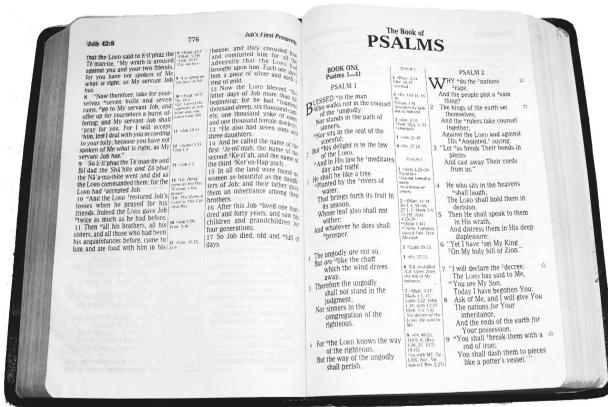


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

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

We have seen that chapters 24 to 27 describe two cities – Mount Zion, which is strong and blessed (1; cp. 24:23). Isaiah also saw a proud city which God will bring down to the dust, which is ruined (5–6; cp 24:10; 25:2,12). 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. This chapter shows the blessedness of all those who trust in the Lord. The ‘strong city’ (1) also speaks of the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22–23). The church on earth represents of that ‘city’, which is the church made perfect in heaven (cp. Revelation 21:1–5). What are the characteristics of those who belong to the Lord?

- 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 fix our mind on God, trusting in him and obeying his Word.
- They are directed by God who levels their way (7; English Standard Version), making it smooth.
- 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.

*Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and he is on the throne.*

(Edward H. Bickersteth)

Gathered one by one

This prophecy 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. This great creature and ‘*the reptile that is in the sea*’ (probably a crocodile) refer to the rivers of 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 (12–13). The picture of Judah as a delightful vineyard guarded by the Lord and from which he gathers fruit (2–6) sharply contrasts to the picture of the useless vineyard in chapter 5.

Jehovah deals with Israel in mercy. His chastisement of 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* (‘*discernment*’ ESV; 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 jubilee trumpet which was sounded on the day of atonement (Leviticus 25:9) will call the captives by the River (the Euphrates) and those in Assyria and 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 of them, the prophet denounces Judah for seeking help from Egypt rather than trusting in God. Isaiah points out that the drunken revellers of the northern kingdom (Ephraim) were like a crown of fading flowers (1). The party would soon be over with the coming of divine judgment. The ‘*crown of pride*’ of the drunkards with its fading flowers would ‘*be trampled underfoot*’ and swept away as if in ‘*a flood of mighty waters*’ by Assyria, the Lord’s ‘*mighty and strong one*’ (2–4).

The Lord also had a message for the faithful remnant encouraging them to stand firm: *In that day the LORD of hosts will be for a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty. They were a beautiful crown to give ‘a spirit of justice and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate’ (5–6). Their enemies were very strong and were very near (‘at the gate’), but the Lord would ‘turn back the battle at the gate.’ (see 36:2: 37:36).*

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 Word of God but they would hear the stammering tongue, 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 not to believers but to unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:21; cp. Acts 2:4–13).

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 divine 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 again speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ: *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* (16). This verse is quoted in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:6–8). 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 like that made by scorners (15). 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

Verses 23 to 28 contain a parable concerning the work of a farmer. There is nothing haphazard in his work as he ploughs his field, sows seed and harvests. He ploughs just enough to break up the soil and 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 care in harvesting. Grain used for bread flour 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 and sows his seed accordingly, so the Lord will wisely deal with Ephraim (1–4) and Judah (7–15). 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 leaders of Judah who vainly thought that they could hide their devious plans from the Lord (15–16). ‘Ariel’ means an altar-hearth and Isaiah warned that Jerusalem would become like an altar which dripped with the blood of those who were killed as the city was besieged (1–4). It is important to see that God sovereignly used Judah’s enemies to punish her (see the ‘*I wills*’ in verses 2 and 3). 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 the people of Judah by bringing spiritual slumber and blindness upon them, sealing his Word so that they were unable to hear it or understand it (9–12). The New Testament Pharisees were like those people of Judah to whom Isaiah was prophesying. They had much religious show but little reality, as their hearts were far from God (13; cp. Matthew 15:7–9).

