

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

< www.ghmag.net >

The Church Militant (Song 2:8-17)

by B. S. Poh

We have been studying The Song of Solomon, believing that it is a book of spiritual allegory, in which deep spiritual truths are conveyed through a made-up story, although the persons and places may have genuinely existed.

In Chapter 2:1-7, we have considered “The Church At Peace”. The Lord loves His church and provides for all her needs. As the church attempts to serve Him faithfully, there are times when she feels weak. That is when the Lord draws near to strengthen her. The faithful church should not be rocked by those with selfish ambition and personal egoism. There have been times in history when the church went astray. God raised up people like Martin Luther and John Calvin to shake the church, through the preaching of the word. That was necessary, and good for the church. But the church that has been attempting to be faithful to the Lord should not be disturbed by those who quibble over petty differences and wrong emphases brought from without. It would not be to your good, nor the good of others, if you do that.

We now move on to consider “The Church Militant”. Let us be reminded that when we use the word “church” we do not mean the building where Christians meet to worship God. Rather, we are referring to the believers in a locality, who are covenanted together to worship and serve God according to the Bible’s teaching. This is how the word “church” is used in the Bible. Apart from the local church, the Bible refers to all Christ’s people found everywhere, on earth and in heaven, as the church. This is the universal church - which is the body of Christ. A true believer is a member of the universal church. But the true believer should be a member of a local church as well. It is God’s will that you commit yourself to be a member of a local church somewhere.

Furthermore, it needs to be said that not all who profess to be Christians are true believers. Many are those who claim to be Christians, who attend church, who may even have been baptised, but have not been born-again of the Holy Spirit. If you have never been convicted of your sins, nor repented of your sinful life, and are not trusting in Jesus Christ alone for acceptance before God, you are not yet a true Christian. Our message concerns those who are true Christians. They are the people of God. They form the church of Jesus Christ. The church on earth is at peace with God in the sense that God has forgiven His people their sins on the basis of Christ’s death for them. They are well-loved by the Lord and taken care of by Him. But the church exists in the midst of a sinful world which is opposed to her very existence, and often causes her much distress and brings her many trials. The church also has much work to do for her Lord on earth, in spite of severe opposition. The church may, therefore, be said to be “militant” in the sense that she is engaged in a spiritual warfare, in which the weapons used are spiritual in nature, and not carnal. The church uses the weapons of the preaching of the word, prayer, good works, and the like, in this warfare.

In this portion of the Song of Solomon, we are considering the church in its state of militancy. There are four parts to this message.

I. The first coming of Christ (vv. 8-9)

Foretold by the prophets

In the first part, covering verses 8-9, the first coming of Jesus Christ to earth is alluded to. We read in

verse 8, “The voice of my beloved! Behold he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.” This verse shows God’s people excited over the coming of the long-expected Saviour. The coming of the Saviour was foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament. The spiritually minded people of Israel were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. When the fullness of time arrived, John the Baptist began to preach and call for repentance. The arrival of the Saviour in the world was announced. Then, Jesus Christ began to preach and teach in public.

The announcement of the Lord’s coming, followed by His appearance on the scene, happened in the midst of a spiritual deadness that had enveloped the nation of Israel. The Jews had been in bondage to legalism for so long. They had, over the centuries, added human traditions to their wrong understanding of God’s law. They had relied on law-keeping to achieve righteousness, which was an impossibility. Theirs was a system of salvation by works. Their leaders were constantly on the lookout to catch those who did not keep the many laws of their tradition. Jesus Christ’s coming, and His teaching, were a breath of fresh air to the stale religious atmosphere of the time.

Many of us are not unfamiliar with the stifling atmosphere of legalistic religions. The religious leaders impose burdens on the followers, demanding compliance by law or threats of withholding from them religious privileges. Officers from the religious department go around arresting those who do not fast during the fasting month. Spies are sent out to catch those who commit the sin of “close proximity”. The follower’s spirituality is shown by how he dresses, or what he wears on the body and the head, or what he eats and refrains from eating. Acceptance before his god is by the frequency and regularity of his acts of worship. Severe punishment awaits the follower who attempts to leave his religion. Only the followers have the right to express what the religion teaches. Others who do not adhere to that faith are not permitted to express what they think or feel about the religion.

