

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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Christ's Estimate of the Church (Song 4:1-6)

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We come to “The Song of Solomon”, Chapter 4, verses 1-6, from which we learn of “Christ’s Estimate Of The Church”. God-willing, this will be followed by a study of verses 7-16, from which we learn of “Christ’s Delight In His Church”. An allegory, by its nature, tends to make a point-for-point comparison. As a love poem, the basic intention of the book is to convey to the reader the mutual love between Christ and the church. This is done by means of the relationship between King Solomon and the Shulamite woman, to whom he is betrothed.

The purpose of this passage and, indeed, of the whole chapter, is to assure believers of Christ’s love for them. This is so much needed because believers are under constant pressure in the world and have to bear many trials for their faith. Contrary to the “health-and-wealth gospel” taught in many churches today, the Bible teaches us to be prepared for trials, sufferings and self-denials that will come to believers because of their faith. The Lord tells us in Luke 14:27, “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” This does not mean that the Christian life is dull, gloomy and depressing. No, the Christian life has its inner joy, and its sense of fulfilment, given by the Lord. However, the sense of joy and fulfilment is experienced in the midst of trials and sufferings which we have to bear with. If you are new to the Christian faith, please be prepared for this!

What are the trials and sufferings likely to come to us? They may be from without, or they may be from within us. From without comes persecution from the unbelieving world, misunderstandings from family members, and ridicule from unconverted friends. These trials vary in intensity and in frequency, but they are sure to come to the believer. With the Lord’s help, and with growing experience and spiritual maturity, we will be more and more able to handle them. Then, there are the trials from within us. Remaining sins trouble us, and temptations to sin can be particularly strong. When converted, we are given a new desire to live a holy life and a new ability to obey God’s word. All these are due to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But that does not mean we are free from inner struggles - against the stirrings of lusts, the tendency to be lazy, the inclination to do what is convenient and comfortable to ourselves over against what is pleasing to God, and the like.

These trials, both from without and from within, often cause us to be disappointed, discouraged, and depressed. One of the ways the Lord comforts us is by revealing His love for us. Even if we are joyful and filled with the Spirit most of the time, the assurance of Christ’s love for us is a welcome tonic. In the present passage, we learn of Christ’s estimate of His church. He sees us as beautiful because He has made us so. He loves us and has made us to be what we are. There are three sections to this message.

I. Beauty in the eyes of the Lord

The beauty of the bride

First, we learn that the church is beautiful in the eyes of the Lord. We often say, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. Here, the beholder is Christ. We are told, in verse 1, “Behold, you *are* fair, my love! Behold, you *are* fair! You have dove’s eyes behind your veil. Your hair *is* like a flock of goats, going down from Mount Gilead.” This is a general statement of our standing before God and of how the Lord looks upon us. In the eyes of the world, the church is nothing. We have no position, power, or glory. The world despises the Christians. This is generally true. We know that there are individuals

who are attracted to the Christian faith because of what they observe in the lives of their Christian friends. The Christians may not be perfect people but they love one another, there is a certain inner joy in them, and they appear to have values and a sense of direction in life. Some parents even encourage their children to go to church to seek for good life partners there. They do not realise that the true Christians will not court non-Christians, let alone marry them. Yes, there are non-Christians who are attracted to the Christian life, but the world at large does not appreciate the Christians. God, however, loves His children, and Christ looks upon the church as beautiful. And beautiful she is, for she has been purchased by His precious blood which was shed on the cross of Calvary, and He continues to cleanse her “with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:26). Believers show that they belong to Christ by getting baptised, and they continue to grow in holiness by the hearing of God’s word. The Holy Spirit in the believer transforms him as he hears and obeys the word.

The eyes and hair

The transformed character of the believer is portrayed by the eyes of a dove. The eyes of a dove are round and clear, showing gentleness, meekness, and docility. They are unlike the eyes of an eagle or a tiger, which show their readiness to pounce on their prey. Gentleness, teachability and humility are qualities found in a believer. One of the first things the Holy Spirit does in us when we are converted is to subdue our aggressive nature. Saul was full of fury and hatred against the Christians, but when confronted by the Lord on the road to Damascus, he was subdued. When converted, you find peace with God, contentment in life, and tranquility of spirit.

