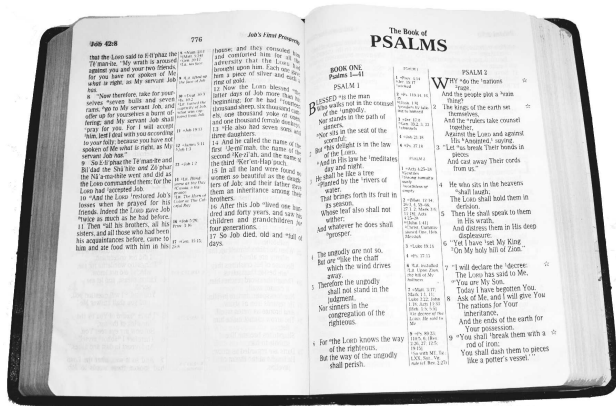


# PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



## September 2020

Bible readings from Isaiah chapters 26 to 39  
Song of Solomon

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*You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you*

The promise of the restoration of Judah from captivity (1–2, 12–14) was fulfilled after the conquest of Babylon by the Medes and Persians in 538 BC. We must always remember that Old Testament prophecy often speaks both of the near and distant future. This chapter is no exception. The main reference here, however, is not to the restoration of Judah, but to the gospel age. The ‘*strong city*’ (1) is the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22–23). The church below is the earthly representative of that city, which is the church made perfect in heaven (cp. Revelation 21:1–5). Isaiah saw another city in his prophecy. It was a proud city which was doomed for destruction (5–6). If you are not a Christian, you belong to that city. What are the characteristics of the citizens of heaven, of every Christian?

- They are a singing, worshipping people (1).
- They are a secure people surrounded by walls of salvation (1,20).
- They are a righteous people who love the truth (2).
- They enjoy a precious peace which this world cannot give: *You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.* (3). We have *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding* (Philippians 4:7; cp. John 14:27). If we would enjoy God’s perfect peace, we must have a steadfast mind, trusting in God; we must live a holy life seeking to do God’s will.
- They are directed by God. Their way is righteous because the *Most Upright* guides them (7).
- They thirst for fellowship with God (8–9).
- They pray for the salvation of sinners, who are wilfully blind in their wickedness (10).
- They have a glorious hope – the resurrection of the dead (19).

**Christian, should you be downhearted? No! Think of your glorious privileges and raise your songs of praise to God.** If you do not praise God, could it be that you do not belong to the Lord? He will accept you and save you if you will repent of your sin and trust in him.

*Gathered one by one*

This is yet another prophecy that not only points to the restoration of the Jews from captivity in Babylon, but also to the gospel age. ‘*Leviathan*’ (1) is a serpent-like monster. These great creatures are used to describe three empires:

- Assyria, ‘*the fleeing serpent*’ (the swift-flowing River Tigris).
- Babylon, ‘*the twisted serpent*’ (the winding River Euphrates).
- Egypt, ‘*the reptile that is in the sea*’ (the Nile Delta).

God warned that he would visit judgment upon them and he promised that his people would be *gathered one by one* from their captivity (1, 12–13). The picture of Israel as a delightful vineyard guarded by the Lord and from which he gathers fruit (2–6) is a sharp contrast to the picture of the useless vineyard in chapter 5.

Jehovah deals with Israel in mercy. His chastisement visited upon them was mild compared with his punishment of her enemies, being designed to bring her back to himself (7–8). His forgiveness and restoration was dependent on the removal of pagan shrines and idol worship (9). Alec Motyer suggests that *a people of no understanding* (10–11) refers to the northern kingdom of Israel under judgment ‘but the divine love has been alienated by the people’s determination to trust their own discernment’ (COMMENTARY, page 225).

‘*In that day*’ the atonement trumpet will call the captives in Assyria and Egypt (the River Euphrates) to Egypt to *worship the LORD in the holy mount at Jerusalem* (12 and 13). Matthew Henry writes, ‘All this is applicable to the grace of the gospel, and God’s promises to, and providences concerning, the Christian church and such as belong to it.’ The gospel has been preached throughout the world and will be until the Lord Jesus returns for his church. **Let us be encouraged to persevere.**

*The LORD of hosts will be for a crown of glory*

There are six addresses in chapters 28 to 33 all beginning with the word ‘woe’ (28:1; 29:1,15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1). In some the prophet denounces Judah for seeking help from Egypt rather than trusting in God. Isaiah was among the leaders of Jerusalem (7) and he begins by pointing to the northern kingdom (Ephraim) which was like a crown of fading flowers on the head of a drunken reveller. The party would soon be over with the coming of divine judgment. The flowers would be trampled underfoot as Assyria, the Lord’s ‘*mighty and strong one*’ conquered Ephraim (1–4).

The Lord also had a message for the faithful remnant to encourage them to stand firm. The ‘*crown of pride*’ of the drunken mockers would soon fade away (1,3), but *in that day the LORD of hosts will be for a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty*. A beautiful crown to give a *spirit of justice and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate* (5–6). **Satan and his evil servants are very strong and are very near (‘at the gate’), but let us remain faithful to the Lord. Strengthened by him, we will turn back the battle at the gate.**

Isaiah warned Judah to take heed. She too would be punished if she persisted in her sin. Matters were made worse in Judah through a lack of spiritual direction from the religious leaders who were drunkards. Strong drink robs a man of dignity and sound judgment (7–8). This is a warning against drunkenness which is sin (cp. Ephesians 5:18).

These people despised Isaiah and scorned his simple, direct approach. ‘*Whom will he teach knowledge?... precept upon precept, line upon line ... here a little, there a little.*’ They would not listen to the word of the Lord and he would surely bring judgment upon them (9–14). They had despised the stammering tongue, but they would hear the strange language of foreigners (perhaps the Assyrian invaders). Verse 11 is taken up in the New Testament to show that the gift of tongues was given as a sign of judgment upon unbelieving Israel which had rejected Christ (1 Corinthians 14:21).

*A tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation*

Those who mock God’s word are not modern – there were plenty like them in Isaiah’s time (14). The foolish leaders of Judah had *made a covenant with death* confident that they would escape judgment (15–16). This covenant may refer to the treaty made with Egypt and other nations to protect themselves from Assyrian aggression. They vainly imagined that this alliance would safeguard them from death and from the abode of the dead (‘*Sheol*’). Such confidence was totally misplaced and would not save them from judgment. Just as a man cannot cover himself when lying on a short bed so Egypt would not be able to shield Judah from her enemies. The leaders of Judah were signing their own death warrant. Isaiah warned his hearers against mocking God’s word. When God rises up to do his awesome work of judgment, no one can avoid it (18–22).