That was the type of atmosphere Jesus Christ came into.

The Saviour’s arrival

The arrival of the Saviour is portrayed as a young male deer, leaping and skipping over the mountains. This shows His vitality and power. No one could stop Him from coming to rescue His people. Nothing could prevent Him from saving the elect. Satan tried various methods to prevent the Saviour from appearing on the scene, but he failed. Herod the Great tried to destroy the infant Jesus by ordering for all male children from two years old and under to be killed, but he failed. The religious leaders tried their utmost to stop Him from preaching, and finally delivered Him to be crucified. Even that failed to stop the Lord from saving His people!

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ occurred outside the walls of Jerusalem. We are told in Hebrews 13:12-13, “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.” The Jews rejected Jesus Christ as the Saviour. The Romans crucified Him outside the city of Jerusalem. From the ceremonial point of view, Jesus Christ was regarded as unclean. He was a reproach. Yet, by His death on the cross, He saves sinners from their sins. God “made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). In order to be saved, we must be prepared to identify ourselves with Him. We must “go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.” But this the majority of the Jews refused to do. They were prepared only to gaze at Him from the confines of their legalistic system of religion.

This is shown by verse 9, “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag, Behold, he stands behind our wall; he is looking through the windows, gazing through the lattice.” Note that the phrase, “gazing through the lattice” may be translated as “showing through the lattice”. The people could hear the Lord calling, and they could see Him, yet they would not want to expose themselves fully to Him. Often, this is what happens to those who hear the gospel. You hear the voice of Jesus Christ calling, you know He is near, but you do not want to come to Him. You hide yourself from Him, yet you would not flee from Him. You are attracted to Him, yet you would not come openly to Him. It is as though you sense that He knows too much about you. You want to run away from Him because you are a creature of darkness, while Jesus Christ is the light of the world, and His brightness hurts your eyes. You protest when Christians come to tell you about Jesus Christ, yet you want to know

more about Him.

This, then, is the picture painted for us concerning the first coming of Jesus Christ. He came to call sinners to Himself, but He was not received well by His own people - the Jews.

II. The call of the gospel (vv. 10-13)

Redemption accomplished

The second part covers verses 10-13 - the call of the gospel. Everything needed to save sinners has been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ. He lived a perfectly righteous life, fulfilling all the requirements of the law of God on behalf of His people. He died on the cross, bearing the full penalty of the sins of His people. We are saved by Christ's life, as much as by His death. This might sound strange if you are hearing it for the first time. Actually, this is correct doctrine - we are saved by the life, and the death, of Christ. Often, we say that the death of Christ saves us from our sins. But that is only a summary of the full doctrine of salvation. We are saved by His active obedience, i.e. by His keeping of the law of God on behalf of His people, and also by His passive obedience, i.e. by His death on the cross as a substitute for His people.

The gospel calls upon sinners to repent from sin and to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. When a person turns from his sinful life to trust in Christ, his sins are regarded as taken away by Christ's death on the cross. At the same time, the righteousness of Christ is regarded as given to the believer. The Jews, however, refused to trust in Christ as their Saviour, and relied on their attempts to keep the law to be saved. Many people today also have the same attitude towards Jesus Christ. They refuse to trust in Christ alone for salvation. Instead, they rely on their attempts to live a holy life to earn salvation. The Bible makes it clear that we do not have any righteousness of our own, and no amount of human effort can change our sinful nature nor make up for the sins we have committed against God. Salvation cannot be earned by human efforts. The only way to be saved is to trust in Jesus Christ. Salvation is truly by the grace of God, through faith in Christ alone.

Redemption applied

This message of salvation is proclaimed to people everywhere. Through the hearing of the gospel you are being called to Christ. The call of the Lord Jesus Christ comes to you in such a tender and loving manner, persuading you with powerful reasons. We are told, in verses 10-13, that winter is past, the rainy season is over, spring has come, the birds are singing, and the fruits are appearing on the trees. The passage is so beautiful, not only in its form, but also in its content. It says, 'My beloved spoke, and said to me: "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over *and* gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its green figs, and the vines *with* the tender grapes give a good smell. Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away!"' We have here a powerfully persuasive call from the Lord to arise and follow Him. Winter conveys to us the idea of coldness, gloom, and fruitlessness. We would all agree that although winter has its own beauty, it generally conveys gloom in contrast to the brightness, joy and fruitfulness of the spring season.

