietness of rural life. But her beloved takes up her comparison of herself, and gives it a notable turn in 2: humble though she may feel herself to be, she stands out for him as a lily among thorns. She takes up the dialogue in 3, 4, in words as striking and felicitous on the human level as on the spiritual and divine. Such words should be savoured to the full, they are indeed a source of fruitful and blessed meditation. What lovelier or more satisfying description of our fellowship with Christ could we have than these marvellous words? Not that they are without challenge also, however, for they disturbingly ask us how much delight we find in His presence. It is recorded of John Welsh, one of the Scottish Reformers, that on one occasion he was 'so filled with the sense of the enjoyment of God' that he prayed 'Lord, hold Thine hand; it is enough: Thy servant is but a clay vessel and can hold no more'. Is there anything in our Christian experience that answers to this, in however small a measure?

11) 2:1-7

One wonders whether the kind of experience described at the end of yesterday's Note is indicated in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12, which describe 'how he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it was not lawful for a man to utter'. It was certainly the Shulamite's overwhelming experience of her beloved that caused her to utter the call for help in 5. Her beloved is swift to answer her cry, and takes her in his arms (6). Delitzsch says, 'If this sympathetic, gentle embracing exercises a soothing influence on her, overcome by the power of her emotions; so love mutually kindled now celebrates the first hour of delighted enjoyment, and the happy Shulamite calls to those who are witnesses of her joy' in the words of 7. Another commentator says, 'the banner of love is over her, and the arms of love are around her. She has attained the longing of her heart expressed in the canticle. She has reached the assurance and enjoyment of the Bridegroom's love. How happy when the saint finds every longing of the renewed nature satisfied by the love of Christ.' And he adds: 'With the banner of love over her and the arms of love around her, the bride dreads the slightest intrusion that would mar the enjoyment of love. And well may the saint, in the enjoyment of the love of Christ, dread any intrusion that would break up or mar that intimacy of love that may exist between him and his Saviour'.

12) 2:8-17

These verses contain (11ff) one of the loveliest utterances in the entire Old Testament. The sheer beauty of the poetry is exquisite on the merely natural level, quite apart from any spiritual connotations (which, of course, are very real), and it is a benediction to savour such loveliness. A new 'song' begins at 8, speaking of the coming of the Bridegroom or Beloved, to his loved one, apparently after a time of absence (or even withdrawal, perhaps?). One thinks readily of the words of the hymn, 'Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; It is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings. When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again a season of clear shining, to cheer it after rain.' The picture of the 'leaping lover' is a very impressive and indeed attractive one, and it is not difficult to interpret the impression given here in spiritual terms of the Lover of souls in His irresistible advance (cf Francis Thompson's poem, 'The Hound of Heaven'), overcoming all obstacles to reach us. The Gilcomston Record note on 8, 9 contains this graphic and striking comment: 'As to the spiritual lesson here. A Lover is serenading His love beneath her window, as in Shakespeare or a musical play. The Lover is Jesus, the loved one is you. What more do you want to know? You do not really suppose she doesn't know what to do! Oh yes, she may be coy, and hide behind the casement and peep, not showing herself, but it is because she wants to prolong the suspense, and hear these precious burning words of loving entreaty repeated and multiplied. Who wouldn't? But it is love, not indifference, which makes her do that, isn't it? She is coming out to Him at last. Or, is she? Are you?'

13) 2:8-17

Perhaps it may be reading too much into 9 - by way of spiritual interpretation - to suggest that the sight of the Beloved 'through the lattice' presents the somewhat 'refracted' view that we have of Christ due to our sin and mortality. It is true that it is only in glory that we shall see Him as He is, and that meantime we 'see through a glass darkly'. The words in 10, in the invitation they give, surely and readily remind us of Wesley's glorious words in the hymn 'And can it be....'

'I rose, went forth, and followed Thee'. And what music there is in 11 and 12! What a picture of spiritual awakening and renewal they give, and how readily Hosea's words, immortalised in Paraphrase 30 come to mind:

His coming like the morn shall be
Like morning songs his voice....
So shall His Presence bless our souls
And spread a joyful light.