The prophet points again to the coming of Christ. Verse 16 is quoted several times in the New Testament (Romans 9:33; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6–8) – *Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation; whoever believes will not act hastily*. Why should we trust in the Lord Jesus? He is our sure foundation and he will never fail us. When we trust in him, we will not act hastily on account of panic. To belong to Christ is to be included in the new covenant which was sealed with his precious blood. This is a covenant of life, not a covenant of death. Is it any wonder that Peter could write as the Holy Spirit brought this prophecy to his mind, *Therefore, to you who believe, he is precious* (1 Peter 2:7). **Is the Lord Jesus precious to you?**

*Christ is made the sure Foundation,  
Christ the Head and Corner-stone,  
Chosen of the Lord, and precious,  
Binding all the church in one,  
Holy Zion’s help for ever  
And her confidence alone.*

(7th-century hymn, translated by John Mason Neale)

*The LORD of hosts who is wonderful in counsel*

This passage is a parable which ends with an exclamation of praise to God. There is nothing haphazard in the work of a farmer as he ploughs, sows seed and harvests. The man has a field and various kinds of seed. He ploughs just enough to break up the soil. He then sows the best seed (*the wheat*) in the best soil, then barley and then around the edges of the field, the inferior rye-seed (*spelt*). There is also careful processing of the harvested grain. It is sufficiently threshed to remove the chaff and no more (24–28).

Isaiah's message is that just as the farmer knows what he is doing, so God is in complete control of the nations of the world and wisely governs all things. He is *the LORD of hosts who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in guidance* (29). One of the names of the Lord Jesus Christ is 'Wonderful Counsellor' (9:6). We should trust in God because:

- He *is wonderful in counsel*. His purposes cannot be frustrated or thwarted. God declares, '*My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure*' (46:10; cp. Psalm 33:11).
- He *is excellent in guidance* (the Hebrew word translated 'guidance' = 'wisdom'). In God *are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Colossians 2:3). He lovingly and wisely cares for his people.

Christian, are you troubled or perplexed? Come to the all-wise God, your heavenly Father, *who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom*. Pour out your heart to him in worship, adoration and praise. Tell him that you love him and that you will trust in him. *Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in him* (Psalm 37:5). **He will bring you through.**

*God shall alone the refuge be  
And comfort of my mind;  
Too wise to be mistaken, he,  
Too good to be unkind.*

(Samuel Medley)

*Those also who erred in spirit will come to understanding*

There are two messages of woe in this chapter – to Jerusalem (called ‘Ariel’, 1–14) and to the scheming, plotting leaders of Judah who vainly thought that they could hide their devious plans from the Lord (15–24). ‘Ariel’ means an altar-hearth and the prophet warned that Jerusalem would become like an altar which dripped with the blood of those killed in the slaughter as the city was besieged (1–4). Verses 5 to 8 probably refer to the incident in which God destroyed the Assyrian divisions around Jerusalem (chapters 36 and 37). The army vanished like a dream in the night (7–8).

The Lord punished Judah by bringing spiritual slumber upon them and sealing his Word so that they were unable to hear it (9–12). Ignorance is not bliss and spiritual blindness is a terrible condition which seals up the Word of God so that it cannot be understood. The New Testament Pharisees were like the people of Judah. They had much religious show, but little reality as their hearts were far from God (13; cp. Matthew 15:7–9). If we are not right with God and continue to reject his word, we are in deadly danger.

When God visits our hearts things are different. The spiritually deaf are able to hear God’s Word, the spiritually blind are enlightened and there is joy in the Lord (18–19). *Those also who erred in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmured will learn doctrine* (24). **Nothing is too hard for the Lord. He can save the most ignorant and hostile sinner so that they will embrace the Saviour and learn his ways. What a glorious gospel we have to declare.**

*O Jesus, King most wonderful,  
Thou Conqueror renowned,  
Thou sweetness most ineffable,  
In whom all joys are found!*

*When once thou visitest the heart,  
Then truth begins to shine,  
Then earthly vanities depart,  
Then kindles love divine.*

(Bernard of Clairvaux).



*Speak to us smooth things*

The people of Judah were again reminded of their sin of refusing to trust in God in the face of the Assyrian threat to their country. *‘Woe to the rebellious children,’ says the LORD, ‘Who take counsel, but not of me, and who devise plans, but not of my Spirit’* (1). The crisis facing their country should have driven them to seek the Lord but they refused God’s word. They sought the help of Egypt seeking help but this would prove to be useless (2–5). Verses 6 and 7 describe ambassadors travelling south with donkeys and camels laden with gifts, but all this was to no purpose. God called Egypt (also known as Rahab), *‘Rahab-Hem-Shebeth’* which means *‘Rahab sits idle’* (7). In his commentary on Isaiah, H.C. Leupold suggests that this phrase means that Egypt is *‘a Big-mouth that is a Do-Nothing’*.

We can too easily fall into the same sin of which Judah was guilty. When faced with a crisis or hard choices, we do not seek the Lord. We do not pray or trust in the Lord, but complain and fret.

*O what peace we often forfeit!  
O what needless pain we bear!  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer.* (Joseph M. Scriven)

The rebellious people did not want to hear a plain declaration of God’s word. They wanted to be flattered and made comfortable in their sin. They said to the prophets, *‘Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits’* (10). They refused to turn from their wickedness to trust in the Lord with the *quietness and confidence* that this brings and they would surely be punished (11–17). People are still the same in the twenty-first century. They do not want to hear of man’s responsibility for his own sin, of judgment and hell, of repentance for sin and trust in Christ alone for salvation, of the need to deny themselves to follow Christ. **Do not be like the foolish people of Judah. You cannot know lasting peace and satisfaction if you refuse to trust in God and obey his Word.**

*The LORD will wait, that he may be gracious to you*

Judah was not listening to the word of God through his prophet, Isaiah. They were a rebellious people and this makes the words of verse 18 all the more wonderful, *‘Therefore the LORD will wait, that he may be gracious to you.’* The word ‘gracious’ means ‘bestowing undeserved kindness and showing mercy’. The word ‘wait’ here means ‘to wait eagerly, to long for’. Think of that! God longs to show his grace to undeserving rebels. We have proved this in our own Christian experience and this should encourage us in our prayers for loved ones and friends who are not saved.

God is not only gracious in saving us from our sin, he also waits to be gracious:

- To hear and to answer our prayers (19).
- To be with us in adversity (20).
- To guide us (21). God speaks to us through his Word and directs us. How wonderful!
- To turn our hearts from sin (22).
- To bestow unexpected blessings upon us (23–26).
- To give us a song (29). The songs which tell out the praises of God are far better than the songs of the world.

