

Solomon's
Song of Songs

Pure Intimacy

First Edition

By

John R. Barber

Many of the author's writings are available in electronic form and may be freely downloaded from his website: **jrbpublications.com**. The website also provides information about the author and some of his other interests. It also hosts his blog, which is regularly updated and contains at this time over 1400 entries.

The author wishes to thank Roger Ninnis and Duncan Briant (elders of his church) for reviewing the draft manuscript, the folk at Solopress, Southend for printing this book, his Indian family for their help providing the peace and quiet for writing, to the numerous persons who over many years have informed and inspired him and unbeknown to them have contributed to this book and his longsuffering wife, Jolly.

The front cover includes the painting "Love is strong as death" by the Plymouth Brethren, Pre Raphaelite artist, John Jewell Penstone (1817 – 1902).

The back cover includes major images from the Song of Solomon: vineyard (2:13), gazelle (2:9), dove (2:14), rose of Sharon (2:1), palm tree (7:7).

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“Heaven forbid any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy. For the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy and the Song of Songs is holy of holies.”

Rabbi Akiba (circa 100AD)

“Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) of 2006 refers to the Song of Songs in both its literal and allegorical meaning, stating that erotic love (eros) and self donating love (agape) is shown there as the two halves of true love, which is both giving and receiving.” **Wikipedia**

“The Song of Solomon is regarded today as probably one of the most obscure and difficult books in the Bible. But it may surprise you to know that throughout the Christian centuries it has been one of the most read and most loved books of all. During the dark days before the Protestant Reformation when the Albaneses fled the Catholic church and John Huss led his small bands of Christians up into Bohemia, this was one of the books of the Bible that was frequently read, quoted, referred to and memorized. It was a great comfort to them. In the days after the Reformation. in the time of the bitter persecution of the Covenanters of Scotland, out of which came the Presbyterian Church under the leadership of John Knox and others, this again was one of the most frequently read and most often quoted books. It brought the Covenanters great comfort and sustained the spirits of those men and women who were hunted like animals throughout the mountains and glens of Europe.” **Ray Steadman**

“Because you’re gorgeous I’d do anything for you. Because you’re gorgeous I know you’ll get me through.” **Ladybird**

“In attempting to explore Solomon’s masterpiece a little I feel quite guilty. I realise that I am but an amateur who is trespassing among the stars where only angels have right of way. The poem means so much to me that, great daring, I am venturing forward into it hoping that what has helped me so much may help someone else as well.” **W.W.Vellacott**

“As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee”
Isaiah 62:5

“My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the king: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.” **Psalms 45:1**

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**O Christ, He is the fountain,
The deep, sweet well of life:
Its living streams I've tasted
Which save from grief and strife.
And to an ocean fulness,
His mercy doth expand;
His grace is all-sufficient
As by His wisdom planned.**

**O I am my Beloved's,
And my Beloved's mine;
He brings a poor vile sinner
Into His house of wine!
I stand upon His merit;
I know no other stand.
I'm hidden in His presence
And held by His own hand.**

**The Bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory,
But on my King of grace:
Not at the crown He giveth,
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory,
And my eternal stand!**
Anne Ross Cousin (1824-1906)

**Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.**

**Jesus, our only Joy be Thou,
As Thou our Prize wilt be;
Jesus, be Thou our Glory now,
And through eternity.**
Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Introducing the Song

This book comprises 31 short meditations (one for each day of the month), all on the Bible book: **The Song of Solomon**. I do so with the view it could be used in one's own individual quiet time, to encompass studying the Bible and praying to the Lord, although it could also be read in one or more sittings or serve simply as a reference that can be used when considering this song. Each meditation is based on a single verse in the Song, although several of the meditations will relate to more than one verse. I do so partly because context and background demands it and is all important when it comes to understanding the Bible and partly because it is my intention while adopting this approach to cover as much of the Song as I can.

I recognise despite being familiar with and having thought about most of these verses over many years that all too often I am still paddling in the shallows rather than out there swimming in the deep when it comes to exploring the riches in the Word. I envisage my readership will comprise those who know little or nothing concerning the Song as well as those with considerable depth of insight and understanding. Just prior to penning my thoughts, I was able to experiment with members of my own church Bible study group. I asked for eight volunteers and gave each a verse from the Song (one for each chapter) and invited each one to share their thoughts on what they had read. I think none would have regarded themselves as being experts and as far as I could make out did not have strong views on what the Song was about. Yet each one provided credible thoughts, demonstrating that we can all meditate, even on more challenging scriptures.

In order to be of further assistance to those seeking to understand this sublime and mysterious book, and before embarking on these meditations, as well as in order to provide a context and framework to studying the Song, I have written two chapters. The first is titled: “**Approaching the Song**” and contains my own story as to why, after fifty years of being fascinated by and pondering on the Song, I am now writing down these thoughts. The second is titled: “**Interpreting the Song**” and addresses the elephant in the room – what is it all about? Because for some / many, not knowing the answer can be a sticking point, and the Song gets neglected and misunderstood as a result, which is a pity, given the riches that are contained in it. While recognising wide variations in opinion on how to interpret the Song, I try giving, and do so with due respect, an interpretive framework, without being too dogmatic, mindful that readers, including among those who are most holy and who know their Bibles well, may see things a lot differently to me.