Every true spiritual revival is like this: the dark and bleak winter of barrenness and apathy gives way to the coming of spring with its life and vitality. C.S. Lewis portrays it very aptly in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', in the great thaw that came when the White Witch was defeated and all her wiles set at naught. Hudson Taylor, in his fine little book, 'Union and Communion' puts it thus: 'All nature is responsive to the return of the summer, wilt thou, My bride, be irresponsive to My love?'

14) 2:8-17

In 14 and 15 there seems almost to be a hiatus in the response the Shulamite makes to the Beloved's appeal, for whatever reason, for she seems to be hiding from Him. In the spiritual life this is often true of the believer, hiding with a sense of unworthiness because of an inability to believe the love He has for us. How slow we often are to respond to His loving overtures, and how fearful we are to let ourselves go out to Him. In an address given some time ago on the biblical doctrine of Adoption, we spoke of the pastoral and psychological implications in this great theme, and said, 'With so many, there seems to be a built-in inability to believe the position God has given them in the adoption of sons, and therefore just to believe they are really children of a loving Father, and that God really looks on them with a fatherly care and tenderness and love. Instead, they have a basic, deeply entrenched conception of God as a rather stern, forbidding, almost tyrant-like figure, standing over them threateningly, ready to criticise or condemn their slightest deviation from the standards He has set them - or, rather, the standards they have set themselves I have wondered sometimes whether Jesus was drawing attention to this in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), in the words that the 'one-talent' servant spoke, 'Lord, I knew Thee that thou art an hard man...and I was afraid...'. But there is no evidence in the parable that his lord was hard. The problem with this servant was that he had a totally wrong conception of the Lord he was serving. And this wrong attitude paralysed him as to any service he might have rendered, and the paralysis lasted for a lifetime. This is the measure of how serious the issue can be for Christian life.' And how little need there is - and how little evidence - to think of our Lord in this distorted way! How greatly we need just to believe the love He has for us, and what a liberation it is when we do!

15) 2:8-17

What is said in 15 must surely be interpreted as a gentle warning from the Beloved to take heed to the things that mar and disrupt fellowship with Him. This is certainly not a question of a distorted view of Him, as described in yesterday's Note, but the intrusion of something that harms and destroys the intimacy of fellowship. As Hudson Taylor puts it, 'Strong as is His love, and His desire for His bride, He can come no further. Where she now is He can never come.... The enemies may be small (the little foxes that spoil the vines), but the mischief done great. A little spray of blossom, so tiny as to be scarcely perceived, is easily spoiled, but thereby the fruitfulness of a whole branch may be forever destroyed. And how numerous the little foxes are! Little compromises with the world; disobedience to the still small voice in little things; little indulgences of the flesh to the neglect of duty; little strokes of policy; doing evil in little things that good may come; and the beauty and the fruitfulness of the vine are sacrificed!' Some commentators interpret 16 and 17 as a somewhat careless reaction on the part of the Bride - possibly content to ignore the warning in 18 about the 'little foxes', and that the Bridegroom withdraws, grieved away by her lack of ardour for him, and that this explains her sense of the loss of his presence described in 3:1ff. This is certainly a possible interpretation, and true to spiritual experience. Others, however, would question whether the language of 16 and 17 warrant such an interpretation, and take the verses as describing a brief visit paid by the Beloved to his bride, and that the sense of loss expressed in 3:1ff (to which we come in tomorrow's Note) is due to the briefness of this visit; and this may seem to be the more likely interpretation.

16) 3:1-5

The Shulamite's anxious and indeed anguished search and longing for her absent lover certainly reflect, in spiritual terms, the earnestness of the soul in seeking its absent Lord, following as it does the prayer expressed in 2:17, and again prompts the query as to what had come into the relationship between them, to drive Him away. It is true that sin can grieve Him away, and this may put some credence on the interpretation mentioned in yesterday's Note about carelessness in allowing 'the little foxes' to come in and spoil the vines. But there are other possibilities of interpretation: times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord are cyclic - they come and go at His sovereign behest, and it need not necessarily be assumed that it is sin that drives Him away. The Psalmist's words in Psalm 63 are a case in point, where precisely this longing is expressed, without any evidence that sin had marred his fellowship with the Lord (and even the language in the Psalm v6 echoes that in 1 here). Furthermore, it is also true that sometimes the sense and comfort of the Lord's presence is withheld, for His own wise purposes in us. As the hymn says,

When we in darkness walk
Nor feel the heavenly flame
Then is the time to trust our Lord
And rest upon His name.