Verses 27 to 33 refer to God’s judgment on Assyria. *The LORD will cause his glorious voice to be heard ... For through the voice of the LORD Assyria will be beaten down* (30–31). When Christ returns for his people and to usher in the final judgment, everyone will hear his voice (John 5:28–29; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

God, who is waiting to be gracious, blesses *all those who wait for him* (18). Those who wait for God long for fellowship with him and thirst after him (cp. Psalm 40:1–5; 42:1–2). They patiently trust in God when they cannot trace his ways. **If you are not a Christian, will you continue to rebel against God? He waits to be gracious to you. Come to him now in the name of Jesus and trust in him.**

*Who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD!*

In this fifth ‘woe’, Isaiah continues to berate the people of Judah for trusting in the military might of Egypt for their defence – *who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD!* (1). They knew from their own history that the Lord had destroyed the mighty Egyptian army and that chariots and horses do not guarantee success in battle (Exodus chapters 14 and 15). How foolish and perverse of them to trust in mortal men rather than in the living God (3; cp. Psalm 20:7)! God told the prophet that he would defend Jerusalem. He is pictured as:

- A roaring lion with its prey, quite unconcerned by the *multitude of shepherds* (the nations who were gathered against Jerusalem). He would fight for Mount Zion (4).
- A mother bird, hovering over her nest to defend her fledgelings. God would protect and deliver his people from their enemies (4–5). How foolish to trust in men or in idols (7). The Lord himself would destroy the Assyrian aggressors (8–9).

There is a challenge for us in these verses. **Do we seek the Lord when we are in trouble? Do we trust in him alone to help us and to bring us through?**

*Why should I make a man my trust?  
Princes must die and turn to dust!  
Vain is the help of flesh and blood;  
Their breath departs, their pomp and power,  
And thoughts all vanish in an hour,  
Nor can they make their promise good.*

*Happy the man whose hopes rely  
On Israel's God! He made the sky,  
And earth, and seas, with all their train:  
His truth for ever stands secure;  
He saves the oppressed, he feeds the poor,  
And none shall find his promise vain.*

(Isaac Watts' paraphrase of Psalm 146:3–4, sadly, this second stanza which stands in contrast with the first, is not in most of our hymn books).

*The effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever*

We saw yesterday that the Lord promised that he would destroy the Assyrian invaders when they came against Jerusalem (31:8). Isaiah now prophesies that *a king will reign in righteousness* (1). Who is this king? These prophecies were given at a time when Judah was rebellious and refusing to trust in God (see chapters 28 to 31). King Ahaz of Judah was the one evil king during Isaiah's ministry and he rebelled against the Lord (chapter 7; cp. 2 Chronicles chapter 28). Now a different kind of king is promised who *will reign in righteousness* (1). Some believe that the promise of this king refers to good King Hezekiah, during whose reign the Lord destroyed the invading Assyrian army. He cared for his people and sought to protect them (2–4).

Isaiah prophesied to King Ahaz of the coming of the Messiah at the same time speaking of the Assyrian invasion (7:10–17). Many believe that the king promised here looks to the coming into the world of the Lord Jesus Christ, rather than to the reign of Hezekiah.

Moral values are turned upside down when God is despised (cp. 5:20–21), but when he is loved and obeyed, wickedness is hated and exposed (5–8). The Bible does not underestimate the role of women in society for good or for evil (cp. 2 Timothy 1:5). The women of Judah who lived for pleasure and luxury were a significant factor in the spiritual decline of the nation (9–13). Godly women, however, are a precious treasure (1 Peter 3:1–5).

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the gospel age is promised here (15; cp. Joel 2:28–32). The righteous reign of Christ in our hearts makes a great difference in our lives. *The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever* (17). The Lord loves righteousness (Psalm 11:7) and we cannot be saved without it (Matthew 5:20; Hebrews 12:14). **Peace, quietness and assurance. Do you have these precious qualities in your life? Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you** (Matthew 6:33).

*Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?*

The sixth and final ‘woe’ is directed against Assyria (1). It was approximately 701 BC and the mighty Assyrian army was at the gates of Jerusalem. King Hezekiah had already seen his outlying fortress cities taken and had agreed peace terms with Sennacherib, king of Assyria. He paid the Assyrians a huge tribute which was financed from temple and palace treasures. Egypt had failed to help just as the prophet had warned. The Assyrians had treacherously broken the peace treaty (notice the references to plunder, treachery and covenant-breaking in verses 1 to 8 (see 2 Kings 18:13–17 for further details). The ambassadors of Hezekiah weep bitterly as they realise that they have been deceived by the Assyrians (7–8)

Isaiah prayed against the Assyrian hordes, exalting God for his great power (2–3). The promise of the Lord to deal with the Assyrians (10–13) was soon fulfilled as he miraculously destroyed the vast army (37:36–38). The sinners and hypocrites in Jerusalem who had refused to trust in God were amazed and seized with fear. They cried out, *‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?’* (14). They had recovered a sense of the awesome power and majesty of our sovereign, holy God. How we need that same sense of awe in our churches today. The question of the people is answered in the following verse. To dwell in fellowship with God, we must present our bodies to him as living sacrifices with feet, mouths, hands, ears and eyes being given over to righteous living (15–16; cp. Romans 12:1).

God promised the besieged people that they would see King Hezekiah resplendent in his royal robes and no longer in the sackcloth of mourning as the Assyrian army was miraculously removed (17–19). They would then acknowledge God as their Judge, Law-giver and King (22). It is also true that every Christian will see the Lord Jesus in his beauty in heaven (Revelation 22:4). What a glorious day that will be. **Will you be there, dwelling with the God of ‘everlasting burnings’ and awesome majesty? Are you living to please him?**

*For the cause of Zion*

The Old Testament prophets often spoke of judgment that was to come upon the unfaithful Jews and their heathen neighbours. They also saw into the distant future and prophesied of the last judgment. The first four verses of this chapter prophesy of the judgment of the wicked when Christ returns (cp. 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9). The Lord stretched out the heavens when he created the universe (cp. 40:22; 42:5; Psalm 104:1–2). When the Lord Jesus comes again, *the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll* (4; cp. Revelation 6:14). *Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness* (2 Peter 3:10–11).

The theme of God's judgment continues as Isaiah turns his attention to Edom, the nation descended from Esau, brother of Jacob (Genesis 36:1). Edom had a history of opposing the people of God (cp. Obadiah 10–14). There is a stark picture of desolation and ruin as God warns that *he shall stretch over it the line of confusion and the stones of emptiness* (11). Life without God is confusion and leads to emptiness and judgment. The prophecy of Isaiah is described as '*the book of the LORD*' which the people should search because these prophecies of judgment would be fulfilled (16). We know from secular historical records that judgment came upon Edom as Isaiah had prophesied.

