

The Gratitude Of The Expectant Church (Song 8:1-4)

by BS Poh

In this book of allegory, we learn of the love relationship between Jesus Christ and His church. Let us review the last couple of chapters in order to bring ourselves up-to-date. In Chapter 6, we learned of Christ's love for the militant church, i.e. the church that is actively serving Him on earth. In Chapter 7, we learned of Christ's love for the maturing church. In this last chapter of the book, we learn of Christ's love for the expectant church. The church lives in expectancy of Christ's return. The chapter is rich with spiritual food. There are simply too many beautiful scenes that we do not want to miss by rushing through it. Let us focus on the first four verses of this chapter here. We learn of the gratitude of the church towards the Lord as she awaits His return.

The passage shows three areas in which the church expresses her gratitude to the Lord. First, the church is grateful for salvation from the Lord, covering verse 1. Secondly, the church is grateful for sustenance from the Lord, i.e. for providing everything needful to keep her faith, covering verse 2. Thirdly, the church is grateful for succour, or help given in her need, covering verse 3. The key words are "salvation", "sustenance", and "succour". The last verse is a charge to all to maintain peace in the church.

I. Gratitude For Salvation From Christ (v. 1)

The first area for which the church is grateful is salvation in Jesus Christ. Verse 1 says, "Oh, that you were like my brother, who nursed at my mother's breasts! *If* I should find you outside, I would kiss you; I would not be despised." The last part of this verse is the key to understanding the passage. The bride is being despised. She is being bullied by her cruel half-brothers. This is alluded to in verses 8 to 9 of the present chapter. The ill-treatment has been going on for some time, in fact, for a long time. Let us recall the background of the bride. She is a country girl. She lives in very difficult circumstances. She has a number of older half-brothers, who have been bullying her. These older half-brothers were born to her mother by her first husband. When the husband died, the mother had remarried and had this daughter - the Shulamite lady, who is betrothed to Solomon. Solomon had set eye on her, and realized that she is such a beauty, beneath the external plainness of her dressing and the tan upon her. The Shulamite lady has grown up taking care of the vineyard and the sheep and goats of her half-brothers, neglecting the property left for her by her father. This we have learned from Chapter 1:5-6. Verse 6 of that chapter says, "Do not look upon me, because I *am* dark, because the sun has tanned me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, *but* my own vineyard I have not kept." The next two verses of the chapter show that she is a shepherdess, taking care of the flock of sheep and goats that belong to her brothers. She has been cruelly treated by her half-brothers all these years, until she met Solomon and is betrothed to him. These are her half-brothers, for they are referred to as "my mother's sons" instead of "my brothers". A similar expression is found in 1 Corinthians 5:1, which says, "It is actually reported *that there is* sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's

wife!” The expression “his father’s wife” means “his step-mother”. So also, here, “my mother’s sons” means “my step-brothers”.

Knowing Christ early

In the midst of cruel treatment from her half-brothers, she longs for the groom to whom she is betrothed. She wishes that he is her own blood brother, one who “nursed at my mother’s breasts”, for she expects that her own blood brother would not treat her cruelly. If he were her true brother, there would be love between them instead of hatred. It is here that we should see the lesson for ourselves. The bride wishes that she has known the groom earlier, as her blood brother. Many of us who have been converted from a pagan background often wish that we were converted earlier. Unlike those who have been brought to Sunday School from young, who were taught the Bible from early, who have had believing parents to pray for them and to guide them, we grew up in heathen settings. We were exposed to all kinds of evil while growing up in the unhappiness of unbelieving homes. We are reminded of an incident in China when Hudson Taylor was a missionary there. He was asked by an old man for how long Hudson Taylor and his people had had the gospel. When told that it had been for hundreds of years, the old man exclaimed that it had taken that long before someone came to bring the gospel to China! The old man wished he had heard the gospel earlier. He wished that his parents and ancestors had had the opportunity to hear the gospel. In the same way, many of us wished that we were exposed to the gospel earlier. We have now come to faith in Jesus Christ and experienced the blessedness of being forgiven by God and living in His presence. Life without Christ was miserable. We interacted with unbelievers and shared in their uncouth and shameful lives. Some of us have sins of the past that we are ashamed of today. Thank God, there is forgiveness in Christ for all such sins! Do you appreciate your new life in Christ? Are you thankful for your salvation? Something is wrong if you do not value your faith in Christ. We need to be more thankful for the salvation given to us.