The 19th century American divine, George Burrowes puts it thus: 'Withdrawals are for a wise end'. The 'watchman' in 3 may be said to represent those who guard, and instruct, the perplexed; and the Lord is generally found near them (4) - a point of some importance, for those of us who tend to be somewhat impatient of their concern for our wellbeing and our instruction. The final outcome of this search, brought about for whatever reason, is wholly blessed: when found, 'I held him and would not let him go'. Happy is the soul who comes to this glad state! The section closes with a repeat of the words of 2:7.

17) 3:6-11

This is a rather wonderful passage, describing the procession of King Solomon in splendour and majesty and royal magnificence. One readily recalls our Lord's reference to Solomon 'in all his glory' in reading these words, and although He was contrasting this with the beauty of the lilies of the field, it is nevertheless in its own worldly way a very splendid display. Whether or not there is a link between these verses and the previous ones (3:1-5), describing the finding of the Beloved, and the determination not to let him go - it may well be that in finding him the Shulamite is now overwhelmed by the discovery of his royal magnificence - there is certainly a connection between the two parts of the chapter in the spiritual 'type' that is given here. For it is truly when we cling to the Lover of our souls in the way described in 4 that we begin to discover the real glories of His Person. Burrowes writes finely of this in his commentary: 'Our finding Him is the preparatory step to finding Him in the splendour of His throne at the right hand of God. She who was allured by the motives in 2:10-13 to arise and come away, having embraced the invitation, finds on coming out of the walls of her dungeon, the royal palanquin waiting for her, under escort of a powerful guard; and the angels who desire to look into these things, view with admiration this imposing procession, as coming up from the wilderness lying between this world and heaven, the cortege is overshadowed by the reality represented by the pillar of cloud and fire, by the cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night; while around is ascending the perfume of those odoriferous graces which are fed by the oil of gladness, and kindled by the flame of the Holy Spirit. In this manner, is the soul of him who is so humble in his own eyes, and neglected by the world, carried by the angels to Jesus' bosom (Luke 16:22). In this progress to glory, the soul is overshadowed by the glorious covering or protection of the divine nature of Christ, our righteousness, like pillars of smoke or cloud, breaking the force of the rays of divine justice, and surrounded by the incense of prayer and all other graces, more pleasing than the perfumes burned in golden censers around the eastern bride.'

18) 3:6-11

There is so much of beauty in the writings of older commentators on the 'typology' represented in these verses that we may allow ourselves the indulgence of recording a further comment, this time from Hudson Taylor's 'Union and Communion': 'In these verses the bride is not mentioned; she is eclipsed in the grandeur and the state of her royal Bridegroom; nevertheless she is both enjoying and sharing it. The very air is perfumed by the smoke of the incense that ascends pillar-like to the clouds; and all that safeguards the position of the Bridegroom Himself, and shows forth His dignity, safeguards the accompanying bride, the sharer of His glory. The car of state in which they sit is built of fragrant cedar from Lebanon, and the finest of the gold and silver have been lavished on its construction. The fragrant wood typifies the beauty of sanctified humanity, while the gold reminds us of the divine glory of our Lord, and the silver the purity and preciousness of His redeemed and peerless Church. The imperial purple with which it is lined tells us of the Gentiles - the daughter of Tyre has been there with her gift; while the love-gifts of the daughters of Jerusalem accord with the prophecy, 'Even the rich among the people shall entreat Thy favour'. These are the things that attract the attention of the daughters of Jerusalem, but the bride is occupied with the King Himself, and she exclaims, 'Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon...' The crowned King is everything to her, and she would have to be so to the daughters of Zion likewise. She dwells with delight on the gladness of His heart in the day of His espousals, for now she is not occupied with Him for her own sake, but rejoices in His joy in finding in her His satisfaction.' Well, that is some thought, is it not?