I would add three further thoughts. I quote from the Authorized (King James) version of the Bible, not because I am hung up about KJV (believing for serious study one can / should use a variety of versions and other study aids) but it is the version I am most familiar with, is at least as good as any of the alternatives and it sounds better. Secondly, and this is a clue to my own understanding, while it is true I am aiming what I write to any on the spectrum between knowing nothing about the Song to those who know all that is worth knowing, I am especially doing this for lovers (experienced / wonderful to inexperienced / aspiring) of the LORD. I do so with the prayer you will love Him more dearly and know more of that love He has for His loved ones, yet not to dismiss the notion the Song is also about sexual ethics and personal relationships. Thirdly, I believe the Song as prophetic. While its subjects are young people, it is something older people might reflect on. The spontaneous energy exuded may be for us oldies something reminiscent of a long ago youth, but we remember what it was like and, not only that, we look forward to the day when we can do so again, for we will be with our heavenly lover forever and say ... *“Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready”* (Revelation 19:7).

This brings us to what the Song is about. Just as Solomon’s Proverbs were about wisdom, so his Song of songs is about LOVE, especially that between two lovers, including obvious physical love making. The importance of love is in stark contrast to that of human vanity, the subject of Solomon’s other book, Ecclesiastes. The unique love between husband and wife is foreseen at creation: *“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24) and is later likened to Gods relationship with Israel (Old Testament) and Christ’s relationship with the Church (New Testament). The Song incorporates both. In trying to unravel major themes of the Bible, one can’t ignore that of God seeking to relate to His people in love being at the top, despite their tendency to be unfaithful, which makes the Song of Solomon doubly relevant.

I dedicate the book to all such lovers, and especially those who suffer because of the love that is *“stronger than death”* they have for the one they are betrothed to. In sense with the escalation of persecution of Christians and Jews the world over, this book comes at an opportune time, not just because I am on my way out and offer the thoughts I do as something I want to pass on to those I leave behind, realising just as believers down the ages have found special comfort in the Song, I believe they will do so yet again. I also dedicate this book to my beloved, my wife Jolly.

Approaching the Song

I became a Christian aged 15, partly due to the efforts of the Plymouth Brethren, and it is with the PBs (middle of the road, Open section) I have been associated for much of the time since then, although I have been around a lot, having had many encounters at most points along the ecclesiological spectrum. One of my early PB experiences was attending the traditional (as far as PBs go) Sunday morning Breaking of Bread meeting. Its focus, besides on the emblems of bread and wine, was around the atoning death of Christ. The meeting's uniqueness was brothers in fellowship could share, pertinent to this focus, as felt led by the Spirit. And they did contribute, not just praying and giving out hymns but sharing verses from the Bible, maybe accompanied by a short exposition. It was then I became aware of the Song. A brother might share a verse from the Song in the context of Christ's love for His Church. Two brethren stood out: Bryn Jones and Len Ladd – both I owe a great debt. At that time, my RE sixth form teacher shared he and his wife read the Song on their honeymoon, something me and my wife did years later.

From there on I was hooked, and if someone were to ask me for my favourite book in the Bible I might well answer: Song of Solomon. I saw in the Song some of my own desire and journey getting closer to the Lord, in spite of saying nothing about God or specific Bible doctrines. Over the years I have often preached on the Song, because like my early mentors I felt there were profound applications, and for the last twenty it was my intention to write a commentary on it. I have had three bites of the cherry, available as free downloads from my website: **jrbpublications.com**, but in each case what I wrote skirted round many details in the Song, not providing specific exposition of each verse, but rather on giving overviews and applications.

If one were to enquire: why the procrastination? I could think of several reasons but one especially stands out. My particular Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is feeling the need to thoroughly prepare before letting loose to the wider world what it is I wish to share. This is of particular relevance regarding the Song of Solomon. As I was to discover, there have been literally thousands of detailed, differing commentaries on the Song since it was written some 3000 years ago, a good many of which are still around if one cared to look. One thing is obvious (which I will discuss in the next chapter) is that there have been many different interpretations and applications, a good many of which have been contradictory. In order to get it right, one needs to understand the language and the historical and cultural context, especially when it comes to the rich imagery invoked in the Song.

While my early mentors were pretty clear as to their understanding of the Song of Solomon, I was soon to find out that others outside that fairly confined circle had other ideas, including a modern trend to ditch the notion there is a deeper spiritual interpretation on the lines of the divine / human relationship and focus on the human love aspect. I was also to discover, with one notable exception (when I fellowshiped with the Pentecostals and one of the members gave me a book on the Song her deceased husband had written) that many churches outside the PBs neglected and ignored the Song, except when it came to marriage guidance.

In the 50 years I have taken a particular interest in the Song, I have read many commentaries on it by Christians from all sections of the Church and, except for some written in most recent times, these were all solely addressing the matter of divine human love using the “love story” as illustrative of some “higher” truth. Besides PB writers, like J.N.Darby and William Kelly and those nearer to this present time: W.W.Vellacot and C.E.Hocking, these covered the Early Church Fathers like Origen, a group I refer to as medieval mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and Julian of Norwich, Puritans like Richard Sibbes, John Owen and John Bunyan, and many others, like the Chinese church planter, Watchman Nee. Helpful commentaries that focused on the theological / background rather than providing much of a devotional perspective included “The Song of Solomon” by G.Lloyd Carr (part of the Tyndale series) and “Song of Songs” by Marvin Pope.

