

The Longing of the Expectant Church (8:13-14)

by BS Poh

The last chapter of the Song of Solomon describes the life and experiences of the maturing church. In a sense, the church will never truly be mature while on earth. We will arrive at full maturity only when we are in heaven. We are dealing with a maturing church, not a fully matured church. There is considerable vitality in the church, at the same time that there is an obvious mark of maturity in that there is the expectancy of Christ's return. We have seen that the expectancy of Christ's return is expressed by gratitude to the Lord, in Chapter 8:1-4, by faithfulness to the Lord, in verses 5 to 7, and by consecration to the Lord, in verses 8 to 12. There is another way by which the expectancy of Christ's return is expressed, and that is by longing for His return. This is what verses 13 to 14 teach.

One can expect Christ's return, and not long for His return. The maturing church is different - she longs for the return of the groom. This longing for Christ bears some similarity to the enthusiasm seen in a new believer, at the same time that there is a vital difference, namely that it is tempered by a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, while living in the midst of a hostile world. That difference might be put this way - the new believer is seeking to know more about the Lord, while the mature believer is seeking to know the Lord more. There is a vital difference between knowing *about* the Lord and *knowing* the Lord Himself. Of course, to know the Lord, you would have to begin with knowing about Him. However, there is much more to knowing the Lord than to know about Him. A newly converted believer is overwhelmed by the mercy of God and is thankful for his salvation. He is enthusiastic in finding out more of God's word and desires to implement what he learns. Like a fresh university graduate, he looks forward to the things he can do in the world. He looks forward to his first pay cheque, to building up his career, and to having a family. An older person has experienced much in life. He has experienced trials and triumphs, he has passed the peak of his career, and he now looks towards retirement. A maturing church is quite unlike the older person who is looking forward to retirement. The maturing church is more like a person who is at the peak of his career, who has gained much experience, and is able to contribute much, but he is not quite ready to retire. He has more to learn, more to contribute, and more to look forward to. There is a quiet vitality in his life. He is able to do things better, and with greater efficiency. Returning to the picture of the bride, we see her longing for the groom's return, while showing forth her gratitude, faithfulness and consecration to Him.

A longing for Christ's return is a mark of the maturing church. How is that longing shown? The first way is by communion with Him in the midst of service in the world. The second way is by anticipation of His return in midst of waiting in the world.

I. Communion In The Midst Of Service (v. 13)

Learning to pray at every stage

We consider first communion with Christ in the midst of service to Him. Verse 13 says, “You who dwell in the gardens, the companions listen to your voice - let me hear it!” These are the words of the groom to the bride. The bride who dwells in the gardens has companions - the servants and the maids who serve her. They listen to her. The groom wants to hear her voice as well! This is to show that the Lord desires His people to be in constant communication with him. This truth has been expressed in the relationship between the bride and the groom throughout the whole Song of Solomon. We have to learn to commune with our Lord in prayer from the beginning of the Christian life. We must learn to commune with Him in the years of active service to Him. We must continue to commune with Him right to the end of our days. Just as we hear the Lord’s voice in the pages of Scripture, we must respond to Him in prayer. The Lord wants to hear our voices.

The bride has been introduced to us in the various phases of her life. From early, in Chapter 2:14, we read of these words, “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; for your voice *is* sweet, and your face *is* lovely.” The believer is grateful for the salvation found in Christ. He is the “Rock of Ages, cleft for me”. Shepherds and travellers caught in a sand storm would appreciate the shelter of clefts in the rocky mountains. The caves sheltered them from heat in the day, and cold at night. David, in his early years of fleeing from Saul, often sought shelter in caves. This is the picture of a believer seeking shelter in Christ, the Rock of our salvation. We are kept safe from the wrath of God for our sins. We are kept safe from the evil one and the persecution of the world. From early in our Christian life, we are made to realize that the Lord takes pleasure in hearing the prayer of His people.