The wavy, black hair of the bride - in all its fullness and length - appears like a flock of goats going down from Mount Gilead. It seems odd that the beauty of a lady should be compared to a flock of goats, but its very oddity shows that there are qualities of the person being alluded to rather than her actual physical beauty being praised. What does the hair speak of concerning the person? We are reminded of 1 Corinthians 11:3, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman *is* man, and the head of Christ *is* God.” Then, it says in verse 10, “For this reason the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on *her* head, because of the angels.” In its context, these words show that a woman is to be submitted to man. God created man and woman equal in His sight. They were to complement each other in life. As a result of the Fall, they are equally in need of salvation in Christ. However, it is God’s intention that they have different, complementary, roles in life. There are biological and physical differences between man and woman. Man is generally bigger and physically stronger than woman so that he is more suited to rough work such as carrying heavy loads and fighting in wars. The feminine hormones in woman make her more suited to the role of a homemaker and caregiver. It is God’s will that man takes the role of leadership in the country, in the home, and in the church. This is not to say that women cannot function well, or are totally excluded from any leadership role. We are only saying that it is God’s will for man to lead, and for the woman to submit to the rightful authority of man. When man fails to play the role of head, a woman may arise to take his role, as happened in the case of the prophetess, Deborah, in time of the Judges. A Christian man who fails to act as head of the family is not setting a good example to his children. Such a family is unlikely to be greatly blessed by God.

Coming back to the hair of the bride, we note that it is first a symbol of submission to rightful authority. It is, secondly, a symbol of beauty. We are told in 1 Corinthians 11:15, “But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her, for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.” Women throughout the ages, and in all cultures, keep longer hair compared to men, to display their femininity and beauty. In recent days, there have been women who cut their hair short like that of men, such that it is difficult to tell whether she is male or female. Also, there have been men who keep long hair such that it is impossible to tell whether they are male or female when looked from the back. Those people depart from the norm, but it is God’s will that men should be dressed clearly as men, and women as women. We do not want to dwell on these departures from the norm. We are considering the beauty of the bride as seen in her hair. The hair of the bride is like a flock of goats moving down the hill, which shows that it is wavy in an orderly fashion. In Ephesians 6:17, we are told to “take the helmet of salvation”, as we put on the other pieces of armour. The helmet is meant to protect the head. Here, the hair covers the head, which is the seat of our thoughts. The wavy hair, like a flock of moving goats, show that the thoughts of the bride are clear and orderly. She is a rational and clear-thinking lady, and not merely an emotional and sentimental one. The beauty of her hair is intended to show the beauty of

her thought-life.

The believer whose life is regulated by God's word will stand out in obvious spiritual beauty. He is stable in his belief, not easily drawn away by false teaching. He is balanced in his grasp of Bible truths, not easily offset by issues and trends of the time. He is clear-minded, able to distinguish the main matters from the peripheral ones. On the corporate level, the church that is adorned with clear, systematic, teaching will stand out in an age of superficiality. Visitors will sense the warmth and vitality of those who walk closely with their God. The Lord is pleased with the church that reflects His character and is faithful to His word.

The teeth

Verse 2 says, "Your teeth *are* like a flock of shorn *sheep* which have come up from the washing, every one of which bears twins, and none *is* barren among them." When a person bares his teeth, we are able to see whether there is a tooth missing. In the case of this bride, not one is missing. The teeth are in pairs - nice and even, white and clean - like sheep that have been shorn, and coming up after a good wash. Why should the bride be showing her teeth? Animals bare their teeth when they are about to attack their enemies. Humans show their teeth when they smile. The more broadly you smile, the clearer your teeth are seen. If you have nice teeth, they make your smile beautiful and attractive. The smile speaks of warmth of heart and friendliness of disposition. That is a characteristic of converted people. Those who have trusted in Christ for salvation would have joy in them, and a warm and friendly heart towards other people.

We have considered the eyes, the hair, and the teeth (or, rather, the smile) of the bride. Christian ladies who are gentle, meek, and sweet in spirit are truly attractive. Coupled with clear-mindedness and a good understanding of God's word, we have a truly beautiful person. This is not someone who has "beauty without brains". Added to those qualities is friendliness and warm-heartedness. What more do you want in a bride? She seems to be the perfect bride! But we must remember that this is the picture of the bride of Christ, the church. The Lord has made her the beauty that she is. The church has been purchased and cleansed by the blood of Christ. She is being transformed by the Holy Spirit in accordance to the teaching of the Bible. She is submitted to the Lord, and to all lawful authorities. She follows the teaching of God's word and is not easily swayed by "every wind of doctrine", nor easily drawn away by the trends and fashions of the time. She has a love towards other people which is shown by a warm and friendly disposition. The church is truly beautiful, and well-loved by the Lord.