19) 3:6-11

The more one thinks, however, of these verses, and the spiritual interpretation placed on them, the more inclined we are to suggest that the specific details of interpretation may not be so important as the general impression of the glory and splendour of what on the natural level are the nuptial celebrations for the marriage of the King to his bride. It is of course inevitable that from the Christian point of view we should think of the consummation spoken of in the New Testament in 'the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love', but the impression of the greatness and majesty of the King is surely similar to the impression one receives when reading the sublime description of the exalted and glorified Lord given in the vision the Apostle John received on the isle of Patmos. There, it is not the details that are important, so much as the overwhelming sense of the greatness and majesty of Christ that comes over to us when reading it. And surely there is a place, in reading such passages, for dispensing with the need to understand the minutiae of what is said, and simply to bow low in abject worship and adoration before the glory that is revealed to us? Is it not enough to echo the prophet Isaiah's words (Isaiah 28:9): 'And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation' - as if to say, as expectancy turns to realisation, 'We knew that this would be wonderful, but this is unspeakable, far beyond our thinking and expectation'. As the old hymn puts it:

'O the soul-thrilling rapture when I view His blessed face
And the lustre of His kindly beaming eye,
How my full heart will praise Him for the mercy, love and grace
That prepares me for a mansion in the sky.'

20) 4:1-6

The Bridegroom now speaks, and gives expression to the pleasure he finds in his bride. On the human level his delight in her beauty and the hyperbole in his description of her are fully understandable to us, and surely bring a smile to the face - as we say, all the world loves a lover! But it is the spiritual lesson that this teaches us that is of supreme importance, for it reminds us that the Lord takes pleasure in His people. This, for the believer, is a constant source of wonder and joy - that the holy Lord should seek the fellowship and love of our poor hearts that He should see anything in us to love and delight in! Such knowledge is too high for us, and it must surely fill our souls with awe. The words of the hymn serve to underline this:

Yet I may love Thee too, O Lord
Almighty as Thou art,
For Thou hast stooped to ask of me
The love of my poor heart.

For Him to speak like this of us, to take such pleasure and delight in us - this is surely the greatest of mysteries, and one that will baffle our understanding all our days! Nor must we say, 'Surely it cannot be quite like this?', for why otherwise would the Church be called the bride of Christ? Burrowes in his commentary rightly, we feel, underlines the fact that it is the general beauty of the bride that is conveyed, and it does not help that general picture to concentrate on one particular part any more than it helps artistic appreciation to preoccupy oneself with one particular point in a work of art - it is what the whole conveys that is important and significant. And so it is here. It is more than enough for us to know that the Bridegroom of our soul has such thoughts as these of us. What else could matter, if this be true?

21) 4:7-12

In 6, it is the Shulamite that speaks, in response to the Bridegroom's words in 1-5. Her desire is to withdraw, for very modesty - perhaps overcome, and unable to take in such love. But her modesty makes her still more lovely to the king (7). The invitation given to her in 8 follows naturally and inevitably, and it is an invitation to fellowship. Since she is invited to company with him, it would not much matter where they went, but in fact the place names mentioned are beauty spots, and this is the measure of his provision for her pleasure. But there is another note here also. As one commentator has put it, 'Earth has no fairer scenes than Lebanon and Amanah, Shenir and Hermon; but hidden dangers lurk beneath earth's brightest prospects. The lion has his den, and the leopards roam, in the excellent places of the earth. The well watered plain of Jordan may appear fair as the garden of the Lord, but Sodom and Gomorrah are there.' There are different possibilities of interpretation of the places of danger: the idea may be that even though hazards are inevitable, she is safe with him rather than in the mountains of spices or, what may be intended is that she is rescued by him from the dangerous places. Or, climbing the heights with him, she is therefore safe, amid all dangers, and oh, the view! And, after all, as Hudson Taylor puts it, what are lions' dens when the Lion of the tribe of Judah is with us; or mountains of leopards, when He is at our side!