Historically, the proclamation of the gospel to all nations started on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the gathered disciples of Christ. The long wait for the coming of the Saviour was over. The period of bondage to sin, to legalism, and to frustrating failures in spiritual pursuits was over. From that day, Jesus Christ is proclaimed as "the way, the truth, and the life". Many are the people held in bondage to sin, to the keeping of religious rituals, and to the futility of earning salvation by good works. The proclamation of salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, is startling to those hearing it for the first time. Salvation is not accomplished by our human effort, but by humbling ourselves before God and coming to Him through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Acceptance before the holy God is not by building up for ourselves a greater pool of merits through good works, but by receiving the righteousness of Christ through faith in Him.

Redemption has been accomplished by Jesus Christ when He died on the cross as a substitute for those He came to save. It must now be applied, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel. We are told, in Romans 10:17, that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God". We are commanded in the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all the nations.

Persuasive preaching, consisting of doctrine applied to the hearers, must be used to reason with souls so that they may come to faith in Christ. Sinners need to hear the gospel proclaimed for what it is - the good news of salvation!

As applied to the church, we realise that there are times when it goes through hardship, barrenness, and even persecution. Severe trials also come through disagreements among the brethren, such that emotions run high, hurtful words are hurled at one another, breakups occur, and severe damage is caused to the work of the gospel. While in the midst of such trials, darkness and gloom appear to be upon us. Service to God is such a burden, and the joy of meeting together appears to have fizzled away. But we cannot remain in such a situation forever. We must get out of the coldness and barrenness of such winter seasons, and move on into the joy and blessing of the Lord. We must seek Him till we find Him, so that the fruitfulness of the gospel is seen again.

In the personal life of the Christian, there are times when winter appears to set in. There is coldness of heart, and the joy of salvation is lost. Often, that is due to carelessness in the spiritual life, when you are drawn away by temptation and fall into sin. Backsliding is never a pleasant state to be in. You know what needs to be done - you must repent of your sins, and put things right with God and men. Confess your sins to God, seek forgiveness from those you have wronged, and make restitution where possible. Draw near to the Lord, and He will draw near to you.

We must not fail to address those who are not yet converted. For too long, you have called yourself a Christian but you are not born-again. For too long, you are satisfied with a nominal Christianity, failing to experience the blessedness of new life in Christ. Why remain in the coldness and gloom of winter, when there is the joy and blessedness of spring to be enjoyed? Come to Jesus Christ! Go outside the camp, to join Him in His reproach. Stand with Him, share in the shame of Calvary, and you will find rivers of blessing pouring into your life.

III. The response of the church (vv. 14-15)

Responding in worship

In the third part, covering verses 14-15, we have the Lord calling upon His people to draw near to Him in worship and prayer. First, we see the Lord calling out to the church with tender adoration: "O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice." The Lord looks upon the church as a dove, and not a bird of prey. A dove is gentle and peaceable, unlike the eagle that is constantly on the look out for other creatures to pounce upon. We are told by those who are more knowledgeable in these matters that the dove has some peculiar characteristics. The dove will eat only grain, and not worms. The dove is gentle in spirit and sweet in its voice. It also keeps its nest clean, refusing to litter it with its own droppings. Here, the dove is used to picture those who have believed in Jesus Christ. Believers have had their wild spirits tamed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and their nature is being transformed from one degree of holiness to another.