Other than checking out that what I write is sound, I have avoided referring to other commentaries, and merely add yet another commentary to the many already available. Rather, I have used the opportunity to share what the Lord has laid on my heart these past fifty years and encourage a new generation to explore further and in particular meditate on the Song. Meditation has always been an important part of the Judaeo-Christian heritage, and there are many verses in the Bible that talk about meditation, like: “*My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord*” (Psalm 104:34). The discipline of meditation does not naturally fit in with today’s culture yet is something we overlook to our cost. Christian meditation is not to be confused with that of New Age and eastern mysticism where the aim is to empty one of self entirely and by this means it opens the door to the spirit world. Rather, the aim of Christian meditation is to muse, ponder, contemplate, wonder, think about, and reflect upon the character, work and word of God. This Song, as much as anywhere else in Scripture, is fertile ground for meditation. My aim is to help people to study the Word, rediscover this discipline and be blessed as a result.

Interpreting the Song

If the qualification needed to meditate intelligently on this Song depended on having the right interpretation then by my reckoning no-one would be able to do so, since having studied the opinions offered by the good and the great down the millennia not one has got it completely right and many have been way off the mark. Yet I will argue even the simplest and unlearned can profitably meditate.

At this point, I could attempt to write a long treatise aimed toward providing the “right” answer when it comes to understanding the true purpose of and meaning behind the Song, before ending with a mere handful of helpful principles to be borne in mind, recognising I may end up less sure about the Song of songs than any other book in the Bible, including Revelation and Daniel, despite maybe being as familiar with this as any of the other 65. The best I can come up with in the next 1.5 pages is to outline the “problem” areas, some of the main ways the learned from many different camps have tried to solve the problems and what I think, following years of reflecting and realising my early mentors were a lot less than 100 per cent correct. And we begin with spiritual versus literal. Coming to a view will have significant bearing on our understanding. For example, the text “*he feedeth among the lilies*” (2:16) has been taken to mean having fellowship with God’s people or as part of making love, depending on what view we take.

The impression I get studying commentaries down the ages is, except for the past 100 years say, most commentators set little store on what on the face of it is a love story involving two (sometimes three) human lovers and chose to emphasise a greater and more significant story to do with Yahweh and Israel (Jewish) and Christ and the Church (or individual believer) (Christian) and how that relationship might work out. Both camps try to provide justification for thinking as they do but the huge variations in interpretation within both camps have left me unconvinced. A middle path is to recognise all schools of thought and try to combine the best. That is, there is a human love story that involves relationship development and sexual intimacy but also part of the rationale behind the Song’s inclusion in the Bible is that not only do these things matter enormously but it also illustrates a greater relationship between the divine and the human. As far as the Old Testament goes, there are several references to do with God comparing His relationship with Israel with that of a husband and his wife. Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than with the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife he was told to love regardless. In the New Testament, not only is there the narrative of the marriage

supper of the Lamb but we find it comparing the love of a husband is meant to show toward his wife with Christ and the Church: “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*” (Ephesians 5:25).

Whether we take the spiritual or literal approach to interpretation, we are still faced with a formidable array of imagery, a lot to do with the natural world, little being merely incidental, which for great poetry is normal. It is concerning which I have found commentaries by those having researched the subject helpful, albeit not binding. Just as challenging is working out who are the characters of the Song, if indeed they are not merely made up, and piecing together what seems to be the story line. I sympathise with those who identify two lovers: the king (Solomon) and the humble, rustic shepherd (both referred to in the Song), given Solomon’s history with women was far removed from the biblical model of a man loving solely his one and only wife. But having thought long and hard, I am inclined to the view the lover is Solomon, showing himself initially as that shepherd, possibly when visiting one of his country estates incognito, and the beloved is that modest, Shulamite country girl, who despite his 999 other liaisons was his one true love. There is a third party often referred to in the text as the “Daughters of Jerusalem” or by some commentators as “Friends” or as I prefer the “Chorus”, who provide a running commentary to what is going on. The “Lover”, the “Beloved” and the “Chorus”, following ch1:1, cover the entire rest of the Song as speaking parts, although other parties like the watchmen and the brothers are referred to (at the end, I include the Song along with who says what). The Song has been seen as a number of unrelated poems. I would love it if it were a developing story starting with initial and testing love to ending with maturing and enduring love. But it may not be that simple, given the marriage may have been that in chapter 3 with sexual intimacy delicately depicted in chapter 1 and sexual restraint in chapter 8. The story could well be darting backwards and forwards, maybe including dreams.

It is not my intention to insist on the understanding I have reached, especially given my admission that while I know a lot more now than 50 years ago, when I discovered the Song, but as they say the more I know, the more I know I don’t know. But the notion the Song is based on a real life love story between king Solomon firstly disguised as a shepherd and an ordinary country lass, but with the deliberate spiritual application for those who are intent on following the two great commands, about loving God with all we have and loving our neighbour (includes everyone) as ourselves is the basis upon which I offer the thoughts that follow.