II. Additional assets of the bride

We have considered the looks of the bride. She is beautiful to behold. Her eyes and her hair make her look particularly beautiful. Her warm and friendly smile is so attractive. Which man will not be stricken by her beauty? But we must control ourselves and consider the other assets she possesses. We consider her speech, her abilities, and her emotion.

Her speech

While describing the bride's teeth, the writer cannot help but notice her lips. He, therefore, goes on to say, in verse 3, "Your lips *are* like a strand of scarlet, and your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil *are* like a piece of pomegranate." Generally speaking, our lips are red in colour. The redness causes the lips to stand out on our faces. Throughout the world, the traditional colour of lipsticks is red. Today, lipsticks come in different colours, including purple, and even black, but red is still the favoured colour. Women use lipsticks to enhance the colour of their lips. The lips form the shape of the mouth. Some ladies have particularly well-shaped lips, making their mouths beautiful, just as there are those who have beautiful eyes and noses. When we speak of the lips and the mouth, we are alluding to the speech of the person. In Matthew 15:8, the Lord rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, saying, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me." In Romans 10:10, we are told, "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Furthermore, it says in Romans 10:15, 'And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things.*"' We see, then, that the lips and mouth are related to speech in worship, in the confessing of faith, and in the

preaching of the gospel. Our speech is to be employed in the service of God.

The bride has beautiful lips and a lovely mouth. Since these are a reference to the speech of believers, we need to ask if we have employed it well in the service of God. Do we pray regularly? Do we sing heartily to the Lord? Do we confess our faith to the world and proclaim the gospel to all? Apart from these, we have to consider the use of our speech to edify one another. Is our speech gracious and “seasoned with salt” (Col. 4:6)? The words we utter, and the manner we utter them, have a tremendous effect upon our hearers. You would know of individuals who are such a joy to be with because they are so warm, understanding, and encouraging. Their words are balm to our bruised souls. There are others who make us unhappy each time we meet them. When we analyse the situation to determine why this is so, we discover that their speech is so caustic and the way they say things is such that our hearts are constantly being pierced at. These are very unedifying people to be with. Then, there are the individuals who are the opposite of these, who try to be encouraging but in the wrong way. They do not finish listening to what we have to say and, therefore, do not understand what we are saying, yet they are so quick to want to encourage us. Such people are so artificial in their manners and so unhelpful to talk to because they do not truly listen to others. Let us make sure that our speech is truly edifying to others. “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

This leads us to consider the temples of the bride which are hidden behind the veil. It would seem that the veil is made of gauze, so that what is covered can still be discerned. The temples, or sides of the head, are described as like a piece of pomegranate which has been opened, ready for eating. It sparkles red, like rubies, juicy and clear as crystal. It is so attractive! The attractiveness of the temples would appear to lie in the fact that it is partially hidden behind the veil. This is to show that the bride is modest and humble about her intelligence, which the temples represent. A person with a broad forehead, and therefore prominent temples, is supposed to be intelligent. We have considered earlier the wise and edifying speech of the bride, which reveals her intelligence. We are now shown the modesty and humility of the bride, who does not parade her intelligence but covers her head appropriately. Here is someone who is not showy and obtrusive about her wisdom and knowledge. There are beautiful women who talk too loudly, too much, and are attention-seeking. They are not attractive, despite their physical beauty. The believer should not appear threatening to others around him. His wisdom should be sought by others, and not imposed upon them. He bears witness to others, carrying out “aggressive evangelism”, but he should not be aggressive in his approach and mannerism. The church should not be showy and attention-seeking in the world. We do not need to declare our presence by addressing social and political issues. We quietly act upon issues as they arise, and as we are able, in accordance to God’s word. We do not want to be diverted from being a centre of truth, a beacon to the spiritually lost, and a refuge for wounded and bruised souls. The church should be modest and humble in the world.