Of course, it is all in God’s sovereign purpose that we are saved. It is not for us to choose where we are born, and when we come to faith. There are those who have had the privilege of being brought up in a Christian culture, having freedom to hear the gospel, and having friends and family members who have prayed for them, but who never appreciate all these. I once met an American man in Nepal who was seeking out a Buddhist monk to help him in his search for enlightenment. Today, not only do we have eco-tourism and medical tourism, but we also have such “religious tourism”. The man I met was so aggressively made-up in his mind not to have anything to do with the Bible. I decided not to say more, except to point out that it is possible to throw away the true treasure in exchange for trash. While God sovereignly determines who hears the gospel and when, He holds us responsible for how we respond to the gospel and the spiritual benefits we have enjoyed. There are those who have been brought up in Christian homes, who have been exposed to the Bible early, and who have all the spiritual privileges that others do not have, but do not value them. There are others who, when converted, wished that they had been exposed to the Bible’s teaching earlier. “Many *who are* first will be last, and the last first” (Matt. 19:30). You might argue that the experiences of life as an unbeliever will make us better people, that those experiences will help us to understand others better, and also make us appreciate salvation in Christ. While these may be true to some degree, we must not desire dark knowledge and carnal experiences. They affect our lives adversely. They are not necessary. We will not be worse off without these knowledge and experiences. Jesus Christ is sufficient for us. Our lives are complete in Him. We do not want to give excuses for remaining in sin. God holds us responsible for not coming to faith in Christ. If you have not trusted in Christ for salvation, it is time that you do so. Come to Him as soon as possible!

Blessedness of salvation

Consider the blessedness of salvation in Christ. The Shulamite wishes the groom could be her blood brother, believing he would treat her well and love her as his younger sister. For those of us who have come to faith in Christ, this has become a reality. We are referring to spiritual relationships, but they are nevertheless real. The Lord once pointed to those who believed in Him and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:49-50). On another occasion, He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). You must understand that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God who came to earth by taking upon Himself true, sinless, human nature. He is truly divine and truly human, in one Person. By taking upon Himself perfect human nature, He identifies Himself with us. He laid down His life on the cross to save His people. We who have believed in Him are bought by His blood. We belong to Him. He is the eternally begotten Son of God, while we are the adopted children of God. Jesus Christ is not only our Prophet, Priest and King, but He is also our Eldest Brother in the kingdom of God. We are expressing deep spiritual truths using human language. The reality of our relationship with God, through faith in Christ, cannot be doubted. God loves us as His children. Jesus Christ loves us as our Eldest Brother. How good it is to know that we have an Eldest Brother who is all-powerful and feared by our enemies! When oppressed, when under persecution, or when things do not go well for us in this world, we remember that Jesus Christ is on our side and that brings us tremendous comfort. We are truly grateful for the salvation that He has given to us. This is captured in John Newton’s hymn:

*Jesus! my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.*

II. Gratitude For Sustenance From Christ (v. 2)

This brings us to the next area for which we are grateful, namely, that the Lord sustains us in the faith. The Lord gives us faith in Himself, and He continues to sustain that faith. Otherwise, we will weaken and go astray. In John 10:27-29, the Lord says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father’s hand.” The Lord will ensure that His people are kept in the faith to the end of their lives. How does the Lord sustain us in the faith? We have mentioned already God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in our lives. Here, we must see again how God works in us. He works in us love for Himself such that we will have holy desires. We will then act upon those holy desires. This is seen in verse 2 of our present passage, “I would lead you *and* bring you into the house of my mother, she *who* used to instruct me. I would cause you to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate.”