Why was God so severe in his judgment upon Edom? He was punishing them because of what they had done to his people; it was *for the cause of Zion* (8). Woe betide those who dare to oppose or oppress the people of God. The Lord Jesus came into the world to *save his people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21). He *loved the church and gave himself for it* (Ephesians 5:25). There will always be those who hate us just because we are Christians, but we are precious to God. **We must never take personal revenge, however, but leave our cause to God, the righteous judge (Romans 12:17–19). If he is for us, why should we fret because of evildoers (Psalm 37:1)?**

*But the redeemed shall walk there*

This chapter is so different from chapter 34 which presented a scene of judgment and of desolation. There is here a joyful anticipation of the restoration of the Jews to their land after the captivity in Babylon but we are taken beyond this to the coming of the Lord Jesus to earth when the eyes of the blind would be opened, the deaf made to hear and the lame to walk (5–6). There is also a glimpse of Christ's return after which there will be *new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (2 Peter 3:13).

The pilgrim road to heaven is called '*the Highway of Holiness*' (8) and *the redeemed shall walk there* (9). The words '*redeemed*' and '*ransomed*' (9–10) are similar to each other and are often linked (cp. Jeremiah 31:11; Hosea 13:14). The word '*redeemed*' speaks of deliverance by payment of a price ('a ransom'). The Lord is the Redeemer of his people (41:14). The Lord Jesus has redeemed us to God by his blood (Revelation 5:9; 1 Peter 1:18–19). He gave *his life a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:28).

The redeemed of the Lord shall walk *the Highway of Holiness*. Nothing that defiles can enter heaven (Revelation 21:27). God has called us to be holy and without holiness we shall not see the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven (Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 12:14). Lasting joy and contentment is not found in the pursuit of happiness as an end in itself, but in obedience to God's Word.

Are you discouraged or fearful in heart? *Be strong and do not fear* (4). When we reach heavenly Zion, sorrow will give way to singing and sighing will be replaced by songs of joy as we praise God for ever. *The ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads* (10). **All the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that awaits us (Romans 8:18). Let us now thank God for our great salvation.**

*What confidence is this in which you trust?*

Isaiah chapters 36 to 39 are almost identical to 2 Kings 18:17 to 20:21 except for the psalm written by Hezekiah after he recovered from his illness (Isaiah 38:9–20). Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, had accepted the tribute he had imposed on Hezekiah, but he now demanded the unconditional surrender of Jerusalem (cp. 2 Kings 18:13 to 19:37).

The Rabshakeh (Assyrian army chief of staff) tried to scare the people of Jerusalem into submission and spoke in Hebrew to make certain that everyone understood his threats (11). He rightly scorned the futility of relying on Egypt for help (6) and added that Hezekiah had alienated Jehovah by removing the high places from the land. The reverse was true; these were places of idol worship and not connected with the worship of the Lord (7). The Assyrian even claimed to have had a word from the Lord (10) and urged the people not to listen to Hezekiah (14–18). We reject the claims of those who believe that they have ‘words from the Lord’ because God’s Word is complete and there is no new revelation from God.

The Rabshakeh also scorned any trust in Jehovah, asking, ‘*What confidence is this in which you trust?*’ (4) and he went on to blaspheme God (18–20). Hezekiah’s servants Hilkiyah, Shebna and Joah were terrified at his words and tore their garments in their distress. They then went to the king and told him all that the Assyrian had said (22). **There have been scoffers in every time of history (Acts 17:32 Peter 3:3) and we must not allow such people to intimidate us.** Trusting in men and their schemes is futile, but it is not vain to trust in the Lord. He is the glorious, all-powerful sovereign Creator of the world. He will never fail us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5–6).

*O Lord, how happy should we be  
If we could cast our care on thee,  
If we from self could rest:  
And feel at heart that God above,  
In perfect wisdom, perfect love,  
Is working for the best!*

(Joseph Anstice)



*Hezekiah ... spread it before the LORD*

What was the distraught king to do in a time of severe crisis when his country was threatened with destruction and his own life was in danger? He did not pretend that the problem did not exist. He faced up to it and went to the house of God. He also sought the prayers of other godly people, in this instance the prophet Isaiah who sent back a very reassuring message. He was not to be afraid; God would deal with the Assyrians (4–7).

The Assyrian king sent messengers to Hezekiah, bearing a letter which blasphemed God (8–13). *Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD* (14). He then uttered a great prayer of confidence in God the sovereign Creator of heaven and earth. ‘*O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear ...*’ (16–17). He was realistic in his assessment of the military might of Assyria but the nations they had conquered were worshippers of useless idols which were powerless to save them. He knew that God could easily deliver Judah and he prayed that the Lord would be glorified in their deliverance from the Assyrians (17–20).

What should we do when we receive bad news, when everything seems to be going wrong for us? **We must come to God in prayer, remembering that he is sovereign and is in control of all our circumstances.** We must spread the situation before him and bring our praises as well as our petitions to him. He will never fail us. Why do we so often sink under trials and difficulties? Surely it is because we neglect prayer and do not spread our troubles before the Lord.

*Restraining prayer we cease to fight;  
Prayer makes the Christian's armour bright;  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.*

(William Cowper)

*Because you have prayed to me*

The Lord sent a reassuring message to Hezekiah, promising that because he had prayed the Assyrians would be punished for their blasphemy (22–29). They had not realised that they owed their past victories to the sovereign purposes of God (26). The devastated countryside would begin to yield harvests (30–32) and the king of Assyria would not be able to conquer Jerusalem because the Lord was defending the city (33–35). We must not fear arrogant despisers of God. The Angel of the Lord destroyed the army of Sennacherib in a night and he was later assassinated while worshipping his useless god, Nisroch (36–38). Those who mock God do so at their peril (Psalm 2:4).

Let us close by thinking of the words of God concerning Hezekiah, ‘*Because you have prayed to me ...*’ (21). Prayer makes all the difference but it is a great privilege which is often neglected by many Christians. When we pray, we come to the almighty God who loves us. The Bible stresses the great need for prayer in the life of every believer (Luke 18:1; Ephesians 6:18) and God delights to welcome us at his throne of grace (Matthew 6:6; Hebrews 4:15–16). The devil knows this and he will do everything to keep us from prayer. He will make sure that we are too busy to pray, too tired to pray, too disheartened to pray. The Lord Jesus said that we *always ought to pray and not lose heart* (Luke 18:1).

Are you encouraged by answers to your prayers because you have prayed? Or are you weak and discouraged because you have not prayed and your needs are not met because you have not asked (James 4:2)? **Martin Luther rightly observed, ‘Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness.’ Let us be more faithful in prayer.**

*Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;  
Prayer makes the Christian’s armour bright:  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.* (William Cowper)

*You have lovingly delivered my soul*

At the time of the Assyrian invasion King Hezekiah was very ill, probably suffering from poisoning of his system which had gathered into a large boil (21). Isaiah brought him a message from God telling him that he was going to die. The distressed king did the right thing in seeking the face of God in prayer (1–3). Do you pray when you hear grim news?