In the growing years of our walk with the Lord, we continue to look to the Him in prayers. The bride was sought by the groom in Chapter 5:2, ‘I sleep, but my heart is awake; *It is* the voice of my beloved! He knocks, *saying*, “Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one...” This shows the Lord desiring communion with His people. The bride has been taken out of the wilderness, from her mother’s home, where she had experienced oppression from her half-brothers. She now lives in Jerusalem, awaiting the day of marriage. The groom visits often, but she has slackened in her relationship with him. In the growing relationship between them, the bride has to learn to be faithful and consistent in her love, while preparing for the day of marriage. The maturing Christian has to learn faithfulness and consistency in his walk with the Lord.

Now that the bride is more mature and experienced, she continues to be reassured by the groom that he takes pleasure in hearing her voice. The groom says, in Chapter 8:13, “Let me hear it!” We are not to slacken in our prayer life. As the years go by, we ought to realize that we have not spent enough time in prayer. We have not sufficient faith in prayer. As we gain experience in our walk with the Lord, we realize that He does answer prayers. We are to cultivate trust in Him and express this in constant prayer to Him. Our Lord wants us to commune with Him often.

If our prayer life is so important, we need to take heed that we do not neglect it. Young believers must cultivate the habit of praying daily. You do not have to spend hours in prayer each time, but you should spend time each day in prayer. Spending fifteen minutes a day reading the Bible and praying is far better than talking about wanting to pray but never making it. It will be good if you learn to start the day with fifteen minutes of “quiet time” with the Lord. Then, before you sleep, recall the day’s work, thank the Lord for whatever have been accomplished, confess your sins, and commit to Him whatever else that needs to be

done. It takes only ten minutes to do that. Once that habit is cultivated, you will no more be thinking of the length of time spent. Instead, you will be lost in your communion with the Lord, and experience often “joy inexpressible and full of glory”. Those with families should have daily family worship in which a portion of Scripture is read, followed by prayer. You will reap the benefits in the years ahead when your children grow up. From early, they learn the importance of cultivating the spiritual life. When converted, they will find worship a pleasure rather than a drudgery or a chore. God does hear the prayers of His people. Extending this to corporate prayer, do you not see the importance of coming to the prayer meeting in church? The Lord has promised His special presence where two or three are gathered together in His name. If we desire God’s blessing upon the ministries of the church, we should be coming to plead for it at the throne of grace. When we love the Lord, we want to be with Him and to be with His people. We come to hear His voice as the word is preached, but we also want to draw near to Him in prayer. He wants to hear our voices, too.

We have considered the desire of the groom to hear the bride’s voice, which speaks to us of the importance of prayer. Note that the bride is dwelling in the gardens, and her companions are listening to her voice. The word “gardens”, in plural, show that the bride not only takes care of the garden given to her by Solomon but also other gardens that he owns. Nearly all the occurrences of the word have been in the singular. In Chapter 4:12, we have, “A garden enclosed *is* my sister, *my* spouse...”. In verse 16 of the same chapter, we have, “Awake, O north *wind*, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden, *that* its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits.” In Chapter 5:1, we have, “I have come to my garden, my sister, *my* spouse...” Indication that Solomon has more gardens than the one he gives to the bride is found in Chapter 6:2, “My beloved has gone to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed his flock in the gardens...” The bride has been given her own garden, as can be seen in Chapter 6:11, “I went down to the garden of nuts to see the verdure of the valley...” In Chapter 8:12, we have, “My own vineyard *is* before me.” While the bride has her own garden, which is planted with fruits and spices, she dwells in the midst of other gardens owned by Solomon. This fact conveys to us the spiritual truth that each of us has to serve the Lord in a local church while extending our service more widely, as we are enabled. We have our vineyard in which to serve, while extending our service to other vineyards as the Lord opens up the opportunities. Our own vineyard is our own church and the locality we live in. We serve the Lord by bringing the gospel to others, attempting to build up the church of Jesus Christ here. We are also to send out missionaries and to support missionaries elsewhere. We are to visit other places, to speak, to teach, and to encourage others. We are involved with relief works elsewhere. The local ministries are carried out hand-in-hand with the wider ministries. We do not meddle in the affairs of other churches, but we engage in co-operative efforts with them. In those ways, we mutually encourage one another. We are mutually refreshed and benefit from the interaction one with another. A church cannot live in isolation, for it will decline and decay from within. God is good. God is wise in giving us a place to belong to, and to serve, at the same time that He gives us opportunities of service elsewhere.