Attending to the means of grace

The bride desires to bring the groom to her mother’s house. She is not ashamed of her simple house, nor of her humble background. True love is such that we share our lives with the ones we love without the need to hide any deficiency. True love also accepts whatever blemishes that are found in the person we love. This is not to say we condone sin and bad habits. These should be put right, however much our loved ones bear up with us. The bride had brought the

groom to meet her mother before. This we have seen in Chapter 3:4. As a courting couple get to know each other better, they would want to introduce the loved one to the parents. It would be strange if your daughter hides her boy-friend from you. As parents, you will worry that your daughter should do so. Here, the bride is anxious that the groom should meet her mother. Remember that this is not the first time that he is meeting the bride's mother. They couldn't have been betrothed without the knowledge of the bride's mother. The bride obviously loves her mother and has high regards for her. The mother is described as the one who used to instruct her. The bride is well brought up, capable, and spiritual-minded. It was the practice of Jewish mothers to teach their children the Scripture from young. The bride had been mistreated by her half-brothers, but her mother had been faithful. Her mother had distributed the inheritance fairly after the husband's death, such that the bride has her own vineyard and her own flock of sheep and goats. This we have encountered in Chapter 1. Here, the mother is well-respected and loved because she loves her daughter and has taken care of her. She has been instrumental in molding her character so that the daughter is the lady she is now.

What does this speak to us of? In the book of Revelation, in Chapter 12, the woman represents the church, or God's people in the Old Testament, who gave birth to the male Child, namely Jesus Christ. The devil, represented by the fiery red dragon, attempted to destroy the male Child, who was "caught up to God and His throne". This is a reference to Christ's resurrection from the dead and His glorification. Christ is now reigning with the departed saints in heaven. Meanwhile, the dragon tries to destroy the woman but she is preserved from harm by God. Knowing that he is unable to destroy the church, the devil turns his attention upon the believers - the offspring of the woman "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17). The devil works through the unbelievers in the world to bring harm to the believers. Christians will always be hated and hunted by the unbelievers in the world, just as the bride in our passage is bullied and ill-treated by her half-brothers. Not all non-believers will show hostility in obvious ways toward the believers, but there is always the underlying tension between them. The Lord has warn us that the world will hate us just as it hated Him. However, as we have seen already, the Lord will ensure that none of His children are lost. Satan is able to destroy our bodies, but God alone can destroy body and soul in hell. Those who harm the Christians are touching the apple of God's eye. God will deal with them accordingly in due time. There will be a day of judgement. God might act even before the day of judgement against those who dare to oppose Him.

However, we must come back to the passage and see that the bride desires to bring the groom to her mother's house and entertain him there. This is the picture of the believer coming to the church to attend to the means of grace. We are not saved to live the isolated life of a hermit, nor the communal life of the monks in a monastery. Rather, we are saved to remain "in the world, but not of the world". We are to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14). In order to be effective and useful to the Lord while living in the world, we must be integrated into the life of the church. There is safety in the church. There is warmth and love in the church. It is in the church that you receive teaching and find avenues of service to the Lord. It is in the church that your faith is sustained through the means of grace, namely, the hearing of God's word, prayer, baptism and the Lord's supper. Are you baptized yet? Are you committed to Christ as a member of His church? Our lives should revolve around the church. It is strange that believers should arrange their family life to revolve around the company they work for, or around the community they live in. While we acknowledge that we have responsibilities at the place of work and in the community we live in, should we not have our family life revolving around the church? Should not Christ be at the centre of our life, and our family be integrated into the life of His church? Happy are those who grow up knowing the fullness and blessing of church life!