The chapter ends with the Lord’s promise of spiritual awakening (17–24). 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). Sinners will hallow God’s name and fear him. (23) and *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 sinner and give them spiritual understanding.**

*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)

Do not prophesy to us right things; 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 Judah should have driven them to seek the Lord but they refused God’s word. They sought the help of Egypt but this would prove to be useless and bring shame (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’. The Egyptians are referred to as ‘*beasts of the South*’ (‘the Negev’) in verse 6.

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. **Let us always be faithful to the Lord and persevere in making known the gospel to our lost and needy generation.**

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

The people of Judah were not listening to the word of God given 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’ and the word ‘wait’ means ‘to wait eagerly, to long for’. God promised that he would hear their prayers and that the *‘bread of adversity and the water of affliction’* would be replaced by rain to water their seed and an abundance of bread (23–24). They would also hear the voice of God to guide them (21). 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.

Who is a pardoning God like thee?

Or who has grace so rich and free (Samuel Davis)

Alec Motyer writes, ‘In verses 18 to 26 we are allowed to look beyond a waiting period to the moment when Messianic glory will dawn on a new creation’ (COMMENTARY, page 249).

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 still waits to be gracious and there are great blessings for 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. *Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint* (40:31).

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. They did *not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD!* (1). They knew from their own history that the Lord had once destroyed the mighty Egyptian army (Exodus chapters 14 and 15). It was foolish and perverse of them to trust in mortal men rather than in the living God (3; 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). They would see foolishness of trusting man-made idols (7). The Lord himself would destroy the Assyrian aggressors (8–9).

These verses encourage us to trust in the Lord in these troubled and uncertain times. Alec Motyer aptly comments, ‘The Lord never merely reacts to events as if sprung upon him. He has prepared all beforehand and is totally master of the situation’ (COMMENTARY, page 253).

*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).

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. Isaiah prophesied to King Ahaz of the coming of the Messiah at the same time speaking of the Assyrian invasion (7:10–17).

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 influence in the spiritual decline of the nation (9–11). 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 of gold and silver, taken from the temple and the royal palace (2 Kings 18:13–18). 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, 2 and 8). Hezekiah’s ambassadors wept bitterly when they realised that they had been deceived by the Assyrians (7–8).

Isaiah prayed against the Assyrian invaders, exalting God for his great power (2–3). The promise of the Lord to deal with the Assyrians (10–13) was soon fulfilled when he miraculously destroyed the powerful 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 lead righteous and blameless lives in obedience to his Word (15–16; cp. 57:15; Psalm 15).

God promised the besieged people that they would no longer see the Assyrian army but they would *see the king in his beauty* (10,17–19). The Lord is the King who was their Judge, Law-giver and deliverer (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 the 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) and he has determined when the end shall come. 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 divine judgment continues as Isaiah turns his attention to the people of Edom who were descended from Jacob's brother Esau (5; Genesis 36:1). Edom had a history of opposing the people of God (cp. Obadiah, verses 10–14). There is a stark picture of desolation and ruin as God warned that he would *stretch over it the line of confusion and the stones of emptiness* (11). 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 punished 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 presents a scene of judgment and 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 into the world 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 coming again 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 (eg. 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 in *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, speaking 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 had no connection with the worship of the Lord (7). The Assyrian mocked the weakness of Judah and then claimed that the Lord had told him to go up to destroy her (8–10). He urged the people not to listen to Hezekiah (14–18).

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 Hilkiah, 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 throughout history (Acts 17:32; 2 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).

*A sovereign protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand,
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend
And walls of salvation surround
The soul he delights to defend.* (Augustus M. Toplady)

Hezekiah ... spread it before the LORD

Hezekiah joined his servants in tearing his clothes and putting on sackcloth, an expression of distress and penitence. 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 went to the house of God and also sought the prayers of the prophet Isaiah who sent back a very reassuring message. He was not to be afraid; God would deal with Sennacherib, causing him to return to his own land where he would be killed (4–7).

