

The Faithfulness Of The Expectant Church (Song 8:5-7)

by BS Poh

In Chapter 8 of this book of allegory, the church is expecting the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the first four verses, we have seen the church showing forth her gratitude to the Lord for her salvation, for sustenance in the faith, and for succour in times of need. Onlookers and adherents to the church are warned not to disturb the peace in the church, which the Lord has given to her. We now consider verses 5 to 7, which show the faithfulness of the expectant church. The church, while waiting for the return of Christ, is single-minded in her love for Him. The faithfulness of the expectant church is shown, first, by the response of faith to God's grace. It is then shown by the response of love to the Lord for His love to the church.

17.1 The Response Of Faith (v. 5)

We begin with the first section, which concerns the response of faith of the church to God's grace. We know that the word "grace" in the Bible means the unmerited favour of God shown to undeserving sinners. Sinners do not deserve the favour of God. Instead, they deserve eternal damnation for offending the Creator who has been good to His creatures. We were guilty in the sin of Adam, who was the representative head of the human race. When he disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit, he sinned on behalf of the whole human race who descended from him. We also inherited the sinful nature of Adam and Eve, which causes us to break God's law in so many ways. We, therefore, are guilty for the many acts of sins we have committed against God. We deserve to be condemned to eternal hell for all these offenses against God. Yet, in His mercy, He sent His only begotten Son to this world to save sinners. Those who repent and believe in the Son of God will not perish but have eternal life. A sinner is saved, not by the good works he has done, or by any good found in himself, but by the mercy of God shown to him through Jesus Christ. Salvation, therefore, is by grace, through faith, in Christ alone. The church is made up of such individuals - those who are saved by grace, not by works. They rely on the Lord to be saved, and they continue to rely on Him to be saved. Faith is needed at the beginning of the Christian life. It is also needed in the rest of the Christian life. It is the continuing need of faith that we see in this passage.

Dependence on Christ

Verse 5 says, "Who *is* this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?" Without introducing a new party, this may be seen as the words of the daughters of Jerusalem. Three things may be said about the church based on this verse. Firstly, we note that the bride is described as leaning on her beloved. The word translated "leaning" carries the idea of reclining for support. While we know that lovers tend to lean on each other to express their love and trust, here, the main idea being conveyed is that of a plant leaning upon a wooden support in order not to fall over. Spiritually, this is to convey the idea that the church, represented by the bride, depends on the Lord for its existence and sustenance. The universe came into existence by the creative act of God. The universe continues to be sustained by God, without which it would collapse and turn chaotic. We are told, in Hebrews 1:1-4, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has

in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.” God spoke, and all things came into existence. His word was the agent of creation. His word is the Son of God. The Son of God who was the agent of creation continues to uphold all things by the word of His power. You might find this somewhat philosophical and difficult to grasp, but you should at least understand that the eternal Son of God was involved in creation and continues to uphold the whole of creation. When He took on perfect human nature, appearing on earth as the Lord Jesus Christ, He effected salvation by His death on the cross. Just as the universe depends on the Lord to continue existing and functioning, the church depends on the Lord to exist and to function as it ought. We live in a fallen universe, which is beginning to be redeemed with the redemption of God’s people. We are told in Romans 8:21, “...the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” The church in the world depends on the Lord to sustain her. Practically, that means we must feed on His word to be strong, and we must express our dependence on Him in prayer. On the individual level, the believer needs to lean on Jesus Christ, for if we do not abide in Him by faith, we can do nothing. The Lord says, 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.”