Her readiness to serve

Consider another asset of the bride, namely her readiness to serve the Lord. We read, in verse 4, “Your neck *is* like the tower of David, built for an armoury, on which hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.” No lady would like her neck to be described like this - strong, muscular, and solid. But this is the description of the Tower of David, whose qualities are found in the neck of the bride, which supports the head. The Tower of David is the armoury in Jerusalem in which are kept the weapons - both the offensive and the defensive ones. The Tower is strong and impregnable to the enemies. The weapons are to be used by the mighty men, who can be counted on to fend off the enemies and to protect the nation. This is to show that Jesus Christ, the greater Son of David - the One greater than Solomon - has His mighty men to defend His people from the enemies of souls and to protect them from dangers. This is a reference to the Christians who are given various gifts, or abilities, to serve Him in the church. The Lord trusts them and has entrusted them with the task of defending His church.

In life, we experience betrayal and lack of trust from others. We are not valued, our abilities are not recognised, and we feel “used” by others. We successfully accomplish a task, but the credit goes to someone else. We have the necessary qualifications, but others less qualified are assigned to a project. We have obvious abilities to be useful, but others feel threatened by our presence. We are sidelined,

unappreciated, and not valued. This happens in the place of work, in the family, and also among Christians. When betrayed by Christians, we can feel terribly hurt. Our spirit can become dampened, so that we become discouraged and cynical. This is when we must be very careful, for it is a common strategy of Satan to destroy our usefulness in the Lord's service. Satan often sows fear or discouragement in our hearts so that we become less useful in God's service. We must fight Him off with all the weapons that the Lord has equipped us with - using both the defensive and the offensive ones. In Ephesians 6, we are told to put on all the pieces of the spiritual armour, and use the weapons of prayer and the word of God.

The Lord knows that His people can be relied upon to fight His battles. He is entrusting the faith to His people. The church must propagate the faith from one generation to another, without it being changed - faithfully passing on the truth and spreading it far and wide. If you are truly born again, you belong to the Lord and you are valued by Him. Each of us has been given gifts to serve Him with. There are those who can preach. There are those who can give. There are others who can encourage. And all of us can pray. When we are united as a church, we are like the impregnable Tower of David. The world may not value us, the world may scorn the church, but what does it matter? If the Lord trusts His people, and values our service, what is our reputation before men? Our self-esteem does not depend on the approval of men. It is sufficient to be valued by our Lord.

Her love and commitment

There is another asset seen in the bride, namely her love and commitment to the Lord. This is shown in verse 5, which says, "Your two breasts *are* like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies." Some artists would want to paint the naked woman with her two dangling breasts, and regard that as art. Our purpose, however, should be higher than that. We seek the spiritual significance, the loftier meaning. We have seen that the hair of the bride is symbolic of her submission to authority and of her beauty in thought and understanding. That arises from the fact that the hair covers the head, which is the symbol of authority and the seat of reasoning. The New Testament equivalent is the helmet which covers the head, in Ephesians 6. The helmet of salvation will shield us from the fiery darts of Satan, which are the lies and doubts he shoots into our mind. In the same way, we should not focus attention on the physical breasts but, rather, see those as a reference to the part of the body closest to the heart - the seat of our emotion. We know that emotion by itself cannot be the measure of truth. We must therefore be careful not to trust mere feelings, or allow our lives to be ruled by feelings. At the same time, we must recognise that the emotion is given to us by God. It is a faculty of our human personality. From it arises our feelings. We must learn to regulate our feelings with the truth of Scripture, and cultivate feelings that are right and good. Feelings of hatred and jealousy should not be entertained. Love and compassion should be cultivated.

When we talk about right feelings, which is the chief for the Christian? We can quite safely say that love should be the chief characteristic of the Christian's emotion. We are referring to love that arises from the experience of the love of God in Jesus Christ. We are able to love God only because He first loved us and sent His only begotten Son to save us. There is nothing lovely about us, yet the Lord laid down His life for us and made us lovely in His sight. We are so unworthy of His love, yet He loves us to the end. When we ponder on the love of God shown to us in His Son, we are overwhelmed. The only right response is for us to love the Lord and to give ourselves wholeheartedly to Him. We know that our love for Him is so imperfect, but believers who know the love of God would want to love Him and commit their lives to Him. We desire to be faithful to His word, and loyal to His cause.