The Lord immediately responded to Hezekiah's prayer, sending Isaiah to tell him that he would add fifteen years to his life (5; cp. 2 Kings 20:4–6). We can calculate, by comparing scriptures, that the king was thirty-nine years of age at this time and in the prime of his life (10; 2 Chronicles 29:1). The Lord graciously gave the king a miraculous sign to confirm his promise and the shadow of the sun-dial went back ten degrees (7–8). Isaiah told them to apply a poultice of figs to the boil and the king recovered as God had promised (21–22).

When Hezekiah recovered, he wrote a psalm of praise to God in which he described his anguish at facing death (10–14) and his deliverance (15–22). The grateful king said to God, '*You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption*' (17). We must remember that all God's dealings with us are in love. He hears and answers our prayers because he loves us. He chastens us because he loves us (Hebrews 12:6). **If you are going through a difficult period in your life, enduring trial and disappointment, always remember that God is dealing with you in great love and wisdom. He will lovingly deliver your soul.**

*The King of love my Shepherd is,  
Whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
And he is mine for ever.*

*And so through all the length of days  
Thy goodness faileth never;  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise  
Within thy house for ever.*

(Henry W. Baker)

*But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favour shown him*

The Assyrian empire was weakened by the destruction of its army which had besieged Jerusalem. Babylon was beginning to assert its independence from its Assyrian masters and was soon to overcome them to become the strongest power in the Middle East.

The Babylonians would have been delighted to hear of the destruction of the Assyrian army which was besieging Jerusalem. When they heard of Hezekiah's recovery from his illness, they sent ambassadors to him with letters of friendship and a present (1). *Hezekiah was pleased with them, and showed them the house of all his treasures* (2). The Lord tested him in this happy situation but he fell miserably short by becoming proud in heart. *But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favour shown him, for his heart was lifted up* (2 Chronicles 32:25,31). There isn't any evidence that he glorified God before the Babylonians for his deliverance from death and from the Assyrians.

The Lord sent Isaiah to warn him that a day would come when all the treasures so proudly displayed would be plundered by the Babylonians and his descendants carried off captive. Selfish Hezekiah accepted the word of the Lord as good, saying, '*At least there will be peace and truth in my days*' (8). He should have been bitterly sorry that his folly would lead to trouble following his death.

The Lord delivered Hezekiah from the Assyrians but the king was enticed by the flattery of the Babylonians. **Many a Christian has stumbled through failing to recognise the wiles of the devil.** Satan may sometimes seek to entice us away from the Lord with the flattery of the ungodly. This will make us feel good so that we become proud and give not the slightest hint that we belong to Christ. How tragic!

*(Readings from Isaiah will be continued in the notes for December)*

# SONG OF SOLOMON

Solomon composed 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). The title '*The song of songs*' (1:1) means 'the best of songs' (cp. '*vanity of vanities*' – Ecclesiastes 1:2). This song is about the love of a man and a woman committed to one another in marriage. It has a powerful message for our permissive society where lust is often confused with love. True love is tender (2:2–4), passionate (8:6), enduring and priceless (8:7), and it is totally committed to the beloved (5:9–10).

The Song of Solomon is not easy to follow. There are two main characters, the Shulamite girl (6:13) and her shepherd-lover (identified also as the king). Solomon had a vineyard which he let out to tenants who included a mother, her sons and their little sister the Shulamite (8:11; cp. 1:6; 6:13; 8:8). The Shulamite was very beautiful but her brothers made her toil in the vineyard to such an extent that she had little time to care for her own appearance and became very sunburned (1:5–6). She was a shepherdess and also had to set traps for the foxes who spoiled the vines (1:8; 2:15). One day Solomon visited his vineyard and wooed her (1:6–11), won her and married her (3:6–7). Some believe that there are three main characters, the Shulamite, her shepherd-lover, and the king who seeks to win her affections. It is difficult, however, to see how Solomon could be shown in such an unfavourable light in a book that was written by him.

## **Interpretation of the Song of Solomon**

Christians differ in the way that they interpret the book and there are three ways of looking at the Song of Solomon:

- The Naturalistic Interpretation which takes the book as it stands, viewing it as describing pure, marital love without any spiritual meaning. The problem with this view is that the Lord Jesus says that the Old Testament Scriptures speak of him (Luke 24:27,44–48), but the naturalistic view denies this.

- The Allegorical Interpretation which takes the book as entirely figurative. This has been the most accepted view among Jews and Christians. The former see the poem as an allegory of God's love to Israel. Many Christians interpret the book as an allegory of Christ's love for his church and of their love for him (eg. Matthew Henry, C.H. Spurgeon). The commentary of George Burrowes (reprinted by Banner of Truth Trust) also takes the allegorical interpretation of the book. Dr Peter Masters argues strongly for this view in his book THE MUTUAL LOVE OF CHRIST AND HIS PEOPLE (Wakeman Trust). He points out that 'Solomon would be hardly the ideal channel for lessons on love and marriage in view of his having acquired a thousand wives and concubines who turned away his heart from God. The life of the teacher must surely commend the message.' E.J. Young (INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT) strongly rejects the allegorical interpretation of the Song.
- The Typical Interpretation. Stuart Olyott takes this view, seeing 'the characters and events of the Song of Solomon as suggestive of spiritual truths, without there being an exact equivalence, as in an allegory'. He outlines each of the three interpretations and highlights the problems that we encounter in them (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING – commentary on Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. Published by Evangelical Press).

I follow the Typical Interpretation, believing that we should read the Song both as a love poem and see in it an illustration of the love of Christ for his people. Solomon is a type of Christ and his bride a type of the church which is betrothed to him *as a chaste virgin* (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:27). The language of Psalm 45 which speaks of Christ (Psalm 45:6–7; Hebrews 1:8–9) is similar to that found in parts of the Song of Solomon.

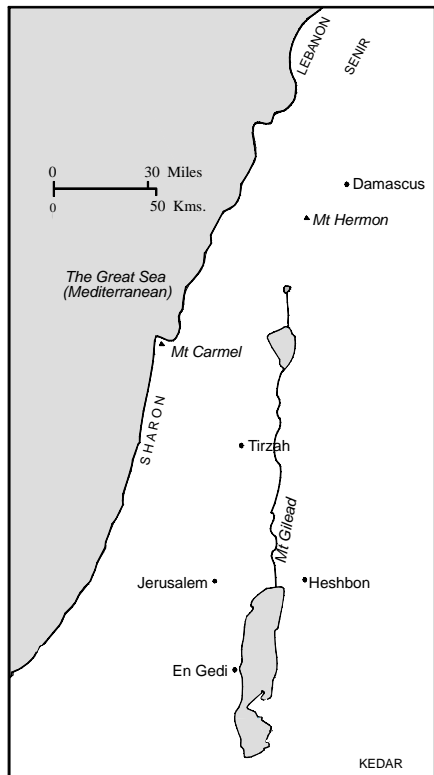
NB. The headings in your Bible indicating the identity of the speaker have been inserted by the publisher of your Bible; they are not part of inspired Scripture. I do not always follow these headings. You will find slight differences of identification if you compare commentaries on the Song of Solomon.