Believers are described as those who are hidden "in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff." This is an allusion to Moses being sheltered in the rock as God passed by and revealed His back to him (Ex. 33:22-23). God condescended to reveal a glimpse of His glory to Moses, but He specially protected him from harm - for no one could see God and live. It is also an allusion to Isaiah 32:2, in which we are told that the Lord will be "as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land". Jesus Christ is, to the believer, the "Rock of Ages, cleft for me." We also sing the hymn, "Beneath the cross of Jesus, I gladly take my stand. The shadow of a mighty rock, within a weary land." That is what it means - we are kept safe from the wrath of God which we deserve for our sins, and we are protected from harm in a world ravaged by sin, all because Jesus Christ has redeemed us by His blood. Believers have their fair share of trials and troubles in the world, but the Lord's eye is upon them for good.

We want to draw near the Lord because we love Him and are grateful to Him for our salvation. We are able to love the Lord only because He first loved us. The Lord takes delight in His people. He says to us, "For your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." We are reminded of the grandmother who cannot take any criticism of her precious grandchild for, to her, the grandchild is perfect! We might say love is blind to any defect or imperfection. To the Lord, we are sweet and lovely. He has made us

so by cleansing us of our sins by His precious blood, and transforming us into new creatures. The unbelieving world disdain us, and we are conscious of our own sinfulness. The Lord, however, sees us as precious and beautiful, because we are clothed in His righteousness. He is determined to transform us into His own image. He sees us from the perspective of eternity, when we will be made perfect in heaven. The transformation He has begun in us will be brought to completion in due time.

Since the Lord takes delight in His people, should we not draw near to Him in worship? Should we not sing to Him in praise? Yet, what do we find often in our worship? We do not worship with joy. We do not sing from the heart. As a preacher, I often glance at the faces of the people in front of me when the singing is not as it should be and, as expected, many mouths are seen to be not moving, or are merely mumbling. Since we are singing to the Lord, can we not sing properly, and with our hearts in the words we are singing? Apart from singing praise to the Lord, we are to listen to Him as His word is expounded. Here, again, we can tell whether or not people are listening attentively. No doubt, there are those who are truly listening despite the fact that they appear to be sleeping, but can we not look at the preacher while he is preaching? If we are focused on listening to the words, we would not be conscious of looking at the preacher. It is basic courtesy to look at the person who is speaking to you. Without stretching it too far, there is a sense in which the preacher represents the Lord when His word is being proclaimed. We are to show our faces to the Lord, for we are lovely in His sight. More importantly, we are to listen to Him attentively.

Responding in sanctification

Apart from responding to Him in worship, we also respond in sanctification. We are told, in verse 15, "Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines *have* tender grapes." As the Lord's people, we serve Him in various spheres of ministry - each in a corner of His vineyard. Note the plural, "Catch *us* the foxes..." and "*our* vines have tender grapes..." We have a share in the Lord's kingdom. There are the foxes that come in to create havoc. These foxes may be small but as they run around in the vineyard, much damage is caused. What are these foxes? They are a reference to anything that destroy the good that God is doing in us, and through us. There are foxes within our lives, and there are foxes without. Within us are sinful desires lurking, waiting to stir us to action against God's will. There are the ulterior motives, wrong attitudes, and sinful thoughts. We must catch those foxes, and remove them. We are to put to death the besetting sins in our lives.

Apart from the "little foxes" within us, there are those that come from without. There are worldly temptations, bad influences, and false doctrines. Some professing believers take for granted the opportunities to meet together in church, and often absent themselves. Some are critical of those who serve God faithfully, while others are cynical of any gospel enterprise, believing that not much good can be accomplished. If you interact too much with these negative-minded people, you might be influenced to come less frequently to church meetings. You might show a false humility by not contributing to the life of the church, claiming that you have few gifts, all of which are insignificant. You are actually behaving irresponsibly, failing to see that you are hindering the work of God, not so much by what you do, but rather by what you are not doing. Laziness, false humility and irresponsibility are little foxes that can cause harm to your spiritual life and hinder the progress of the gospel. Then, you might be interacting too closely with those who hold to wrong teaching, or unhelpful emphases on some points of doctrine. You justify your interaction with them by claiming that they are also the children of God, who profess faith in Christ. What I can say is that you have a false generosity of heart towards such people, and you are more likely to be influenced by them for ill than to influence them for good.