22) 4:7-12

The outpourings of love by the bridegroom in these verses further illustrate the sheer wonder that the Lover of our souls should take pleasure and delight in such as we are. And, just as on the level of human love no extravagance seems too great, so it is also with the prodigality of the divine love. And one is prompted to reflect that when passing through dangers and hazards and difficult and trying times in Christian experience, the sweetness and the preciousness of such intimate fellowship with our Lord more than offsets the pain and hurt that come to us in dark days. The 'garden enclosed' in 12 is a significant metaphor, Delitzsch comments, 'To a locked garden and spring no one has access but the rightful owner, and a sealed fountain is shut against all impurity. Thus she is closed against the world, and inaccessible to all that would disturb her pure heart, or desecrate her pure person. All the more beautiful and the greater is the fulness of the flowers and fruits which bloom and ripen in the garden of this life, closed against the world and its lust.' The spiritual application of all this must surely be clear. Another commentator has put it thus: 'As we listen to the desire of the Lord for His own as expressed in the great prayer of John 17, we begin to realise the deep spiritual meaning of 'a garden enclosed'. If 'a garden enclosed' involves separation from the surrounding desert, then, in like manner, we hear the Lord telling the Father that His own are not of the world, even as He is not of the world. If 'a garden enclosed' has in view the preservation of the tender plants, then, in accord with this thought we hear the Lord praying that His people may be kept from evil. And lastly, if 'a garden enclosed' implies a spot set apart for the owner's enjoyment, then, in harmony with this, we hear the Lord's desire that His people might be sanctified.'

23) 4:13-5:1

The thought of the previous verses is continued in these before us today, and the luxuriance of the garden is dwelt upon, with all its plants and flowers and fragrances. The imagery is very rich, and the spiritual application is not far to seek. Again, the emphasis is on the pleasure and delight the bridegroom takes in its loveliness, and figure is piled upon figure to express that delight. We should not be hesitant or reluctant to press the spiritual imagery to the full, for if our Lord does really take this kind of pleasure in His people - as He surely does - then we do Him despite by being slow to make glad response to such love. Perhaps this is one of the things the Apostle John means when he exhorts us to 'believe the love God has for us'. The reference in 15 to the fountain and 'well of living waters' remind us strongly of our Lord's own words, 'The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life' (John 4:14), and similar words in John 7:38, 39, 'He that believeth in Me, out of his inner most being shall flow rivers of living water. This spoke He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive'. Such a fountain was the life of the garden here, and it is so also with the soul of the believer: the Holy Spirit is the hidden Spring within us, producing the fruits and fragrance of holiness which alone can delight the heart of Him who comes to indwell us and enjoy us. That same Spirit is spoken of in the next metaphor in 16, in the winds that blow upon the garden to enable the spices and fragrances to flow out for the delight of our heavenly Bridegroom. Is this one of the things that the Apostle Peter meant when he spoke of the trial of our faith being more precious than gold? And is this not a wonderful way to look at the hurts that come to us in our Christian experience? 'Out of the presses of pain cometh the soul's best wine' - for Him!

24) 5:2-8

These verses begin a new section whose theme is broken communion, followed by glad restoration. The Shulamite hears the voice of her beloved, as he knocks at her door seeking admittance, but her response is tardy, almost reluctant (3), for whatever reason, and - rebuffed and hurt by her attitude, he is grieved away, so that when she finally consents to open the door, she finds him gone, and she is mortified and desolate (6) in her sense of loss. There are two lessons here in this, one on the natural, human level, and one on the spiritual. As to the human level, sadly enough, such alienation is by no means unknown within a marriage, even a Christian marriage. What does one do when this happens? The danger is to assume that when 'feelings' of love disappear or wane, love has gone. But a serious misunderstanding is at work in this. 'Being in love' is a feeling - deep and genuine and often overpowering, but still a feeling, and like all other feelings, it can wax and wane for all sorts of reasons, some good, some bad. But it is a grave mistake to suppose that a change of feeling calls for a change of partner. What is important in a marriage relationship is not the feelings of love that we may have, but the strength of the vow we made. We promised - not to feel love, but to be faithful. No one can promise to go on feeling in a certain way; promises are about things we can do; and the promise we make in marriage is to be true and faithful to our partner, whatever we may feel. It is not what we feel like, but what we promised, when we married, that is important. The Shulamite did not feel like putting herself about to welcome her lover, and she let feelings override her commitment to him, a mistake that cost her dear, as we see from the verses that follow.