Separation from the world

The second thing we can say about the church is that she is separate from the world. We are told that the bride is “coming up from the wilderness”. The wilderness speaks of the world that is affected by sin. In the “high-priestly prayer” of John 17, the Lord says in verses 14 and 15, “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.” The church is made up of those who have been called out of the wilderness of the world. In the book of Revelation, in Chapter 12:15, we are told that the church, represented by the woman, “was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.” This is to say that throughout the gospel age, until Christ comes again, the church will be preserved from the attacks of the devil. The church will face the onslaught of Satan, but it will not be destroyed. There might be periods in the history of the church when she is dented by persecution or heresy, but the Lord will ensure that she is restored to spiritual health. The children of the woman, i.e. the believers who make up the church, will be the target of the devils attack, and many of them will suffer severely, but the church will continue to exist in the world. She will continue to bear witness to Christ. To be able to maintain a clear witness for Christ, the church must keep out worldliness and false teaching. The church should not bear the characteristics of the world, but should increasingly shed any vestige of remaining worldliness found in her. On the personal level, the believer should be growing in holiness instead of becoming more worldly. We are in the world, but we are not of the world. Not only that, we are to continually come out of the wilderness of this world, which means that, as the days go by, we should be growing in holiness and righteous living. Are you growing “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18)?

Heavenly-mindedness

The third thing that can be said about the church is that she is heavenly-minded. Just as the bride is coming out of the the wilderness and heading towards Jerusalem, believers are heading for the their home in heaven. Solomon dwells in Jerusalem, and he has supplied the

bride with “the daughters of Jerusalem” to accompany her. The bride is being taken to Jerusalem for the wedding. This speaks of the church in the world that looks forward to being gathered in heaven. Our home is not in this world. We are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth”. In Hebrews 12:1-2, we are told, “...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” A heavenly mindedness is easy to detect in a believer. It should be an obvious characteristic of the church. Instead of attempting to become more like the world to attract the people of the world, we should maintain a certain chastity in order to remain attractive to those who are serious about spiritual things. We must maintain moral and spiritual purity if we belong to the Lord. Furthermore, we are to be deliberately useful to the Lord as we pass through this world. We are to be “the salt of the earth”, being a good influence in society. We are also to be “the light of the world”, bearing the message of the gospel high to direct the many weary souls to Jesus Christ, in whom they will find rest.

While on the way to Jerusalem, the bride is accompanied by the groom. This is to express the truth that the Lord is present with His church even though, bodily, He is in heaven. Again, we are confronted with spiritual realities in which are some elements of mystery that are hard to comprehend. Jesus Christ is God and Man in one Person. As the God-Man, He is in heaven. Being God, He is spirit and everywhere. We read in John 3:13, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.” The Son of Man, while uttering these words on earth, could say He was in heaven at that moment. Note the present tense, “the Son of Man who **is** in heaven”. Now that the Son of Man, after His death and resurrection, is in heaven, He is also on earth by His Spirit. Before the Lord was crucified, He said this to His disciples, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever — the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:14-18). In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, the Lord ended by saying, “...and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.” Matthew 18:20 says, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” The presence of the Lord is a reality. He is present by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation by grace

The bride is the centre of attention. The bride is beautiful. The bride is being escorted by the palace retinue to Jerusalem. She is loved by the groom, and she loves the groom. Why was she chosen in the first place? Could there not be others who are equally beautiful, and maybe more beautiful? What makes her deserving of such privilege? Is it because of anything she has done to earn it? We already know the answer. It is not anything in herself, nor anything that she has done that caused Solomon to love her. Solomon has the power to have her, and to do as he likes with her, without having to make her his bride. Solomon could easily have passed her by, but he did not. We are told in the second section of verse 5, “I awakened you under the apple tree. There your mother brought you forth; there she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.” This is spoken by the groom. While the intention is not to put down or belittle the bride, it has the effect of reminding her of her past. She was asleep under the apple tree when first met by the groom. No wonder the apple tree continues to have such significance to the bride. We recall Chapter 2:3 in which the bride praises the groom: “Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so *is* my beloved among the sons. I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit *was* sweet to my taste.” Coming back to our present passage, the bride is reminded of her humble background. She realizes that she is undeserving of the attention given to her.

Spiritually speaking, to be awoken from sleep is to be given spiritual life by the Lord. Just as Lazarus was given life by the hearing of the words of the Lord, when He called out, “Lazarus, come forth!”, so also we are given spiritual life when we hear the Lord’s voice in the gospel. We were “dead in trespasses and sins”, but the Lord has given us spiritual life. The note of gratitude is seen in those who are saved. We are saved by grace, not by our good works or by anything good in us. We are not to forget this, and we must ever proclaim it. Ephesians 2:4 says, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” This is followed by the well-known words of verses 8 to 9, “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.”