Another thing to note is that, in verse 13, the bride has companions who listen to her voice. These are the daughters of Jerusalem, the ladies-in-waiting of the bride, whom we have encountered throughout this book. Then, there are the servants who tend the vineyards, as we have seen in verse 12. These companions represent the seekers and new believers in the church. Non-believers are invited to church to hear the word of God. A number of them come regular, seeking to know more about Christ and the way of salvation. There are also new believers who have many doubts and questions. There is much for us to do to help these people. Some of these accompany us in the work we are involved with, although we would not engage a non-believer in teaching the Bible. As we interact with them, and do things together, they experience the love of the Christians and see Christian principles being put into

practice. Our hope is that many of them would be brought to true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. All in all, there is much to do in service to the Lord. It is in the midst of such busy service that we are called upon to commune with the Lord. How easy it is to be so taken up with service to the Lord to the extent that we forget who we are serving! How easy it is to do one thing at the expense of another. We learn from church history that the pietists focussed on cultivating the inner life - engaging in prayer, meditation and self-examination - to the extent of neglecting active service to the Lord. We learn also that there have been activists who are constantly doing so many things in God's name, but fail to cultivate a close walk with the God they claim to serve. We do not want to fall into any of these extremes. The healthy Christian life holds in balance both active service as well as holy living. The Lord is telling us, in the present verse, that while He opens up opportunities for us to serve Him, we are to spend time with Him in communion as well.

Three adverse consequences

Failure to hold in balance active service with personal piety will lead to adverse consequences, of which three are considered here. The first possible adverse consequence is that we begin to put our trust, and find comfort, in man rather than in God. We enjoy one another's company, and experience "the love of God which has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5). While it is legitimate to enjoy fellowship one with another, it should be noted that that fellowship is maintained only when we are in constant prayer together. Otherwise, the fellowship soon degenerates into mere comradeship - the nice feelings experienced by people who share things in common, such as those who are in the scouts movement, or commandoes in the same unit. When we place too much dependence on human relationship, we dishonour the Lord and put ourselves in danger of being greatly disappointed by friends who fail us. Are there not many who have been badly hurt, and become cynical, because of experiencing problems in church?

The second adverse consequence is that our focus would shift to the garden, instead of being on the Lord. The garden may be beautiful, as indeed it is, if we have eyes to see. The church is the beautiful bride of Christ, despite its imperfection while in this world. Those who have captured the vision of the Great Commission would have a strong sense of missions, which involves the local church planting other local churches. The Great Commission is the last command of Christ to His people before He was taken up to heaven. It is a command that encompasses all nations, for all time, until Christ comes back to judge the world. It is the means by which the whole number of God's elect is to be called out of the world. It is truly a great command. There is no other better way to live to glorify God than to live to fulfill the Great Commission. All Christian work may be seen as subsumed under the Great Commission. Have you captured the vision? It is good if you have captured that vision. However, a danger lurks. Wherein lies the danger? The danger is in the work itself, minus the presence of the Lord. The danger comes when we begin to treat the work as our own work. The danger is that we fail to prayerfully trust the Lord as we seek to build up the church to His glory. Our dependence on the Lord is shown in our prayer. The work is to God's glory when we constantly bring it before Him to bless.