25) 5:2-8

On the spiritual level, as distinct from the natural and human, there is a lesson here about the danger of allowing moods to control spiritual life - praying when we feel like it, serving when we feel like it, reading the Scriptures when we feel like it, and so on. It is this preoccupation with one's moods and feelings that so often causes the swinging of the pendulum - in and out of communion with the Lord - that we see in the Song - and this in the context of love to Jesus. This should warn us against any undue or excessive claims we are sometimes tempted to make about our love for Him. How easy it is, in such a context, to slip away! The price of continuing faithfulness is constant vigilance and the adoption of fundamental principles of Christian behaviour, as opposed to feelings or moods. We need to remember that Jesus is the Lover of our souls, not a concept or an idea, and it is not all the same to Him how we treat Him. The story of our Lord's discussion with Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:36ff makes this plain in a very graphic and challenging way. It is perfectly possible to be an accomplished host, as Simon was, and yet be sadly lacking in the things that really matter. And in the same way it is possible to be withholding from the Lord Jesus what He most desires and longs for, the love and devotion of our hearts. And He grieves, both because love is being withheld from Him and because, in that withholding, He is prevented from giving His love as He desires to do. And so He is grieved away. And, as Bunyan's Holy War makes clear, when Emmanuel was grieved away from the City of Mansoul, it often takes a long time to woo Him back. And the loss of His presence not only gives rise to anxiety and trouble, but also, away from His protection, things can also go seriously wrong (7).

26) 5:9-16

The daughters of Jerusalem mentioned in 8 ask the Shulamite the question in 9, a question that is answered in the remainder of the chapter by the Shulamite. It is not clear why such a question was asked. Hudson Taylor thinks they asked it because they did not recognize the Shulamite as the bride of the King, the implication being that her Beloved was no more than any other. There may be a note of sarcasm in the question, as if to say, 'What is he more than another, that such a fuss should be made of him?' It may, on the other hand, be a sincere question, from a group who really want to know how or why he was so 'special'. The answer the Shulamite gives is a moving and indeed soul-ravishing description of her Beloved. On a human, natural level, her words are full of the hyperbole that has ever characterised the great lovers in the history of literature, and they express the sweetest and tenderest of human emotion and sentiment. But in spiritual application, to the Lover of our souls, they simply beggar description, and it is hardly surprising that they have become the language of the most intimate spiritual fellowship. There are other descriptions of the glory and majesty of the Lord in Scripture - such as that of the 'Ancient of Days' in Daniel 7:9, 10, or Revelation 1:13-16, which awe the spirit for their very majesty, but what we have here speaks a language all its own. And we should bear in mind that they are spoken by one who, having lost His company through carelessness, has rediscovered an appreciation of His desirability, and a new longing for Him. It is impressive to realise that this testimony to her Beloved is a testimony to what she regarded, at that point, as having lost! Is such an experience something that God in His inscrutable providence sometimes allows, so as to bring a new appreciation of His blessings?

27) 6:1-3

Hudson Taylor has a useful and perceptive comment on these verses which is worthy of our attention: 'Forlorn and desolate as she might appear she still knows herself as the object of His affections, and claims Him as her own. This expression, 'I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine' is similar to that found in the second chapter (2:16), but with noteworthy difference. Then her first thought of Christ was her claim upon Him: His claim upon her was secondary. Now she thinks first of His claim; and only afterwards mentions her own. We see a still further development of grace in 7:10, where the bride, losing sight of her claim altogether, says 'I am my Beloved's, and His desire is toward me'. No sooner had she uttered these words and acknowledged herself as His rightful possession - a claim which she had practically repudiated when she kept Him barred out - than her Bridegroom Himself appears; and with no upbraiding word, but in tenderest love, tells her how beautiful she is in His eyes, and speaks her praise to the daughters of Jerusalem.... Thus the section closes with communion fully restored; the bride reinstated and openly acknowledged by the Bridegroom as His own peerless companion and friend. The painful experience through which the bride has passed has been fraught with lasting good, and we have no further indication of interrupted communion, but in the remaining sections find only joy and fruitfulness.' How true all this is in the spiritual life! Happy are those whose backslidings and coldnesses of heart towards the Lover of their souls end in this way!