Our love for God must be shown in our love for men as well, for this is the chief of the commandments. In particular, we must love God's people. Sad to say, that is not often seen. There is so much carnal rivalry between Christians, so much competition and backstabbing. There is a proper place to admonish and correct other Christians, and there is a proper place to separate from those who continue adamantly in sin or wrong teaching. But those situations are quite easily distinguishable from carnal rivalry. The competitive spirit can show itself in ugly ways, causing so much heartache to God's people, and so much damage to God's work. Many problems in church are caused by this - a lack of love for God and His people, with too much love for self. There seems to be no concern for the hurt caused to God's servants, no concern for the damage caused to gospel work, and no concern for the dishonour brought to Christ. There is insistence on one's own ways, one's rights, and one's points of

view. We are such great sinners! We need to repent of our self-centredness and our self-will.

Believers need to show greater love and commitment to the Lord, for He loves His people despite their faltering love for Him.

III. The resolve of the bride

Let us stand back and reflect on what has been covered. In the first section, we considered the eyes, the hair, and the smile of the bride. She has a gentle spirit, intelligence in the things of God, and a warm heart. In the second section, we considered her lips and mouth, her temple, her neck, and her breasts. She has the assets of gracious speech, readiness of service, and love for the Lord and His people. In this third section, we consider the resolve of the bride. We know that we are not perfect. At the same time, we are aware that God treats us as perfect because of what Christ has accomplished in our salvation. We are beautiful in God's sight only because of the continuing work of the Lord in our lives. If the Lord had not saved us, and if the Holy Spirit does not continue to transform us, none of us will be beautiful. The full ugliness in each of us will show more and more. In view of this, what is our response?

The right response is shown to us in verse 6: "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense." These words are familiar to us. We have met them in Chapter 2, verse 17: "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 Bether (or Separation)." There, we learned of the need to be yearning for the Lord's return. The Lord has gone to prepare a place for us in heaven. He will one day return to take His people to be with Him. Meanwhile, the church should long for His coming, which will be like a young deer bouncing over the mountains that currently separate us. In our present passage, an additional thought is added, namely that the bride resolves to go up into the mountain to await the return of the groom. This seems to be a reference to Mount Zion, on which is the temple where worship is carried out.

Myrrh was a fragrant liquid produced from an aromatic plant. It was the main ingredient in the anointing oil used in Israel. It was used to anoint a person who was being set apart to serve God in the capacity of a prophet, a priest, or a king. Frankincense was the chief ingredient in the incense offered on the altar of incense in the temple in Jerusalem. It produced a sweet fragrance that rose up to God. It represented the prayer and praise of the worshipper. The idea conveyed to us is that the church must resolve to set herself apart for God and spend time in prayer and praise. We live in the world, but we need not be of the world. We serve God in the world, but we must take time off to worship Him. We do not want to be influenced by the world. We do not want to absorb worldly values and live worldly lives. We want to be in much fellowship with God's people, to worship God together, to hear His word, and be in His presence. It is so easy to be full of zeal for the Lord, to be active in His service, and then to gradually lose our spiritual sharpness and the heart of worship. It is easy to have the spirit of Martha instead of the spirit of Mary. While there are some Christians who seem to be so full of piety to the extent of becoming virtually useless in God's service, there are more Christians who are so full of activity to the extent of losing their spirituality. Beware of the spirit of Martha!

Conclusion

As we ponder on the love of the Lord for His church, do we not bemoan the fact that we do not love Him more? The Lord looks upon His church as beautiful, and He continues to sanctify His church by the power of His Spirit, in accordance to His word. The church has so many qualities that make her beautiful in the Lord's sight. That the world should miss seeing those qualities is understandable. That believers should fail to see those qualities is such a pity, for they miss the inner comfort of knowing the love of Christ for His people.

We must allow the truth of Christ's love for the church to sink into our understanding. Consider a young lady and a young man who are in love with each other. The young man does not feel embarrassed to tell her that she is beautiful because he loves her deeply. If you are that young lady, would you not make greater effort to beautify yourself? Would you not cut and perm your hair nicely, put reasonable make up on yourself, and dress well so that you appear even more beautiful? You wouldn't just grin sheepishly each time the young man expresses his appreciation of you. Instead, you

would thank him and resolve to be even more beautiful. The Lord loves us and sees so many things beautiful about us. The right response is for us to thank Him and attempt to be even more pleasing to our Lord by improving on our spiritual qualities.

Let us end by noting that we owe everything that we are, and everything that we have, to the Lord. We must resolve to keep a close walk with Him, and to live for Him. May God help us to do that.

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