The centrality of the church

We must say something about the last part of verse 5 before moving on: “There your mother brought you forth; there she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.” This shows the centrality of the local church in God’s purpose. We have consistently considered the the bride as representing the church or the individual believer. In verses 1 and 2 of the present chapter, the bride wished that the groom had been nursed at her mother’s breasts. Her mother used to instruct her. Here, in the present passage, the mother brought forth the bride. She gave birth to her, and raised her up. One way of looking at this passage is to consider the mother as the Old Testament church, which has given birth to the New Testament church with the coming of Christ, the groom. Yet, we would not limit ourselves to such a view, for the bride represents the church looked from the perspective of her constituent members. The mother may be regarded, therefore, as the church corporately considered, just as the garden in Chapter 6:2. The garden is the church corporately considered where God’s word is proclaimed. In Chapter 4:12, the “garden enclosed” is the place where there is proper church government and discipline - the place of safety and refuge as well as the centre of gospel proclamation to the world. Here, the picture of the mother is the place of spiritual nurture for souls. It is God’s will that the church be the instrumentality of spiritual birth to many people. In the church, the gospel is proclaimed and the word of God is taught. Preachers are sent forth to preach the gospel. When souls are converted, they are incorporated into the life of the church.

The church handles the word of God in these two basic ways - the gospel is preached so that sinners are saved, and the whole counsel of God is taught so that saints are built up in the faith. This may be easily proved. In Acts 20:20-21, Paul said to the Ephesian elders, “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” This shows that Paul preached the gospel to win souls to Christ. In verse 27 of the same chapter in Acts, we have, “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” This shows that Paul builded up the faith of those who were converted. Then, consider the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. The command says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations”. This means the gospel must be preached so that souls are truly saved. They are then baptized, after which the next part of the command holds, namely, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”. Although there is considerable overlap between proclaiming the gospel and preaching to build up faith, we must nevertheless keep this biblical distinction. The importance of this becomes clear when we realize that there are churches that focus on building up the faith of believers to the near exclusion of preaching the gospel, and there are churches that focus on preaching the gospel without giving enough attention to building up the faith of believers. However strong

the church may be numerically, it is deficient if one or the other aspect of proclamation of God's word is missing.

Coming back to our passage, we note the emphasis of the place: “**There** your mother brought you forth; **there** she *who* bore you brought *you* forth.” The place was where the bride was first found, the place where she was awakened. This shows that the church must seek out people to hear the word of God. The church must deliberately seek unbelievers to preach the gospel to them. The church should not be growing primarily by drawing other believers away from other churches. When believers do come from barren churches to get better spiritual food, we have no right to turn them away. However, it should not be a policy of the church to gain numbers at the expense of other churches. The kingdom of God overall has not grown by such an approach, and it tends to upset other churches. No, we must be mission-minded and bring the gospel to those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” so that we will have the joy of seeing God's grace operating in their lives. We will then be able to sing:

By grace through faith in Christ alone,
A worm is spared ruin untold;
No more will sin be cause to mourn,
In that city paved in gold;
“‘Tis grace! ‘Tis grace!” will I intone,
When gathered safe in the fold.