Day 1 – The Song of songs (1:1)

“The Song of songs, which is Solomon's”

Here we are introduced to this sublime song, this most sacred of books of the Bible. It is Solomon's song and it is his Song of songs. While Solomon was arguably the wisest man who ever lived, having been bestowed this gift by God himself, at Solomon's request so he could best rule God's own special people, as called upon by God to do, we also know he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, making it a point of wonderment that he was able to reflect so profoundly and with such great understanding on what is meant as a unique, wonderful love relationship between a man and his one wife. The tragedy was he failed to apply those insights personally as many still do. Whether it was to do with his one true love or merely a commentary on how real love ought to be, we can't say for sure, but Solomon understood something incredibly important and was possibly without peer in doing so. One of the great challenges as we begin our journey of discovery of the riches contained in the Song is attaching a right meaning to the words that follow.

Was it a reflection on the love between the divine and the human (Yahweh and Israel or Christ and His Church or even an individual believer) or was it about the love between Solomon or an unnamed rustic shepherd and this Shulamite girl or maybe a love triangle involving all these, we are meant to unravel? The thousands who have commentated on the Song in the 3000 years since the Song was penned are not agreed on the matter (although I offer a view in the introductory chapters), but, whatever the true interpretation is, it should not be a barrier to finding spiritual edification or practical application given it is scripture and we are reminded *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:”* (2Timothy 3:16). As for it being the Song of songs, we know it is one of 1005 that Solomon wrote. It is the only one I am fully aware of and the one the Holy Spirit has allowed to be included fully in holy canon, even though many down the ages have questioned its right to be there. It should be remembered this is poetry rather than prose and is to be sung rather than read; and as such it is meant to speak to the heart more than the mind; that it should engage all senses, even if only in our imagination, and deals with a range of human emotions, especially love. Like Rabbi Akiba, I view delving into this song as akin to entering into the Holy of holies. As such it should be done reverently just as did the High Priest in ancient Israel when he entered there, into the presence of an awesome God, the Holy One of Israel. So let it be so with our meditating.

Day 2 – Intimate love (1:1)

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.”

The first thing that might strike us we get started on the Song proper is that it wastes no time when it comes to what the Song is about and also leaves us in little doubt that even though it was written by a man it seeks to present the girl’s own perspective, although some may say in a chauvinistic way, which is one wanting pure intimacy. While the man does get to speak, the girl appears to dominate the conversation even if only by ending up saying twice as much as the man.

At the start, we find she wants to be kissed and not just a chaste peck that a brother may give to his sister but the passionate kisses of a lover. If I were to use one word to encapsulate the essence of the Song, it would be intimacy but not in a crude or lustful way, but rather in one that is pure and innocent. The girl craves the love of her lover, more than anything else, begging the question regarding those we love, whether our earthly spouse or our heavenly lover, concerning which – how and to what extent do we yearn for his presence and seek and desire to do what pleases him ahead of any other consideration. A kiss, if nothing else, symbolises and is a token of that love. In comparing love she does so with wine, begging the question why wine? I have to confess, I like wine but am mindful of the need to drink in moderation. If nothing else, it can add to enjoyment when eating a nice meal and among other things releases inhibitions and add to bonhomie. As good as wine is compared with anything else by way of comparison, the Lover’s love is far better. The challenge in the verses that follow is going about maintaining that love.

Regarding the next two verses: *“Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee”*, we are introduced to some of the outstanding qualities of the Lover. These include his good name, which is *compared to ointment* poured forth. It was his good name that attracted people to him, whether the virgins or the upright, which reminds us of the importance of having a good name, no better revealed than in the person of Jesus, and of avoiding doing that which may tarnish that good name. But as far as this song is concerned, the girl wants to be drawn and the lover (here revealed as the king) is well able to grant her wish, with gladness and rejoicing being the result, and the chance to remember his love that is better than wine.

Day 3 – Black and comely (1:5)

“I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon”

As far as true love is concerned, it is, or should be, blind when it comes to colour, and the language used here is not racist. As far as the culture the girl relates to goes (unlike my own western culture) fairness was associated with beauty, and she was NOT fair. For in the next verse she explains: *“Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept”*. We now know the reason; she had been working in the sun on vineyards not her own, as directed by her brothers, who were angry with her. A consequence of this activity, besides losing her fairness because of the sun, was to neglect her own vineyard, which maybe is something we should be mindful of when we go around doing what is not our principle responsibility and ignoring what is. The vineyard like the garden we come across later is virtually synonymous with the girl, but it is her responsibility and should be her priority, to look after it.

Her blackness is compared with the *“tents of Kedar”* and the *“curtains of Solomon”* and is our introduction to the Song’s figurative language, in which it abounds. Notwithstanding her fixation on her blackness she is still aware she is comely and addresses her remarks to the daughters of Jerusalem, which like the rich imagery is to be a reoccurring theme of the Song. Perhaps, we too can take comfort that despite our flaws our own lover might find us attractive. Not to be satisfied with being a mere spectator, like the Chorus she addresses, she embarks on her quest to seek out the Lover, asking directions: *“Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions? If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents”* (1:7,8).