Given over to the Lord

Another thing to be noted is that the bride leads and brings the groom into the mother's house. That emphasis should not be missed. Normally, we would say the Lord is the one who takes the initiative to give us holy desires and leads us into avenues of service. Yet, it is true that, humanly speaking, Christians must take the initiative to serve the Lord. Here is where God's sovereignty and human responsibility come in. God saves us while we were "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). At the same time, we are taught the need to obey God's word and to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). If God is at work in you, He will give you the desire and the ability to act accordingly. The apostle Paul expresses this truth in Colossians 1:29, "To this *end* I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily." In the present passage, the bride leads and brings the groom into her mother's house. This expresses the truth that we want to bring the Lord into every aspect of our life. We want His presence in whatever that we do. If you are students, you should want the Lord to bless you in your studies. If you are in courtship, you would want the Lord to be present in your relationship. You would want the Lord to be in your home, and in your career. If you leave the Lord out, and do not invite Him to be present in any area of your life, you cannot expect to be blessed by Him.

The bride not only desires the groom to be in her home and to meet her mother, but she also desires to entertain him in a special way. She has kept the biggest of her pomegranates for him. Imagine how she had watched the pomegranates developing on the tree in the garden, observed which ones were developing well, and thought of which one should be kept for her beloved. The pomegranates have been plucked and are kept in the home. The smaller ones would be eaten by the family, but the biggest must be kept for her beloved! The pomegranate is clearly home-grown, for it is described as "my pomegranate". It is also the pomegranate she has reserved for her beloved. She is going to squeeze out the juice herself, in a day when there is no electric fruit de-juicer. She is going to serve it with the spiced wine. In those days, the diluted wine was made more pleasant to drink by adding spices. She is going to give of her best to her beloved. Of course, she would! She has been ill-treated by her half-brothers. Life has not been easy. She is but a country girl. What is there in her that should make Solomon love her? Now she is deeply in love with the groom. She is going to give of herself totally to him.

She is going to give of herself totally to him... What of ourselves? What of you and me? Do we give of ourselves totally to our Lord? Is there any compartment of your life in which the Lord is excluded? Do you hold back any part of your life from the Lord? If we are truly grateful for the salvation the Lord has given to us, we would want to give of ourselves to Him. If we are truly grateful for the sustenance of our faith, we would attend to the means of grace in His church and pray for His presence in all parts of our lives.

III. Gratitude For Succour From Christ (v. 3)

We come to the third area of gratitude, which is for the succour from Christ. As we have seen, that simply means we are grateful for the help He gives to us in our needs. Verse 3 says, "His left hand *is* under my head, and his right hand embraces me." This is a duplicate of Chapter 2, verse 6. When we covered that verse, comparison was made with Genesis 21:18 where God said to Hagar, "Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand..." Ishmael was a heavy young man of about seventeen years old. How was Hagar to carry him? Note, however, that God only asked her to hold him with one hand. She was holding up her fallen son by the head,

while hugging his body with her other hand. Some paintings depict Mary holding the body of Jesus Christ like that after He was crucified and taken down from the cross. We do not approve of representing Jesus Christ in pictures, not even when teaching children at Sunday School, for He is divine while His human nature is perfect. In so doing, we would be breaking the Second Commandment, and also falsely depicting His perfect human nature. The Bible gives us no account of how our Lord looked like, apart from the general description that He was “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3), and the indication that He looked older than His age, for the Jews said of Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham? (John 8:57)”. That aside, we note that this is a portrayal of someone who is fallen, who needs help.