17.2 The Response Of Love (6-7)

In the second section, we consider the response of the church to the salvation found in Christ. Those who understand the way of salvation wrought by God in Christ will be overwhelmed with gratitude. They will love the Lord because the Lord has shown His love for them by laying down His life to save them. They will want to live to God's glory. It is so important to understand the way of salvation. We know that the gospel may be summarized as “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”. The person and work of Christ must be made clear to hearers. Not only must hearers know who Jesus Christ is, but they must also know how He saves sinners. All too often, Christians who witness to others do not make clear these two elements of the gospel message. Hearers are left unclear about the true identity of Jesus Christ, and they are left unclear how Jesus Christ accomplishes the salvation of sinners. It is often assumed that sinners are incapable of understanding a complicated message and, therefore, the message must be made simple. What happens is that the message is made so simplistic that it is no longer the true gospel. The love of God may be mentioned, Christ death on the cross may also be mentioned, and these are peppered up with sentimental stories to move the hearers to make a decision to “accept Him”, or to assent to what have been said. That is hardly the gospel, for the hearers are left without the understanding of God's holy and just character, without a sense of their guilt against God, without a correct understanding of the love of God shown in the sacrificial death of Christ, and without an understanding of the cancellation of guilt in the sinner who repents and believes. How are sinners to find true peace with God if they have not understood their need of the righteousness of Christ? How are they to experience forgiveness for their sins if there is no true repentance and faith? It is necessary to sound forth this warning against sentimentalism and spurious faith. However, it is to be noted that when the gospel is properly preached, we would expect true feelings of gratitude and love, of joy and peace, to be experienced and seen in those who are saved.

From the earlier part of this message we have learned that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. The bride understands this truth too well. How does she show her gratitude? Of course, she loves the groom, but how is that love shown in her life? How does the church show her love for Christ? From verse 6, we see three characteristics of those who love the Lord: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love *is as* strong as

death, jealousy *as* cruel as the grave; its flames *are* flames of fire, a most vehement flame.” Here, the grave is described as “cruel” when the better translation is “unyielding”. Furthermore, the last expression is literally “a flame of YAH”, or “a flame of Jehovah”. The verse can, therefore, be rendered as, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love *is as* strong as death, jealousy *as* **unyielding** as the grave; its flames *are* flames of fire, a **flame of Jehovah**.”

Three cravings

We may understand this verse as showing three cravings. First, there is a craving after assurance of Christ’s love. This, of course, is closely related to the assurance of salvation. In fact, we can practically regard them as one and the same thing. The seal speaks of ownership, authenticity, and security. A sealed envelop shows that the content belongs to the one who owns it, that whatever is in it is genuine, and that it has not been tempered with. The heart is regarded as the seat of feelings, of love, and of fond remembrance. When the bride desires to be set as a seal on the groom’s heart, she is expressing her desire to be always and forever remembered by him. A believer would similarly crave for the assurance that he or she is well-loved by the Lord. The assurance of salvation is a precious gift of God which, sadly, is not the possession of every one of God’s children. Of course, there are those who have no business to be sure of their acceptance before God. They are not born again of the Spirit. They do not show submission to Jesus Christ as Lord. There is a certain worldliness and self-importance in their lives that make us wonder if they are truly saved. However, there are also those who have every reason to be sure that their sins are fully forgiven, that they are accepted by God, and that the Spirit of God lives in them, yet do not have the assurance of salvation. These are the rare individuals but there are such around. They have repented of their sins before God. They are trusting in Christ for acceptance before God. They have a desire to live a holy life. Despite all these, they still question whether they are saved. If you are such a person, you must pray that God will give you true assurance of salvation. You must realize that, just like the bride in our present passage, the craving for assurance of salvation is itself a sign that you are saved.

Secondly, there is a craving for service to the Lord. This is seen in the words, “Set me as a seal... on your arm”. The arm speaks of power, and it speaks of work. For example, in Deuteronomy 26:8, we read that “the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm”. This refers to the power of God. Believers will want to be useful in the Lord’s work. We have been given the Great Commission. We know that the Great Commission is a command of the Lord to the local church, to plant other churches. Those who are converted should be integrated into the life of the local church by baptism, and in the local church they grow in faith and usefulness in the Lord’s service. Furthermore, all that we do for the Lord will come to nothing if He does not bless us. Psalm 127:1 says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” All too often, there are misguided people who desire power from the Lord for the wrong reasons. Here, the desire for power is to serve the Lord. It is, in fact, better to use the word “ability”. We want to have the ability to do useful work for the Lord. We often use the expression “the servants of God”. If we are servants, we should serve. We should want to be productive in our service to God.