Interestingly, the Chorus can also see beauty in the girl and are happy to direct her. We might take encouragement that despite negatives in our journey and a realisation we may not be what we ought there may be positives too and even if we may not see them others can. While being “black” for whatever reason could be seen as a negative, we may be seen as “comely” by the one who matters most and rather than stay put, we should seek out our heavenly lover so we can be with him.

Day 4 – Horses and chariots (1:9)

“I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots.”

Having succeeded in her quest to be united with her lover, he makes an unusual observation, to which he elaborates *“Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold”* (1:10) and proposes an unusual refinement *“We will make thee borders of gold with studs of silver”* (1:11). We brace ourselves to contemplating the sort of imagery which abounds in this Song and introduced to the notion that what is already there, however basic, can be enhanced.

As far as this meditation goes, like with much of the figurative language used in the Song, my interpretation is incomplete and trying to understand why this metaphor of horses (I believe mares were referred to here rather than stallions which would normally be used) and Pharaoh's chariots was used is one of many questions I would like to ask Solomon if ever I get to meet him. I can imagine that Solomon, when contemplating his possessions, took, in this, special pride

But here goes ... being harnessed to Pharaoh's chariots require a special type of horse and no doubt with the finery used they would have made a splendid sight. The indications are that horses from Egypt were the best and this was the reason they were imported into Israel. There would have been a sense of wildness about the horses and the qualities seen here were part of their natural beauty. We can only imagine Solomon being besotted by this untamed beauty, so full of potential, which can be harnessed and built upon like these Egyptian imports.

There was also a further sense of ever readiness as their task was not just for ceremonial purposes but to take the king and his armies into battle, in order to do so the horses needed to be strong and swift. By making the comparisons he does Solomon bestows on the girl the highest of honours and greatest of confidences. In adding to the qualities already there, *“borders of gold”* and *“studs of silver”*, the horses become even more magnificent to behold, but these were not merely for show but a practical addition in the service of the king.

We might reflect that as we come to our heavenly lover with whatever natural attributes we possess, we are far from the finished product and we are very much work in progress, but he is happy to work with us and in us. We should not dismiss our natural attributes yet recognise He can rightly take what we have, add to it whatever is missing and gladly use us in His royal service.

Day 5 – Thou art fair (1:15)

“Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes.”

We learn here of the lover’s appreciation and admiration for the girl, a point that is to be repeated several times in the Song. One of the observations of life I have made is the number of people that have low self esteem, and significantly as far as my own experience goes this is true amongst many earnest Christians, but more important than that is not how we see ourselves but how God sees us. A key gospel theme to recall is that *“He brings a poor vile sinner into His “house of wine:”*

Whether or not we see this as a description made from a human or divine perspective, the point should be made that as far as the lover is concerned, the beloved is fair and is loved regardless of how she feels about herself or how others might see her. Not that he needed to do so, he repeats *thou art fair*. The main attribute of the girl cited here is her *doves' eyes*. When I think of a dove, I see something pure, gentle and innocent and as for the eyes of the dove these are single and there is no hint of crookedness in them. It is quite likely the girl in question really is that innocent and the danger for all of us as we experience the harsh realities and hard knocks of life is we can lose that innocence and become hard. We need to *be wise as serpents* but at the same time need to be *harmless as doves*.

But it would be unsound exegesis to ignore the context for this verse and even though innocence has been portrayed it is part of scene that included physical love making, leaving little to the imagination. Prior to his declaration of admiration the girl declares: *“A bundle of myrrh is my well beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts. My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi”* (1:13,14). After it is the lover’s turn: *“Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir”* (1:16,17).

Taken alone, and within the human and divine context, this verse reassures me that the one I love sees me as fair despite my propensity of screwing things up and when it dawns on me what I despicable person I can be. But like so much of the Song I am encouraged to hang in there because of the one who remains faithful. But I cannot ignore the application when it comes to the physical love that was imagined. In a world where sex is often depicted in sordid terms, it is well to remember that God got in first and when the relationship is as it should be, and within the context of a faithful marriage relationship, sex is very good.

Day 6 – the Rose of Sharon (2:1)

"I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys"

The first thing that might come to mind when we come across the phrases “rose of Sharon” and “lily of the valleys” is these are about things that are exotic and perhaps rare. My understanding, however, is that these plants, while presenting a pleasing picture to the eye, are common place in the land where this Song is set and if one were walking by might be trod upon without further thought, or like the pretty flowers on the tangle weed in my garden, to be pulled up and thrown out.

The girl didn’t regard herself as special, as she likens herself to something quite common place, even though attractive, making it all the more remarkable from her perspective that her lover saw in her something special. While it is not healthy to put oneself down, which in the early days of this relationship she tended to do, it is not good either to have an inflated opinion of one’s merits and remaining humble is a good thing. It is one quality that will have attracted her lover, when as far as the girl was concerned he could choose from any number of creditable candidates.

One cause of wonderment is that Christ chooses us when there are so many other beautiful flowers that he might choose from. The matter of free will and election has long divided the church, but here we see both the girl seek out her lover and he her. Incidentally, this is one of many examples in the Song where the man seems to be portrayed as someone superior compared with the woman, leading me think this is about more than a human only relationship. A man woman relationship should be between two equals, both with a mixture of good and bad points.