28) 6:1-3

We should not miss the significance of the fact that it is the bride's answer to the daughters of Jerusalem's query in 5:9, and given so fully in 8:10-16 that prompts their further question here in 1. Her testimony tells, even when made concerning an absent Lord. This is grace indeed, beyond our deserving, that even before communion and fellowship are restored with Him, and we are still only seeking restoration. The daughters of Jerusalem are sufficiently drawn by the bride's testimony to want to seek the Beloved with her. The words in 1, '...that we may seek Him with thee' are very precious to the believer who becomes conscious that his testimony has had this effect on those to whom he has spoken. Another commentator has said: 'The lovely description of the Bridegroom raises a further question in the minds of the daughters of Jerusalem. They had enquired, 'What is thy beloved more than another beloved?' Now they ask, 'Whither is thy beloved gone?' The full revival of the bride's affections lies in the answer to these two questions. If our love to Christ has grown cold, let us but answer the two questions, 'Who is He?' and 'Where is He?' and once again, as we are occupied with Him, our cold hearts will be warmed with the glow of His love.... 'My Beloved', she says, 'is gone down into His garden', a fragrant spot where He can feed and gather lilies. There are none that minister to the heart of Christ in this world but 'His own which are in the world'. With them is all His delight. There only does He find the bed of spices. The garden of the Lord is composed of His loved ones, and the restored soul knows full well that Christ can be found among His people. It was thus with the two disciples of Emmaus. When restored they rose up the same hour and returned to Jerusalem (Luke 24)'.

29) 6:4-13

Delitzsch finely comments on 4 when he says that the Shulamite 'had found him again, and she who is beautiful in herself appears now so much the more beautiful, when the joy of seeing him again irradiates her whole being.' This bears witness to something very important and striking, whether on the human level or on the spiritual. As to the effect of human love, there is little doubt that the giving and receiving of love does work a transformation in people, and adds an unmistakeable beauty and loveliness and warmth to the whole personality. And this is just as true, indeed even more true, of the spiritual life: a true 'love-relationship' with Christ works a transformation that is quite unmistakeable in a believer, and adds a glow and a radiance to the life that is a benediction to those with whom that life comes in contact. One readily thinks of the well-known words at the end of Psalm 90, 'Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us', and even more Psalm 149:4, 'The Lord takes pleasure in His people: He will beautify the meek with salvation'. This is the heritage, and this the peculiar blessedness, of those that love the Lord.

30) 6:4-13

But what are we to say of the twice repeated description of the bride by her Beloved in 4 and 10? 'Comely as Jerusalem', 'fair as the moon, clear as the sun' we can appreciate and understand, but 'terrible as an army with banners'? What can this mean? Hudson Taylor renders the word as 'brilliant', and if this is the meaning, it must refer to the irresistible quality of her beauty, a thought that seems to be borne out by what the Bridegroom goes on to say in 5 about finding that beauty almost too much to be borne, so wonderful it is. Overpowering would be a suitable word to describe the effect she had upon him. But - and this is particularly apposite in regard to the spiritual life - there is a sense in which the Church as the bride of Christ must properly be thought of in this way. The hymn says, 'Like a mighty army moves the Church of God', and the sight of an army on the move can indeed be an awe-inspiring experience. It is true that in ourselves we as believers may be poor and weak, but there is another side also, as Paul indicates in his words to the Corinthians, 'I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling', but his speech nevertheless was 'in demonstration of the Spirit and of power', and no one who has experienced such preaching would dispute that this can be an awe-inspiring and indeed overwhelming experience. And who will doubt that that is but the reflection of the mighty Christ in His bride, the Church?

31) 7:1-9

The following comment by W. Still in the Gilcomston Bible Notes serves to set the tone for our reading of these verses: 'Our reading of this passage will test the chasteness of our minds. Here Christ is speaking of His own under the figure of a comely woman, and we conclude that this is how our Holy Lord regarded womankind when he was upon earth. There is no false modesty, nor sense of shame. There does not need to be, for His thought is pure. Everything is boldly stated, yet chastely, and every simile elevating. Here is a pattern for us. Let us test our pureness by setting our thoughts against His. Then, when we can look, unashamed, and with unsullied minds, let us interpret the passage spiritually.' Here, then, is the Bridegroom's continued expression of love. The rapture of renewed fellowship is very wonderful - this, from the Beloved's side. It is true, in the spiritual life, that when our love is withheld from Him, as we have already seen. He is not able to give us the love He wants to give, indeed, He is prevented from being all that He wants to be to us, because of our coldness of heart. He is prevented from being himself, a fountain of love to us. Does not this thought add a new dimension of understanding to the effusion and indeed extravagance of love expressed in these verses.