Thirdly, there is a craving for zeal for the Lord. Zeal for the Lord arises from a holy jealousy for His name. Just as there is such a thing as righteous anger, there is also such a thing as righteous jealousy. The Lord was righteously angry at sin, and its manifestation in the Jews of His days. We are told in Mark 3:5 that the Lord “looked around at the Jews with anger being grieved by the hardness of their hearts”. Similarly, in the Second Commandment, we are told, “For I, the Lord your God, *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the

children to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” God is righteously jealous of His holy name. We have here the love of the believer for the Lord. He is wishing that his love for the Lord may be as powerful as death and as strong as a burning flame, which is possible only if it is from God. He is wishing that his jealousy for the honour of the Lord’s name may be as unyielding as the grave. Such love is seen in those who make a stand for the truth. Such zeal for the Lord is seen in a reformer. Where are such reformers today? We are reminded of the Lord who, while on earth, cleansed the temple off the money changers. His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up” (John 2:17). We are also reminded of what the apostle Paul said, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). If we imitate the Lord and the apostle, we would desire to have such zeal, which can only come from above.

Perseverance

We consider next verse 7, which says, “Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised.” Much water can put out a fire. Much water can also drown people. But love that is aflame can never be put out, or be drown to death. Not even the greatest wealth will be accepted in exchange for love. If there is such love for the Lord, it is not only strong, but it is also steady. Not only is it steady, but it is also lasting. These, then, are the qualities of the love for the Lord that we should desire to have. It must be strong. It must be steady. And it must be lasting. We know too well that in life, love can be quenched by betrayal. Love can also be drowned by sorrow. Consider how many professing Christians you know who were once zealous for the Lord but have fallen away from the faith. Consider how many Christians you know who have turned cynical and are no longer serving the Lord actively after being hurt by other Christians. Consider also the Christians you know who are almost without faith in them because of some great disappointment or sorrow in life. We need perseverance in the faith. We need also perseverance in our love for the Lord.

The natural reaction of those who have been hurt is to withdraw and to isolate themselves. However, such a reaction does not solve the problem. It makes us not available for God to use. We nurse hurt in our inner selves, and struggle with self-pity as well as the possibility of bitterness taking root. It is also sinful as we are unable to truly forgive and we lack faith in the Lord to avenge us. We must remind ourselves afresh that it is clearly taught in Romans 12:19-21, “‘Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance *is* Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ Of course, knowing this is one thing, doing it is another. We have to bring our trials to the Lord, until this inner struggle is overcome. Perhaps these words are speaking to you. It will be good if you can bring yourself to God and seek His mercy for harbouring an unforgiving heart all these years. Your usefulness before God is crippled by a lack of forgiveness for the perceived wrongs done to you. The blessing of God is blocked from flowing freely to you by the root of bitterness. Bring all these to God. Seek His forgiveness in Jesus Christ’s name. Let God avenge you. Let Him vindicate you in His own way, in His own time. Often, the expression “let go, and let God” is used to teach a wrong view of sanctification. Here, we may rightly say, “let go, and let God”, and you will be liberated from what has been crippling your usefulness all these years.

17.3 Conclusion

We must draw to a conclusion. Faith is needed right to the end of our lives on earth. Faith will wean us more and more off worldliness. Faith will keep us focused on our heavenly home. We

are such unworthy sinners saved by grace. We must respond to the Lord's love by exercising faith in Him.

Those who understand how they have been saved will have deep feelings of love, joy, peace, and gratitude. Love for the Lord must be shown in tangible ways. There must be cravings for assurance of His love, for power to serve Him well, and for spiritual zeal to be sustained.

The responses of faith and love are focused on the Lord. We would not want to be diverted from our love for Him. We want to be faithful to our Lord. With God's help, we will remain faithful to Him.

*When any turn from Zion's way,
As some have seemed to do,
I hear my Lord and Saviour say,
"Will you forsake Me too?"*

*Ah, Lord, with such a heart as mine,
Unless You hold me fast,
I feel I must, I shall decline,
And prove like them at last.*

*No voice but Yours can give me rest,
And bid my fears depart;
No love but Yours can make me blest,
And satisfy my heart.*

*What anguish has that question stirred,
That I might also stray,
Yet, Lord, relying on Your word,
I'll never go away.*

(John Newton, 1725-1807)

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