The lover’s instant response to the girls self-deprecation is "*as the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters*" (2.2), indicating whatever she thought about herself his view on her outstanding features was so much higher than her own and being among thorns makes her stand out even more. It is a sobering thought that amidst all the niceties the world around the girl was full of thorns. She was in his eyes the stand out “*lily among thorns*” putting her so much above the rest and thereby was to be afforded a special place of honour.

Within human love it is well to take the view that the lucky one that one’s lover has set his/her desire on is me. Even more so in the divine human love relationship to think that someone who is a mere *lily of the valley* should have been *chosen beforehand in him from before the foundation of the universe* (Ephesians 1:4).

Day 7 – the Apple Tree (2:2)

“As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.”

The exchange begun in 2:1 continues. Just as he describes his beloved as *the lily among thorns* so she describes her lover as *the apple tree among the trees of the wood*. In both cases each one describes the other as outstanding among his/her peers. There will be speculation as to what sort of tree it was but a number of things are clear besides being one to stand out when compared with the other trees in the wood. It gave shade to them by virtue of its foliage which is for all the year round for those who sat under it and its fruit was sweet and satisfying.

In a husband / wife relationship, the traditional role of the man is to be a protector of and provider for his wife. This may well be downplayed in modern culture that lauds equality but it is biblical. Rather than mere going along with today’s cultural norms, the husband should remember he has responsibilities to protect and provide for his wife. When looking at the comparison relationship of God or Christ with Israel or the Church, we find a similar principle applies.

We have our divine protector but there is a need to respond. Outside of that relationship there can be no guarantee of protection and provision, even though there could be and often is the false allure of something better, which doesn’t require the same constancy and commitment. But the wonderful assurance given here is that regardless of the turmoil and conflict we may find raging all around us we can sit under this particular apple tree and find refuge and cover from the elements and whatever it is the world may choose to throw at us.

There may be many things we could well observe as we look around that might disturb us but we are able to find delight under his shadow regardless. I dare say that in the world there will be fruit to be found that appears sweet but it may leave a bitter taste. The fruit our heavenly lover provides is sweet inasmuch it not only tastes good and pleasant but in that it sustains and satisfies fully. If there is an encouragement here it is simply to sit under this particular apple tree and not go in search of another; for this is one is the best in every way.

The delights that can be found in our Lord and heavenly lover will far exceed anything the world can offer. And as we will see later, this lover stands head and shoulders above any other like *the apple tree among the trees of the wood*.

Day 8 – his banner over me (2:3)

“He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love”

One of the impacts this Song has had down the centuries is that it has helped to inspire successive generations of song writers e.g. *“Jesus, our only joy be Thou, As Thou our prize wilt be; Jesus, be Thou our glory now, And throughout eternity,”* (St. Bernard of Clairvaux 1090 – 1153). I can well remember a popular song that came out in my youth based on this very verse (along with the actions).

Banners invariably are associated with a message that the banner provider or waver wishes to show to any who look upon it. We are at the point by my reckoning when the king is wanting to show off his bride (new?) to his entourage / watching crowd. As for the banqueting house, this is a place for sumptuous feasting in a convivial setting and the person in this case that is to be honoured is the bride. She has come a long way from being that humble shepherdess, a non-entity as far as the world goes, and is now in this exalted position where her lover is willing and able to display his affection to her before all onlookers.

Banners can and do display all sorts of messages and it is something invariably waved before a watching world to make a point. There is little doubt in this case what that message is, summed up in a single word – LOVE. The bridegroom is letting everyone know that this is the person he loves and wishes to spend the rest of his life with. There is little doubt that whatever the time or prevailing beliefs that love is one that most will identify as being there toward the top.

Much has been written (and sung) about love, perhaps more than any other subject, and few would dispute that it is a most wonderful thing even though unrequited, betrayed and perverted love are some of the sad digressions when it comes to love. When it comes to love and banquets, one glorious prospect for Christ lovers is the enticing prospect of joining him at the marriage supper of the Lamb. For those invited to the supper the banner over them will be love.

Going back to the song that was sung in my youth – those being brought to his banqueting house were those singing the song and the bringer was Christ himself. We have no right to expect such a wonderful reception, being all too aware of our flaws and shortcomings, and we can only do so because of His grace. The message to the world we can take on board is that He has afforded us this undeserved and unexpected honour and He is not ashamed to declare to all that we belong to Him.

Day 9 – Not to stir up love (2:7)

“I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please”

Following the girl being brought into her lover’s banqueting house (2:4) we can now see her yearning for his love and longing for his embrace: *“Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.”* (2:5,6) and it is at this point she charges the daughters of Jerusalem, a call to be later repeated: *“I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please.”* (3:5) and then again, but this time without invoking roes and hinds: *“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, until he please.”* (8:4)

We can speculate who the daughters of Jerusalem are but we do know they take an active interest in all that is going on, and were close to the king, albeit without the same intimacy the girl enjoyed, being both a “daughter” and belonging to the place where the king sat on his throne. We might surmise as to the significance of hinds and roes, starting with their association with the natural world and implication they were chosen as representative of youthful vigour. Why she implores, not once but three times, the daughters of Jerusalem not to *awake my love, until he please* could be part down to that sometimes patience is needed and it is well to wait.