**Outline of the Song of Solomon** (based on that supplied in Stuart Olyott’s book, A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING)

1. The Courtship of Solomon and the Shulamite (1:1 to 3:5)
2. The Wedding (3:6 to 5:1).
3. The Married life of Solomon and the Shulamite (5:2 to 8:14)
  - a. The Shulamite’s troubled dream – 5:2 to 6:3
  - b. Mutual love – 6:4 to 8:14

**Places mentioned in the Song of Solomon**

We are taken from the mountain peaks of Lebanon and Hermon to the streets of Jerusalem in the Song (4:8; 6:4; 7:4–5). Kedar, Sharon and the vineyards of En Gedi are used in the word pictures portraying the love between Solomon and the Shulamite (1:5,14; 2:1).



*Your name is ointment poured forth*

As the Shulamite looks back on her courtship with Solomon, she expresses her great love and longing for him (1–7). His kisses mean more than affection to her; they are a token of his pure and intense love (2). His love brings her more joy than wine which Scripture links with gladness (2,4; cp. Psalm 104:15; Ecclesiastes 10:19). Fragrant oils or ointment were applied to the skin after washing and the Shulamite likened her beloved to the most expensive and fragrant ointment. *Your name is ointment poured forth* (3). His name speaks of all that he is and she recognises his attractiveness to others as well as to herself.

The Christian loves the name of Jesus. That name which we may have once scorned or blasphemed is now precious to us. It speaks of all that the Lord Jesus means to us. Our love for him is not the same as the love between a man and a woman. We must also beware of a love that is based on sentimentality. We love him for the perfection of his Person and for all that he has done for us. He has set his love upon us and he came to earth to suffer and die to save us. He is our best and dearest Friend who will never leave us. Is it any wonder that we love him? Can you sing from your own experience John Newton's lovely hymn, 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear'?

The Shulamite remembered her first meeting with Solomon who had probably come to the vineyard disguised as a shepherd. She was very beautiful but her brothers (possibly half-brothers) harshly treated her. She was aware that her beauty was spoiled by the scorching of her skin under the relentless sun as she toiled in the vineyard (5–6). Thinking him to be a shepherd, she had asked him where he fed his flock and he told her to follow *in the footsteps of the flock* (7–8). They went on to express their admiration of each other (9–17). Do you long for fellowship with your Saviour or has your heart grown cold towards him? W. J. Cameron observes, '**They who would meet frequently with Christ must seek him in the well-worn paths of faith, obedience and worship**' (THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, IVP. – January 1958 reprint).



*My beloved is mine, and I am his*

The bridegroom now compares himself and the Shulamite to flowers (1–2). He likens himself to *‘the rose of Sharon’* (this may refer to the fragrant narcissus found in the fertile plain of Sharon, on the Mediterranean coast). He then speaks of the attractiveness of his bride, who for him surpasses all other women, just as a lily is more beautiful than thorns. The couple who love each other want to be together and cannot bear to be apart. They admire each other and delight in one another (2–3,8–14). Human love is very wonderful but Satan seeks to debase it. Sex is a God-given gift to be enjoyed within marriage (Hebrews 13:4). We must resist the permissive attitude of the world around us. Those of us who are married must always have ‘eyes’ only for our spouse (14). Whether single or married, we must all abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8).

**When we are ‘lovesick’ (5) for the Lord Jesus, we cannot ‘see’ enough of him. We seek him in prayer, listen to his voice through the Bible and give him the adoration and worship of our hearts.** We admire him for his worth, his beauty and his love to us. We trust in him and we want to please him. We reflect on his love for us with awe and wonder as we ponder how he poured out his soul to death to save us from our sin. The Lord Jesus will one day call us to himself: *‘Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past’* (10–11). The winter of bodily weakness, suffering, trial and sin will then be no more. We will be made perfect (Hebrews 12:23) and we will worship him and enjoy him as never before. Presently we rejoice in him saying, *‘My beloved is mine, and I am his’* (16).

*I lift my heart to thee,  
Saviour divine;  
For thou art all to me  
And I am thine.  
Is there on earth a closer bond than this,  
That my Beloved’s mine and I am his?*

(Charles E. Mudie)

*Have you seen the one I love?*

Many Bible commentators believe that these verses describe a time when the Shulamite dreams that she cannot find Solomon. She reports, *'I sought him, but I did not find him'* (1–2). She rises up to search the streets and squares of the city and seeing the watchmen, she urgently enquires, *'Have you seen the one I love?'* (3). She finds him immediately afterwards and embraces him. She holds him and will not let him go until she has brought him to the house of her mother (4). There are times in every believer's experience when we may sense a loss of fellowship with Christ. This may be through our own sin and the grieving of the Holy Spirit, or because the Lord leads us through some dark valley experience. **If we are not enjoying fellowship with Christ and are not concerned, could it be that we are too pre-occupied with the cares of this world?**

Spurgeon said in one of his sermons, 'Labour after a conscious enjoyment of Christ, till you can say with the spouse, "I found him whom my soul loveth."' It is good to learn the practical precepts of the gospel, it is good to be in the society of the saints; but if you put any of these in the place of communion with your Lord himself, you do ill. Never be content till you can say, "I found him." Dear souls, did you ever find him? Have you yet found him? If you have not, keep on seeking, keep on praying, till at last you can say, "Eureka! I have found him whom my soul loveth. Jesus is indeed mine."' (Sermon delivered on 7 October 1877).

The Shulamite repeats her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem that they do not disturb or awaken her beloved (5; cp. 2:7; 8:4). George Burrowes comments with reference to the gazelles and the does of the field, 'As these animals were proverbially timorous, the greatest care must be taken not to disturb them; and the believer enjoying the manifestations of heavenly love, will be as cautious in avoiding sin, as in watching the gazelle, which bounds away at the rustling of a leaf ... Never have we such intense anxiety in guarding against sin as when filled with intense love.' (SONG OF SOLOMON, Banner of Truth).

*Go forth ... and see King Solomon*

We now come to a new section of the Song of Solomon which describes the wedding procession of the beloved and his spouse. The bridegroom is twice named '*King Solomon*' (9,11). Those seeing the great procession approach Jerusalem ask, '*Who is this coming out of the wilderness?*' (the open countryside; 6). They see Solomon's couch being carried along with the smoke of burning incense and costly perfumes rising at the head of the procession.