The third possible adverse consequence of not being prayerful is that we begin to become this-worldly, thinking that everything in this world will last. Once we lose sight of the spiritual dimension, we would become more comfortable in the world. All we work for become rooted in this world. Soon, we will be more concerned about our comforts in this world rather than about kingdom work. Please do not misunderstand. The Bible is not against wealth and worldly comfort. The Lord does not ask us to live a stoic life of suffering and want. However, the attitude of mind makes all the difference. Whether rich or poor, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). When we forget that we are only

“strangers and pilgrims on the earth”, we will not be able to live a single-minded life for God. Whatever your vocation may be, you are to live to God’s glory. That can happen only when you are a person of prayer.

We see, then, that the prayer life is an indication of spiritual maturity. The prayer life is not meant to be paraded as a badge of piety, but pray we must if we love the Lord and know of our dependence upon Him. A prayerful attitude should underlie the life of prayer.

II. Anticipation In The Midst Of Waiting (v. 14)

Waiting for Christ

We move on to the second section, which is the anticipation of the Lord’s return in the midst waiting for Him. The church has waited long for Christ to return. No one knows when He will return, but return He will at the most unexpected moment. “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah *were*, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matt. 24:36-37). Despite the Lord’s clear teaching on this matter, there have been those who predicted the return of the Lord, only to have their predictions proven wrong. We must not lose heart while waiting. The apostle Peter says, “But beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day... But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:8, 10). These two points are reaffirmed by the apostle - first, no one knows when the Lord will return, and second, the Lord will return unexpectedly. Let us take heart. Let us not be in despair. Let us not be impatient. The Lord will surely return.

The return of Christ is often thought of in terms of judgement to the world. That is right, and should not be overlooked or under-emphasized. There will be a day of judgement, at which all the dead will be raised. There will be the separation of the righteous from the wicked. Judgement upon the wicked will be pronounced, and God will be seen to be just in punishing sinners. Believers will be judged as well in the sense that all their sins will be made known to all, and they will be acquitted on the basis of Christ’s death on their behalf. God will justify them because of the death of Christ for them. 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).” Justice will be done, and will be seen to be done. We will enter heaven with deep gratitude for our salvation, and hearty praises to the Lamb of God. “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing (Rev. 5:12)!”

We know that the Lord has gone to prepare a place for His people in heaven. He has promised to return, to take His people to Himself. “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if *it were* not *so*, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know (John 14:2-4).” The book of Revelation describes the final gathering of all God’s chosen people together with Christ as “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9). This will be preceded by the judgement of the world, where all wrongs will be put right, and all the wicked will receive their due punishment. The present universe will be melted down, and the new heavens and new earth created, in which righteousness dwells. Heaven will be on earth, and earth will be in heaven. The complete number of God’s chosen people is described as the beautiful holy city of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. Then, “God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

Three reasons

To the Christian, the Lord's return is to be looked forward to with great anticipation. It is a happy event for the redeemed of the Lord. This is expressed by the last verse of the Song of Solomon, which says, "Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices." Why should the church long for Christ's return? Firstly, because Christ is our "beloved". We love Him because He first loved us. We are saved by grace, through faith in Him. He has done everything needful to save His people, by His death on the cross. We know that we are undeserving of His love, which makes us all the more grateful for our salvation, and for all the benefits that flow from it. Nothing we do can make up for His love for us. Just as the bride longs for her beloved to return, we long for our beloved Lord to return.

The second reason why we long for Christ's return is suggested by the expression, "the mountain of spices". Peace and safety characterize the "garden enclosed" but the world is characterized by the "mountains of the leopards" which are also full of "dens of lions" of Chapter 4, verse 8. This is a hostile world, fallen in sin. Although originally created by God "very good", the effects of sin are noticeable everywhere. Men do not seek to know God, let alone listen to Him. Christians are, at best, tolerated, if not outrightly persecuted by them. Be that as it may, we are placed in the world to bear witness to it. We are to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14), until the Lord returns. The Lord has promised His presence, by His Spirit, while we serve Him in the world. We have work to do while on earth. We would want to serve Him well, for "the night is coming when no one can work". At the same time, do we not feel the weight of sin around us, the tiredness of toil in our fallen bodies, and the oppression of the ungodly? Indeed, there are believers who have to face outright persecution for their faith all over the world. In view of these things, do we not yearn for the Lord's return, so that "the mountains of leopards" will become "the mountains of spices"? Do we not long for the Lord to return so that "the mountains of Separation" (2: 17) will no longer be between us?