Responding in service

Another matter concerns the vineyard itself, or rather, the vines with the tender grapes. We are told, "...for our vines *have* tender grapes". This shows that fruitfulness is guaranteed in the church and in the life of the individual Christian. We begin with the individual Christian. We read in Galatians 5:22, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." The Spirit of Christ who dwells in the true believer will ensure that such "graces" are produced. The believer will be transformed in his character, from one degree of holiness to another. We also read in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." What is the fruit? It includes the

Christian graces like love, joy, and peace, which we have mentioned. But it includes also the result of witnessing and the good works which we engage in. Although the measure of our success in spiritual work is not in terms of the number of converts made, we are nevertheless given the assurance that there will be fruit. You never know when the persons you witness to may come to faith in Christ. We may have the joy of knowing this while on earth, or we may not know until we arrive in heaven.

We must also consider the fruitfulness of the church's ministry. As a church, we are expected to plant other churches. We must not only be concerned about growing bigger numerically, but we must also engage in planting other churches - whether directly or indirectly. A careful study of the Great Commission, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, will show that it is a command given by the Lord to the local church, to plant other local churches. The early church understood the Great Commission in this way. The church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas to plant local churches. The church at Jerusalem did the same in Judea. This is clearly seen in the book of Acts. The church today must endeavour to evangelise its vicinity, and also to plant churches farther afield. This is where we must not allow the little foxes to disrupt the work of evangelisation and church planting. Petty jealousies, personal disputes, and schism must not be allowed to stifle mission-mindedness and definite gospel endeavours.

Beware of the little foxes! God wants us to live a holy life, to be obedient to His word, and to be faithful to Him, so that gospel progress is not hindered.

IV. The second coming of Christ (vv. 16-17)

Present by His Spirit

The fourth and final part is about the second coming of Christ. The Lord came to earth the first time to redeem His people. After His death and resurrection, He returned to heaven and promised to come back to take His people to be with Him. In a sense, He is still with His people on earth. He is present with them by His Spirit. As His word is proclaimed by the undershepherds, He feeds His people by giving them understanding in the power of the Spirit. He comforts and strengthens them, and assures them of His love for them. We, therefore, read in verse 16, "My beloved *is* mine, and I *am* his. He feeds *his* flock among the lilies."

Absent in heaven

From another point of view, the Lord is away in heaven, acting as our High Priest before the Father. He is the groom who is away, while the church is the bride waiting for Him on earth. Although separated physically, they are thinking of each other. The mutual love between them is pure, and quite different from the selfish, possessive, love seen among immature couples. You know how it is with a couple whose love is insecure and unstable. When separated, they are constantly checking on each other to make sure that he or she is not getting too close to another person. Each is fearful of the other falling in love with someone else, and each is suspicious of the other. This is not the case between the church and her Lord. The church knows that the Lord loves her, and the Lord is constantly interceding for her in heaven. The church longs for the Lord to return. That wonderful day will come, when there will be the great marriage supper of the Lamb!

Faithfully waiting

While waiting for that day to arrive, we want to be faithful and obedient to Him, and to purify ourselves in readiness for Him. The trials of earth will end. The Lord will come quickly, in power, like a deer that bounces over the mountains which currently separate us. The word "Bether" in verse 17 actually means "separation" - "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of separation." This is another beautiful passage. Like verses 10-13, this verse is beautiful in form and meaning.

I cannot help but think that the apostle John had this passage of the Song of Solomon in mind when he penned the last chapter of the book of Revelation. Just as the bride yearns for the return of her beloved, so also the church yearns for the return of Christ. We read in Revelation 22:17, 'And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!"' Verse 20 says, 'He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!'

Conclusion

As we end, let us note that the teaching of this portion of Scripture is already fulfilled, is being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled. The Lord has already come to redeem His people. The gospel is going out to all nations, calling out God's chosen people. The church is responding in worship and sanctification. The Lord will one day return for His people. We know that eternal blessedness awaits God's people. We know also that when the Lord returns a second time, He will judge the unbelieving people of the world. That is why, in closing, I would appeal to you who are not yet believers or who are only Christians in name, to come to Jesus Christ for salvation. The winter is past... The time of singing has come... Come to the Lord Jesus Christ! Trust in Him, and you will be given eternal life.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~