I also think true love cannot be whipped up by noise, emotion or anything else come to that, but when it comes to this relationship it can only happen when he deigns it is to happen. The love that is depicted in this Song is more real than anything that might be manufactured by human intervention. It is something authentic and to be experienced, and not merely something that she or others talk about. Just maybe in the everyday happenings of life things need to just simply happen and the couple must do what needs doing based on that love, but when it comes to love making it happens when it happens or when it pleases.

As for us and our heavenly lover, the thrice repeating of this injunction at various stages in this relationship indicates firstly that love is always there and is the basis of all that later transpires and is not something that can be contrived according to whim. The truth is that He will rest in His love for *“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing”* (Zephaniah 3:17).

Day 10 – Leaping upon the mountains (2:8)

“The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills”

One of the abiding images of this song is of the youthful vigour, the abundance of energy and the ability to do what is desirable, even if humanly speaking it is only barely possible, irrespective of whatever obstacles and challenges there are on the way, on the lover’s part. This picture is further reinforced in the next verse when he reveals himself, to begin with in part only, to his beloved: *“My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice”* (2:9). This joyful exuberance is later repeated: *“Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether”* (2:17) as the girl further delights in this realisation and takes comfort from her lover’s interest in her and encourages him to continue to be like the roe or the hart, hopeful and confident that she and he will soon be together, and he will overcome all obstacles.

It is worth reflecting first on the lover’s voice. It was distinctive and delightful to her ear. For those who follow the Christ this should also resonate like the sheep led by the Good Shepherd; we hear his voice and follow him. Surely it is his voice in which we delight and it is to his call to which we should respond. Much of that which attracts him to us is to do with his flawless character that no human lover can ever possess, and which is a major pre-occupation of this Song. But to begin he is *“leaping upon the mountains”* and *“skipping upon the hills”* as if without a care in the world and what might be seen as obstacles (mountains and hills) these present no barrier at all and are readily negotiated because he is able to do so.

Now I am old, the thought of leaping upon mountains and skipping upon hills is far less a realistic prospect compared with what I might have attempted in my youth, but the intent of doing so in order to reach out toward my beloved should not have gone away, only my ability to deliver. But not so with Christ my lover, who is ever willing and able to skip on hills and leap on mountains, promising to his disciples *“I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”* (Matthew 28:20) and with whom we might say *“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me”* (Philippians 4:13), for it is he who can do it through us and does. While naturally we may be daunted by this formidable array of obstacles, we need to take heart and be confident that this is a small thing for our heavenly lover.

Day 11 – My fair one come away (2:10)

“My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away”

The lover, who we have just found out in the verse before was he who: *“standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice”*, is now telling the girl *“rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away”* with him. He gives the reason *“lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell”* (11-13) before repeating his request: *“arise, my love, my fair one, and come away”*.

It would have been easy to stay put, in her comfort zone, surrounded by all that was familiar, but it was now time to venture forth, into uncharted territory with her lover to lead and guide her. For one thing, the winter had past. The cold and lack of growth and lack of life in the natural world was no longer. What was before her should she respond were the joys of Spring: birds singing, including the sound of the turtle dove, fig trees putting forth figs and vines producing tender grapes. She is ever his love, his fair one, but the choice was hers to stay put or venture forth. She is his *“dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs”* (2:14) but it wouldn't do to remain hidden. He asks to *“see her countenance ... hear her voice”*, *“for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely”*.

Just as the girl was offered the choice to stay or go (to miss or find blessing) so we who sincerely seek to follow Christ are offered a similar choice. We could so easily hold back, and many do, and thus lose out on so many of the blessings he wishes to shower on us and opportunities for us to be a blessing to other people. If we do venture out we will be entering the unknown, may suffer hardship and need to trust on Christ to lead us. Put like this, the choice is an obvious one (and, as we will see, the girl was to make the right choice) but for those of us who love Christ we need to make that choice. While God in his grace can and does make up for our wrong decisions, like not going out in that wider world and doing good as Christ would lead us, it is sad that for some / many that is what they decide and with it the thought of what might have been if they had ventured forth. Right now Christ calls his loved ones: *“rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away”* and the answer to the question must be responded to on an individual basis – do I or don't I?

Day 12 – Taking the little foxes (2:15)

“Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes”

One of the first challenges facing the girl, who has just taken up her lover’s gracious offer: *rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away* (2:10,14) is to look after the vineyards that we see belong not to “her” nor “him” but to both.

Vineyards, as we see elsewhere in the Song, are a reoccurring theme. It can be taken to represent the girl as a person or that which she has responsibility for. The purpose behind any vineyard is to produce grapes in order to make wine. But if grapes are not looked after, they won’t survive and the vine will produce little or no fruit, and especially at this *tender* phase when they needed special care.