The king is escorted by sixty of Israel's finest soldiers (7–8). Solomon's splendid chariot (or palanquin) is made of high quality wood from Lebanon (cedar and cypress) which is overlaid with gold; its purple (or dark red) canopy is supported by silver posts. The luxurious interior had been lovingly fitted out by the women of Jerusalem (9–10). The women of Jerusalem are called to go out to greet the royal procession and see King Solomon with the crown which his mother had placed upon his head. *Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown* (11).

The Lord Jesus is far greater than Solomon (Luke 11:31). When he returns in all his splendour, gloriously crowned, he will be admired by those who believe (Revelation 19:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:10). All who belong to his church, the bride of Christ, will be transformed (Ephesians 5:27). *We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is* (1 John 3:2). **Are you looking forward to the second coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ?**

*Yea, Amen! let all adore thee,  
High on thine eternal throne!  
Saviour, take the power and glory;  
Claim the kingdom for thine own:  
O, come quickly!  
Hallelujah! come, Lord, come!*

(John Cennick & John Wesley)

*You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you*

Verses 1 to 15 of this chapter contain a song (some say two songs) in which Solomon lavishes his praise upon his bride. He gazes at her and is enraptured with her beauty. The language of these verses should not embarrass us; we are reading the Word of God. The Lord created the human body and attraction between male and female is quite normal; it is not sinful, except when it gives place to lust and unholy desire. It is understandable that a husband should have ‘eyes’ for his wife and that he should admire her beauty.

Stuart Olyott comments on verse 5, ‘In the West a public love poem would not normally include any reference to a woman’s breasts. But the Bible does not see anything questionable here, and at this point Eastern culture is still nearer to the Word of God’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING – commentary on Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon).

Solomon said to his bride, ‘*You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you*’ (7). The apostle Paul may have had this verse in mind when he wrote, ‘*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish*’ (Ephesians 5:25–27).

The Lord Jesus Christ takes sinners and makes them into saints. What wonderful grace and condescension! The sanctifying process begins at conversion and though we will not be perfect until we reach heaven, we must seek to *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 3:18). **Does it not fill you with love and wonder, that the almighty, holy Lord Jesus, should seek the love and fellowship of our poor hearts, that he should delight in us?** Let us be determined to walk worthy of God who calls us into his own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

*A garden enclosed*

Solomon wanted more than anything for his bride to be at his side (8). The *'lions' dens* and *the mountains of the leopards'* suggest danger, but he would protect her. The tenderness of his love for the Shulamite is shown in the way he addresses her as his *'sister'* as well as his *'spouse'* (9,10,11,12; 5:1). She had earlier told him that his love was better than wine and he now says the same about her love (10; cp. 1:2).

Solomon describes his bride as *'a garden enclosed ... a spring shut up, a fountain sealed'* (12,15). The word *'enclosed'* is taken from a Hebrew word meaning 'locked and bolted'. An enclosed garden was only accessible to its owner and the Shulamite belonged exclusively to Solomon. The same point is made when she is described as *'a spring shut up, a fountain sealed'* so that only one person can enjoy its water (cp. Proverbs 5:15–21). The church is also *'a garden enclosed'* and a sealed fountain. **Christian, the Lord Jesus Christ has supreme claim over your life and your affections.** *Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's* (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Spurgeon said in a sermon on verse 12, '“All for Jesus” is to be our motto ... We must be truly, thoroughly, really living for Jesus: we must be a garden enclosed, reserved, shut up for him. O brother, your life is to be a stream that flows for the refreshment of him who poured out his life for you! ... You are a spring shut up, a fountain sealed for Jesus, for Jesus only, and that altogether. Should self come forward, or personal advantage, you are to bid them be gone. They must have no admission here. This garden is strictly private. Trespassers, beware! Should the world, the flesh, or the devil leap over the wall, and stoop down to drink of the crystal fountain of your being, you are to chase them away, lest their leprous lips should defile this spring, and prevent the King from drinking thereat again. Our whole being is to be a fountain sealed for Jesus Christ alone.'

*I sought him, but I could not find him*

We begin a new section of the Song (5:2 to 6:3) in which the Shulamite tells of a dream that she had soon after her marriage. In the dream she hears the voice of her beloved as he knocks at her door to seek admission. He speaks to her in the most endearing terms but she appears reluctant to stir herself in order to admit him. He puts his hand through an aperture in the door, trying without success to let himself in (1–5). The Shulamite then yearns for him but to her dismay he is not there when she opens the door. She recalls, *‘I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer’* (6). She becomes so desperate to find him that she goes in the depth of the night to search the streets of the city for him. The suspicious watchmen roughly treat her and humiliate her by tearing away her veil in order to identify her (7). She then calls on the daughters of Jerusalem to tell her beloved of the depths of her yearning for him (8).

On a human level it is possible even in Christian marriage to allow our love for our partner to grow cold. We do not delight in each other as once we did and we will hardly stir ourselves to be considerate or help the other. We must never allow our feelings to undermine our mutual commitment. Feelings come and go and we will not always feel that we are in love. We promised in our marriage vows not to feel love, but rather to be faithful. If things are not right between you and your spouse, repent of your sins of omission and seek his/her forgiveness. Be always determined, with God’s help, to build up and to maintain your marriage.

In our relationship to the Lord it is all too common for us to allow feelings to control us. We will only pray or read the Bible when we feel like doing so. We will only attend the prayer meeting if we are in the right mood. **Have you grown so cold in heart that if you sought the Lord, you would hardly know where to find him?** The Lord Jesus says to Christians who have left their first love and grown cold in heart towards him, *‘Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works’* (Revelation 2:5).

*He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend*

The daughters of Jerusalem respond to the lovesick Shulamite by asking her in what way her beloved was different from any other man (8–9). Their question brings forth a torrent of admiring words which conveys to them that she adores him, that he means everything to her. She eloquently describes his beauty and excellence and closes by exclaiming, ‘*His mouth is most sweet, yes, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem*’ (16).

They now asked the Shulamite to tell them where he had gone, though earlier she had asked them to pass on a message to him if they found him first (5:8; 6:1). In her dream she is now able to say that she knows where he is and that he has gone to his garden. She rejoices that she belongs to him and that he belongs to her (6:2–3).

The Lord Jesus is precious to the Christian (1 Peter 2:7). There was a time in our lives when we saw in him no beauty that we should desire him (Isaiah 53:2). Things are so different since God graciously worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We now see that the Lord Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who came to earth to become man and who lived a life of perfect obedience to the will of God the Father. He humbled himself and willingly laid down his life to save us and to cleanse us from our sins. Our hearts melt with adoring gratitude when we ponder his matchless love. Our almighty Saviour conquered death and will come again as King of kings and as Judge. We will then gaze on him and admire him in all his splendour. We have found him to be a Friend who never fails us and who is always gracious and kind. He is the *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6). ‘*He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend.*’ **Do you know the Lord Jesus? Do you love him?**

*Immortal honours rest on Jesus' head;  
My God, my portion and my living bread;  
In him I live, upon him cast my care;  
He saves from death, destruction and despair.*

(William Gadsby)

*Awesome as an army with banners*

In the remainder of the Song, Solomon and his bride revel in their love for each other. Here he praises the Shulamite for her beauty and begins by saying, ‘*O my love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners*’ (4). Tirzah, a city to the north-west of Samaria, was famous for its beauty. It became the first capital of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 14:17; 15:33). Jerusalem was also renowned for its beauty (Psalm 50:2). Solomon is overwhelmed by the beauty of his bride and the language of these verses is similar to that found in chapter 4. The expression ‘*awesome as an army with banners*’ is repeated in verse 10.