The third reason why we long for Christ's return is suggested by the gazelle, or young stag, which come prancing over the mountains - there is a longing for change to come upon our decaying bodies in this sin-ravaged world. The groom is described as a young deer that bounces across the mountains with great energy and agility. Jesus Christ is the great constant - "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The beauty of His character is reflected in the life of a believer, however faintly. When converted, we are enlisted into the army of the Lord. We willingly serve Him, just as is foretold in Psalm 110:3, "Your people *shall be* volunteers in the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, you have the dew of Your youth." We become part of the church militant - "preaching the gospel of peace, and bringing glad tidings of good things" to others (Rom. 10:15). The power of the Lord is reflected in the life of His people, who bring the gospel to others so that sinners are saved. At the same time, we are urged to keep close communion with Him. Chapter 2, verse 6, says, "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." As we keep a close walk with the Lord, He reveals to us the wide expanse of the terrain that still needs to be conquered by the gospel. From the vantage points of "Lebanon, the top of Amana, the top of Senir and Hermon" we are able to see the sweep of the mission field and to understand better the situation, so as to evangelize more effectively. Time spent with the Lord will help keep our vision clear and our mission focussed. However, we are not able to remain young and energetic forever. As we grow older, our physical bodies slow down. We should ensure that our spirit is renewed day by day, such that we are more effective in the Lord's work. The maturing believer should become spiritually more beautiful by the day. We long for the Lord's return, when our frail and decaying bodies will be transformed to the likeness of the Lord's

glorified body. More importantly, our character, which is already being transformed into the likeness of His image, will finally be perfected. At His coming, “the mountains of leopards” will be transformed into “the mountains of spices”. As in the enclosed garden of Chapter 4:12, the fragrance of spices will be everywhere. There will be no more mountains of separation between us and Him.

III. Conclusion

The expectation of Christ’s return is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. No one can be a true Christian without believing that Christ will return to judge the world. Knowing and believing that Christ will return is one thing, anticipating His return is another. Are we anticipating His return? Are we preparing for His return? How should we be preparing for His return? We have learned that we must commune with Him in the midst of service. Christian service is important, but let us not forget that it is even more important to keep a close walk with the Lord through constant prayer. Our prayer should flow from a prayerful heart, i.e. from a spirit of dependence upon Him. Without Him we can do nothing. The Lord has said, in John 15:4, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.” Practically, that means spending time with the Lord each day, even if it is for fifteen minutes. Once that is a regular affair, we would expect to see faces glow, as it were, with the Lord’s presence. We would also expect to see your faces at the prayer meetings of the church.

We have learned also to anticipate His return while waiting for Him. He will appear at anytime. We are not fearful of His return. Instead, we look forward to His return, and that is because of various reasons. Firstly, we love our Lord, for He loved us first. Secondly, we long for relief from the oppression of this world. Thirdly, we long to be transformed into His image. The apostle John lived to an old age, when he was cast onto the island of Patmos for His faith. He is the epitome of the mature believer, or the mature church, pictured by the bride in the last chapter of the Song of Solomon. The infirmities of old age was upon him, such that he would have wished for the energy and vitality of youth. He had experienced persecution for his faith. He had borne many trials and burdens of the Christian life, taking care of the churches. He had cultivated a close walk with the Lord, as “the disciple whom the Lord loved”. He wrote the book of Revelation to comfort and strengthen other persecuted believers. If there was a Christian longing for Christ’s return, it was him. He expressed this truth in Revelation 22:20, saying: ‘He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus!’

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