

# GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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## The Church At Peace (Song 2:1-7)

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

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

### **I. The beauty of the church (vv. 1-2)**

#### ***The person of Jesus Christ***

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

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

the valleys represents His human nature. Jesus Christ is here portrayed as the most exquisite Person, with unsurpassed beauty of character. He is most desirable.

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

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

### ***The church of Jesus Christ***

We move on to consider the church, the redeemed people of God. The church in the world is compared to the lily among thorns. We are not talking about the thorns on the stalk of the rose. Instead, the picture is now that of a lone lily growing in the midst of thorn bushes in the wild. A bush of thorns is not a desirable thing to be near to. If you are not careful, you might be scratched, blood will ooze out, and you will be hurt. In verse 2, we are told, “Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.” The lily growing in the midst of thorn bushes appear so out of place. The beauty of the lily will stand out, at the same time that it will appear so fragile. Let us talk about its beauty first.

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

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

neighbours to see how well we are doing. We are accepted by our God as beautiful, and that is all that matters.

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

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

You would remember the Parable of the Sower, in which the first three categories of seed die without producing fruit. We do not want to be in any of these categories. The third category of seed is particularly tragic. It seemed to be growing well, but its life is soon choked by the thorns that grow around it. There are those who seem to be genuine Christians, who appear to be growing spiritually, but lose their zeal and desire for spiritual things. We do not want to be like such. We do not have to be like them. We can be the last category seed that grows, despite thorns growing along side of it, and soon produces fruit - thirty-fold, sixty-fold, and even a hundred-fold! Do not make the mistake of thinking that there were no thorn bushes growing around the fourth type of seed. The wonder of the situation would be lost if that were the case. No, we must rather understand that the seed grows and produces fruit in spite of the thorns attempting to choke it. So also with the case of the lily growing among the thorns. It is the picture of the true church growing healthily, and showing forth its beauty, in spite of the trials and difficulties of the world. It is the picture of the true believer persevering in the faith, despite the many trials that come his way. The Lord gives strength to His people, and He beautifies the church so that she will be ready for life in heaven.

## **II. The provisions for the church (vv. 3-6)**

### ***Blessing and help in ordinary times***

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

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

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

There are times when the child of God is convicted of his sins. His conscience burns, showing that he has sinned against God. He senses God's holy anger burning against him. He has no peace of mind, and his heart is troubled. Sleep might escape him, and he is unable to serve God well. This is the time to examine the heart, to confess your sin, and to put right whatever has been done wrong. This is when you must seek refuge in the Lord, who has made atonement even for this sin of yours. Confess your sin before God, in the name of His Son, and you will find cleansing for all your unrighteousness. This is the promise of Scripture. This will be your experience. You will be sheltered from the wrath of God. You will find peace with God in the Lord Jesus Christ. It will be "with great delight" that you sit down under His shade.

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

### ***Extraordinary blessing and trials***

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

Then, as you look out for your host, you see Him seated in the place of honour. Above Him, you see a banner with words written on it. The banner declares the purpose of the occasion, or expresses the sentiment suited to the occasion. As you look, you discover what is written on it - "LOVE", or perhaps, "My love is for you." This is to say the Lord brings us to enjoy blessing beyond what He

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

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

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

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

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

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

their hearts, and maybe in their bodies as well.

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

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

### **III. The charge to all who are attached to the church (v. 7)**

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

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

### **Conclusion**

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

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

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

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