The Assyrian king again sent messengers to Hezekiah, blaspheming God; they also gave him a letter (8–13). He read it and kept them waiting. *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 trusted in useless idols which could not 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 (21–23). They owed their military success to the sovereign purposes of God (26), but he was defending Jerusalem (33–35).

The Lord gave a sign to prove that the destruction of the Assyrian attackers was not a chance happening. Normal agricultural of the devastated land would not be possible but it would yield sufficient food for two years. In the third year they would be able to till the ground and sow their seed (30–32). The Angel of the Lord destroyed the army of Sennacherib in a night and he returned to Assyria where he was assassinated while worshipping his useless god, Nisroch (36–38). Those who mock God, do so at their peril (Psalm 2:4).

Let us think about God’s word concerning Hezekiah: ‘*Because you have prayed to me ...*’ (21). Prayer makes all the difference in our lives but it is a great privilege which we often neglect. The Bible stresses the great need for prayer in the life of every believer (Luke 18:1; Ephesians 6:18). When we pray, we come to the almighty God who loves us and 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 being met (James 4:2)? **Martin Luther rightly observed, ‘Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness.’**

*Behold the throne of grace!,
The promise calls us near;
There Jesus shows a smiling face
And waits to answer prayer.*

(John Newton)

You have lovingly delivered my soul

Alec Motyer points out that the events in chapters 38–39 ‘pre-date those in chapters 36–37 by some years’ (COMMENTARY, page 290). The Lord had promised Hezekiah that he would deliver both him and Jerusalem from the Assyrians (an impending event – 6; 2 Kings 20:1–11). This was after Hezekiah’s illness. He was 39 years old when he fell ill and he died when he was 54 years old (2 Kings 18:2). He was very ill, probably suffering from some poisoning in 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).

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). 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 Hezekiah’s attendants to apply a poultice of figs to the boil and the king recovered as God had promised (21–22).

Hezekiah then 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). **If you are suffering from a serious illness, always remember that God is dealing with you in great love and wisdom. He will always be with you in life and in death (Romans 8:35–39).**

*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 Babylonians were beginning to assert their independence from their Assyrian masters and were seeking to gain allies. They heard of Hezekiah's recovery from his illness and sent envoys to him with friendly letters and a present (1). Alec Motyer writes, 'If we take 687 as the precise date for the death of Hezekiah and the fifteen years of 38:5 as an exact figure, the ambassadors came in 702' (COMMENTARY, page 296). The Assyrian attack on Jerusalem followed soon after.

Hezekiah gladly received the Babylonian envoys, and showed them *the house of his treasures* (2). The Lord tested him after his recovery 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 is no evidence that he acknowledged the goodness of God to him for his recovery during the visit of the Babylonians.

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 into captivity. 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 years later, his folly would lead to trouble and heartache. .

Hezekiah 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 may make us feel good so that we become proud and do not give 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.

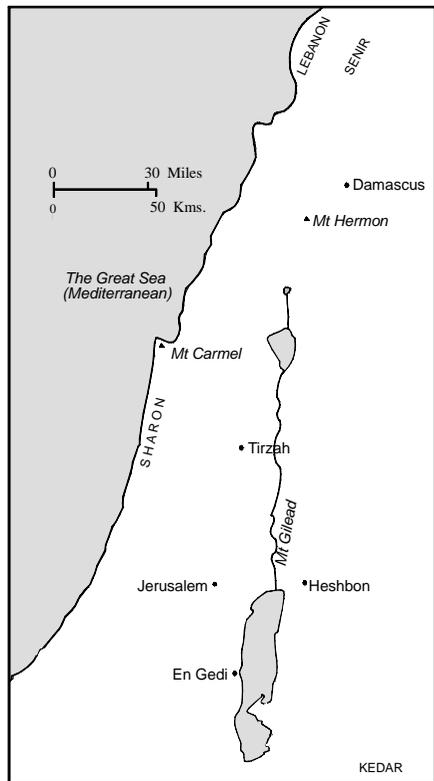
NB. The headings in your Bible indicating the identity of the speaker have been inserted by the publisher of your Bible; they are not part of inspired Scripture. I do not always follow these headings. You will find slight differences of identification if you compare commentaries on the Song of Solomon.