In daily life

The bride indicates that she has suffered more than she is prepared to say. This is consistent with what we know of this most gracious lady. She has been mistreated by her half-brothers, she has been working in the brothers’ vineyards while trying hard to find time to tend to her own vineyard, and she has been working as a shepherdess. She has also struggled against bouts of laziness and lethargy, and experienced grief in her relationship with the groom. She knows that all the while the groom has been longsuffering towards her, loving her despite the fact that she is so unworthy. The groom has drawn near to her, ministering to her in her needs, like an expert doctor and a loving mother. This is a depiction of the spiritual struggles of a believer in his or her walk with the Lord. Believers do face with trials in life. Often, this involves struggle in our faith. We are reminded of how Elijah served God well, only to run in fear from wicked Queen Jezebel afterwards and felt he wanted to die. God sent an angel to minister to his needs, giving him food and drink, allowing him to rest, and then sending him forth to do more work. Those who desire to serve God faithfully will encounter situations in which we are cast down, due to severe trials and our lack of faith.

In full-time service

Is it not true that the Lord has promised to be with His people “till the end of the age”? Note that the promise is given in the context of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*” The special presence of the Lord accompanies those who have given their lives to serve Him by carrying out the Great Commission. Of course, all of us should be involved in carrying out the Great Commission in some ways, by being integrated into the life of the church. The Great Commission is a command from the Lord to the local church to plant local churches. Some are called to engage in this work full-time. Regardless of what you think, such full-time service will require self-denial and deprivation. There will be many times when loneliness and despair set in. There will be many occasions when they are attacked - in their person, in their reputation, and in their ministry. On such occasions, the Lord will have to draw near to sustain them. The missionary CR Marsh expresses this well in his poem:

*I wanted to sow in a fertile field
That bordered a pleasant land,
Where fellowships sweet their joys would yield,
And comforts be mine to command.*

*He gave me instead, a barren spot
In a land that was wild and drear,
Where peril and hardship must be my lot*

Afar from all I held dear.

*But I learned that the field of His choice was fair,
Far better than any beside,
For the Master, also, laboured there --
My strength, my Companion and Guide.*

Our present passage is telling us to look up to the Lord in prayer whenever we are cast down. The passage is also telling us to be thankful for the help the Lord gives us whenever we are in need. The Lord is always near us, but we do not sense His presence due to our lack of faith in Him. He wants us to pray so as to show our dependence on Him. His promise in Hebrews 13:5 is, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Keep a close walk with the Lord!

IV. Conclusion

The passage ends with the charge to maintain peace in the church, saying in verse 4, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases." This is a repetition of Chapter 2:7 and Chapter 3:5. We have seen that this is better translated as "...do not stir up nor awaken my love until she pleases". It is a charge given to the adherents of the church not to disturb the peace of the church when she is seeking to be faithful to the Lord. No church is perfect, for the church is as perfect as the people that make up its membership. "A tree is known by its fruit" (Matt. 12:23). An honest and reasonable person will be able to tell whether a church is faithful to the Lord. If the church is being blessed by the Lord, if the word of God is preached faithfully and souls are saved while saints are edified, why disturb her peace? Why raise issues that are peripheral and insignificant?

In the time of Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic Church had gone astray and false teaching and human innovations were being propagated. Martin Luther had to shake the peace of the church by challenging all the unbiblical teaching and ceremonies introduced by the church. That was needful, and God used him to bring about the Reformation. Are you a Martin Luther to want to shake the church? Do you know the Bible's teaching and have you been faithful to God? Are you sure that the church is as unfaithful as you claim it to be, to want to challenge it? Are you a member of the church, in the first place, to give you the right to challenge it? These are some of the questions you would need to answer before you embark on any crusade against any church. We fear for some individuals who find fault with any church they go to.

Having said these, the challenge to adherents of the church is to consider being integrated into the church if you think it is faithful to God, and is being blessed in her ministry. Let us not forget the teaching of the present passage, which is that we should be grateful to the Lord for the salvation He has given to us, for the sustenance to our faith, and for the succour to us in our needs. The Lord truly has been good to us. He truly loves His people. Let us show forth our gratitude to Him in praise, worship, and service. While waiting for Him to return, let us show forth our love to Him in our lives and give of our all to Him. May God help us to be the believers we ought to be!

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