32) 7:10-8:4

In 10, we have for the third time the phrase 'I am my beloved's' (cf 2:16 and 6:3) and it has been noted that there is a distinct progression of the three statements: in the first two the order is reversed from 'My beloved is mine, and I am his' to 'I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine', while here self is excluded altogether and he is all. This is the basis of the deepest spiritual fellowship described in the verses which follow (11ff). The picture is a very beautiful one: companying with Him, all is joy, whatever we are doing (this is true of Shuman love, of course, but it is even more true of our fellowship with the Lord). It is not difficult to spiritualize 12 to mean service for Him, and - still more importantly - the desire and longing to bear fruit for His pleasure, such as is expressed in Paul's famous words in Galatians 5:22, 23. The pure desire for the consummation of love, in 8:1-4, also has its spiritual counterpart in the ache for the fulness of our Lord's presence in glory. Only then, will we be satisfied.

33) 8:5-7

With these verses we come to the final section and the closing scene of the book. Hudson Taylor finely says, 'In it the bride is seen leaning upon her Beloved, asking Him to bind yet more firmly to Himself, and occupying herself in His vineyard, until He calls her away from earthly service.... For the last time the wilderness is mentioned (5); but sweetly solaced by the presence of the Bridegroom, it is no wilderness to the bride. In all the trustfulness of confiding love she is seen leaning upon her Beloved. He is her strength, her joy, her pride, and her prize; while she is His peculiar treasure, the object of His tenderest care. All His resources of wisdom and might are hers; though journeying she is at rest, though in the wilderness she is satisfied, while leaning upon her Beloved.' It is not certain who is speaking in 6, if it is the bride, she is asking that she be kept close to her bridegroom's heart, like the stones engraved with the names of Israel on Aaron's breastplate and on his shoulder; if it is the bridegroom who speaks, he is asking, as he burns with the fire of holy, jealous love, for that love to be set as a seal on her heart, sealing her exclusively for Himself. Well, it is that kind of exclusive relationship, is it not?

34) 8:8-14

But the exclusiveness of that love relationship excludes only competitors and rivals, not a world of people in need, and never the outward look to family and friends who need Christ. Hudson Taylor comments: 'in the little sister, as yet immature, may we not see the elect of God, given to Christ in God's purpose, but not yet brought into saving relation to Him? And perhaps also those babes in Christ who as yet need feeding with milk and not with meat, but who, with such care, will in due time become experienced believers, fitted for the service of the Lord? Then they will be spoken for, and called into that department of service for which He has prepared them.' There is an important principle involved here. It is true that the essential relationship existing between Christ and His people is a relationship of love, and that what he says to us is, 'My son, give Me thine heart' (Proverbs 23:26). But when we do, He gives that heart back to the world, to love men and women through us, and He will re-enact a thousand Calvaries in us, that they might be saved, and we will fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in our flesh, for His body's sake, which is the Church. To be indwelt by Christ is to be possessed by the divine love, and this means to see the world with new eyes, with the eyes of Christ, and to be moved with compassion for the lost, and to be ready to spend and be spent for their salvation. Do we dare to pray, 'Lord, possess me like that'?

35) 8:8-14

We conclude our study with a fitting word from George Burrowes' commentary: 'Thus constrained by the love of Christ in the way of duty, the soul enjoys the privilege continually of audience with the King of kings through Christ the Saviour, and is encouraged in the exercise of prayer and praise, not only by a sense of our need and by the delights of holy worship, but by the assurance that our voice thus heard is pleasant to Jesus, that these expressions of holy emotions so agreeable to our companions in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, abiding with us here in the gardens of his grace, are heard with still greater pleasure by him who now dwells in these gardens by the Shechinah of the Holy Spirit, as he shall hereafter dwell among us in the paradise of God, its light and glory.'

What a wonderfully rich and rewarding study this has been! May it have awakened a truer and deeper love within us for Him Who is the Lover of our souls.