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 are a token of his pure and intense love for her (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 fragrant ointment. *Your name is ointment poured forth* (3). His name speaks of all that he is in his character and perfection.

The Christian loves the name of Jesus. That name which we may have once scorned or blasphemed is now precious to us, speaking of all that the Lord Jesus means to us. Our love for him is not 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 into the world 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?

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) treated her harshly. She was aware that her beauty was spoiled by the scorching of her skin under the heat of the 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).

*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.*

(John Newton)

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 worship and praise of our hearts. We admire him for his perfection 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 (Isaiah 53:12). 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 says, *'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 in grieving 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 preached 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 as ‘*King Solomon*’ (9,11). Those seeing the great procession approach Jerusalem ask, ‘*Who is this coming out of the wilderness?*’ (the open countryside). They see Solomon’s couch being carried along with the smoke of burning incense and costly perfumes rising at the head of the procession (6).

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 (2 Thessalonians 1:10). All who belong to his church, the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:27), will be transformed. *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 man should admire the beauty of his wife.

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, page 97).

Solomon said to his bride, ‘*You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you*’ (7). The apostle Paul likened the church to a bride: ‘*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). **It should 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 ... a spring shut up, a fountain sealed

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). 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 (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 gain 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 (1–4). The Shulamite then stirs herself to open the door and her hands drip with myrrh which had probably come from Solomon's hands when he had put them through the aperture of the door (5).

She 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 night to search the streets of the city for him. Eastern women did not venture out after nightfall and the suspicious watchmen roughly treat her. They tear 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).

In our relationship with the Lord Jesus 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. We lose the joy of walking with him that we once had. **Have we grown so cold in heart that if we sought the Lord, we 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).

*O Jesus, full of truth and grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek thy face;
Open thine arms, and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal,
And love the faithless sinner still.*

(Charles Wesley)

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 was her beloved different from any other man (8–9). Their question is answered with 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 (10–16) and exclaims, *'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 ask the Shulamite to tell them where he has 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).

Every Christian belongs to the Lord Jesus and he is precious to us (1 Peter 2:7). There was a time in our lives when we saw no attraction in him (Isaiah 53:2). Things are so different since God graciously worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We now see that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who came to earth to become a 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 marvel at his splendour (2 Thessalonians 1:10). He is 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. He praises the Shulamite for her beauty 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). The Shulamite attracted attention like an army with banners. Solomon is overwhelmed by her beauty 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.

Verse 8 refers to the polygamous practices of that time which was found among royalty; it seems that Solomon had not fallen into polygamy at this time. The words of verse 10 were probably uttered by women in their admiration of the Shulamite and she tells them how she became Solomon’s bride (11–12).

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. Let us trust in God and be determined to persevere in these difficult and confusing times in which we live.

How fair and how pleasant you are

The question asked in chapter 6, verse 12 is now answered by Solomon as he extols the physical beauty of his bride. Stuart Olyott writes, ‘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, page 115).

The feet of the bride are beautiful (1) 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 the Shulamite’s 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 touch of her mouth refreshes like the best wine (9).

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 that we do see 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 is 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' (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, page 117), How much time do you spend alone with your precious Saviour? The spouse expresses 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 longs to know him as well as she knew her brother and to have that closeness with him that is enjoyed between brothers and sisters in a happy family (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 song, the Shulamite is seen leaning on her beloved, asking him to bind her yet more closely to himself. She tells Solomon that her love for him *is as strong as death* and is so fiercely jealous that it allows no rival (6). Stuart Olyott observes, ‘Seals were signet rings worn on the right hand, bracelets on the right wrist, or sometimes hanging from the neck and over the heart,, and were regarded as something very precious and dear. This is the place the Shulamite wants to occupy in her lover’s affections’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING, page 119),

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 or drowned.** He is altogether wise and good. Trust in him, even though the way may be dark.

The Shulamite 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, praise and devotion? 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 who has gone away (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!