Christ loves his church (Ephesians 5:25) and his beauty should be seen in his people (Psalm 90:17; 149:4). God has chosen us to be conformed to the image of his Son, that is to be like the Lord Jesus, to have the family likeness (Romans 8:29). The world may despise us and hate us (John 15:18–19; 1 Corinthians 4:12–13), but those who love the Lord Jesus are loved by God (John 14:21–23).

**The church is awesome as a great army with banners and we must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by the world.** Spurgeon has a sermon on verse 4 which is entitled ‘The church as she should be’. He points out that an army with banners speaks of distinction, discipline, activity and confidence. He sees the distinction of the church in its adherence to biblical truth. He rightly states, ‘It is our duty to make a clear and distinct declaration of our principles ... We hear on all sides great outcries against creeds. Are these clamours justifiable? It seems to me that when properly analysed most of the protests are not against creeds, but against truth, for every man who believes anything must have a creed, whether he write it down and print it or no ... After all, there is a Protestantism still worth contending for; there is a Calvinism still worth proclaiming, and there is a gospel worth dying for. There is a Christianity distinctive and distinguished from Ritualism, Rationalism, and Legalism, and let us make it known that we believe in it.’



*How fair and how pleasant you are*

Stuart Olyott writes in his commentary, ‘We now come to a passage which allegorical scholars have used to show what pleasure the church gives Christ. Solomon is here giving the answer to the question which has just been asked, and does so in a poem extolling the physical beauty of his bride. Although we do not adopt a naturalistic interpretation for this book, we should not forget that the human body is a marvel of God’s handiwork and is, accordingly, to be admired. Physical beauty, and physical desire, too, are God-given gifts. Their perversion is undoubtedly degrading, but not the gifts themselves’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING – Welwyn Commentary Series).

The feet of the bride are beautiful and this reminds us of the Lord’s estimation of *the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things* (1; cp. Romans 10:15). The word translated ‘*navel*’ (2) usually refers to the whole of the lower part of the body. A goblet was considered to be most beautiful when it was filled with wine. The whole of her body was graceful and her dark hair glistened with a purple sheen and Solomon was held captive in its tresses (5). ‘The figure of the lover held in the locks of the beloved is common in eastern poetry and is found in English literature’ (THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, IVP. – January 1958 reprint). The fragrance of the apple is much appreciated in the East (8).

The admiring Solomon exclaimed as he gazed on his bride, ‘*How fair and how pleasant you are*’ (6). We will not know perfection until we reach heaven, but the Lord delights in us and we are pleasant to him. **We find some Christians difficult and we may be too ready to see their faults and failings, but they belong to Christ who loves them.** We must be prepared to be thankful for the marks of grace in their lives and recognise that they too are precious to Christ.

*But saints are lovely in his sight;  
He views his children with delight;  
He sees their hope, he knows their fear;  
And looks, and loves his image there.*

(Isaac Watts)

*Come, my beloved, let us go*

The Shulamite states for the third time, ‘*I am my beloved’s*’ (10; cp. 2:16; 6:3). She was filled with delight at the very thought that she belonged to her husband and that he loved her. The Christian belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ and this brings a great responsibility to obey him and to live for him. We must also see that belonging to Jesus is the greatest privilege a person can enjoy. To love and to be loved by the glorious Son of God brings priceless blessings. He cares for us and prays to God the Father for us. He guides us through this world and helps us through difficult and testing times. He will never leave us nor forsake us and one day he will take us to be with himself in glory.

The spouse wants to go out into the country to be alone with her beloved and she says to him, ‘*Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages*’ (11). Stuart Olyott comments, ‘Lovers enjoy being alone together. Those who do not enjoy being alone with Christ must sincerely question whether they love him at all.’ How much time do you spend alone with your precious Saviour? The spouse expressed her overwhelming desire for Solomon (12). The fruit of the mandrake was thought to stimulate sexual desire and to enhance fertility (13; cp. Genesis 30:14–16). She longed to know him as well as she knew her brother and to have that closeness with him that is enjoyed between brothers and sisters (8:1–2). She again repeats her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem not to arouse love until it is ready to waken (4; cp. 2:7; 3:5).

**Do we profess to love Christ, but hardly talk to him or listen to what he has to say to us through his Word?** If we find more pleasure in material things, in watching television, in sport and leisure than in having fellowship with Christ, what kind of Christians are we? Meditate on the perfection of the Lord Jesus, on the cross, on his victory over death and his reign in glory, on his unfailing love for us and let us repent if we have grown cold in heart.

*Many waters cannot quench love*

In the closing verses of the book the Shulamite is seen leaning on her beloved, asking him to bind her yet more closely to himself. W. J. Cameron writes of verse 6, ‘This verse may be regarded as one of the finest descriptions of love ever penned. The seal worn suspended from a cord round the neck, or bracelet, was a symbol of something dear ... The seal would remind him of her, even when he was away from her. cf. Isaiah 49:16’ (THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, IVP. – January 1958 reprint).

*Love is as strong as death ... Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it (7).* Christian, nothing whatever can separate you from the love of Christ, not even death (Romans 8:35–39). **You may feel overwhelmed by floods of suffering and grief. You may be passing through a severe trial, knowing disappointment and perplexity, but the love of Christ for you can never be quenched nor drowned.** He is altogether wise and good. Trust in him, even though the way may be dark.

The bride probably recalled words spoken to her in time past by her brothers. She was once immature, too young to marry, but now things are different (8–10). Solomon had let out his vineyard in Baal Haman to tenants who each paid an annual rent of a thousand pieces of silver. The Shulamite willingly gave herself and her vineyard to Solomon. She was totally committed to him (11–12). He longed to hear her voice (13). Have you ever thought that the Lord Jesus desires to hear your expressions of worship, devotion and praise? How often does he hear your voice in prayer?

The Song closes with the Shulamite expressing her heartfelt desire for the return of her beloved (14). Those who love the Lord Jesus long for his return. He has promised, ‘*Surely I am coming quickly.*’ We respond, ‘*Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*’ (Revelation 22:20). We will then see his face, admire him and we will be with him for ever (2 Thessalonians 1:10). Hallelujah!