That which can spoil the vines are little foxes, that which might go unnoticed if not careful. Before you know it, if unchecked they can cause havoc. We might well ask what exactly this figure of speech stands for but whatever it is it is something significant. It appears the girl had been negligent in her duties. It is quite clear to any offering guidance to married couples that for that relationship to remain strong and healthy, and not end up in breakdown as many do, it needed to be worked on, and not just by the girl! Hear I admit to irritation at Solomon if that was how he felt – catching foxes was his job too! The bottom line is to identify that which might ruin that relationship and deal with it. The obvious parallel is between me and Christ, where the duty of working on the vineyard is down to me, albeit with his support. There are all sorts of things that can get in the way, and often do.

We can think of all sorts of examples of bad attitudes, thoughts, habits, actions etc. where the antidote is the fruit of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance* (Galatians 5:22,23). Pertinent are Jesus words: *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit”* (John 15:1,2), indicating that bearing fruit, as indeed we must, can be a painful process.

These may be what is on the face of it tiny sins but as these continue to mount and are not dealt with we will find that wonderful relationship that we ought to enjoy we don’t and so it wanes and sometimes appears to be lost forever. The solution is to follow the lover’s counsel: *“take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines”* realising we are doing it both for him and me. And it is best to do so early while the tender grapes are on the vine, so these are not lost forever.

Day 13 – My beloved is mine (2:16)

"My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies"

We come to perhaps the most powerful depiction of the love between the two lovers when the girl declares *"my beloved is mine, and I am his"*. There is little doubt this love was enduring and constant and fully reciprocated by either party. The call was to be repeated *"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies."* (6:3) and again *"I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me"* (7:10). The second time the order is reversed – her belonging to him comes first, and third time round her ownership doesn't even feature for it was all about him, which one commentator saw as evidence of a maturing love. But for now she is content to lay claim on her lover – he is mine, as if to say there is nothing no-one can do about it, for the matter is settled, just as was the case with the converse *"I am his"*. We are soon to see this love tested and that which will see the lovers through is the love they have for one another.

For Christians, theirs is not so much a matter of religious adherence but rather that of a relationship between the believer and his / her Lord and Saviour but as far as the *"my beloved is mine and I am his"* claim is concerned we might well add "Lover". Paul's prayer is apt: *"that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God."* (Ephesians 3:17-19). While the harder realities of everyday life might bring out thoughts more down to earth, we do well to ponder our relationship as one that applies to each waking moment and then into eternity. This is what will comfort and sustain us in the testing days and hard knocks of life that are ahead of us.

But she doesn't stop here, for she declares *he feedeth among the lilies*. As was pointed out earlier those who emphasise the spiritual and a more allegorical meaning to the Song may interpret this differently to those who emphasise the literal and a more human meaning. I will leave it for readers to decide whether this is more to do with his having fellowship with God's people or to do with physical love making (I am inclined to the view that it can be with both), but importantly the image conveyed here is of a lover who is content. The love described by the girl is not merely for her benefit but his also, and it brings us to a key element of love – it is to do with both giving and receiving. The two lovers gave to each other.

Day 14 – Lost and found (3:1)

“By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not”

We have here the first of two “lost and found” mini adventures involving the two lovers. It is possible in this case the girl was merely dreaming of her lover and him not being with her. Why she should think so we can’t say for sure, but it is not uncommon for this to happen despite the undisputed fact as far as she was concerned: *I am his and he is mine*. Doubts can creep in so subtly and quickly, made more likely by her being alone at night on her bed. This can be distressing especially if the expectation is for her lover’s continuous presence.

Her response was quick and decisive: *“I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth”* (3:2) but it was to no avail: *“I sought him, but I found him not”*, adding to her anxiety. Many know the feeling of anguish when that happens. Then she tries a different approach or rather avails herself of an opportunity that presents itself: *“The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?”* (3:3) Who these watchmen were we can’t say for sure but it seems their role was to look after the safety of those living in the city. Soon after we find: *“It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth.”* She is so happy with her find: *“I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me”* (3:3,4).

As a young Christian, I was told not to rely on feelings but on faith, holding onto the promise of *him whom my soul loveth* that he will never desert us. To bring in the “soul” is likely to emphasise that she loved him from deep within. There may be times when our heavenly lover seems far from us but it is not he that has gone away. In the second lost and found incident described in chapter 5 the problem was likely to do with wilful sin that had crept into her life, but on this occasion it is was likely more to do with her placing feelings above faith.

Like the girl, we will be tested, and we will feel isolated; it is almost guaranteed, but like her who cherished the relationship she enjoys with her lover so highly, we do well to take whatever measures that are needed to ensure that relationship is secure and recognise we live by faith, and not by sight. One of the beautiful pictures of saints of the past is they enjoyed an ever present sense of closeness (intimacy) with the Lord they loved, from the mundane to the marvellous.

Day 15 – the King in his splendour (3:6)

“Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant?”

We come to a strange scene in our story of love between our two lovers and here Solomon is named, who I take to be the lover (although others see it differently). Up to now the girl may have only known Solomon in the guise of a shepherd and his promise he will return to take her as his bride. Whether she had realised up to that point that he was indeed the king we can't say for sure, and that being the case this would have come as a surprise and any pretence there might have been on Solomon's part now goes. He comes with his entourage from out of the wilderness, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, two gifts the Magi gave the baby Jesus and just as sobering, this was also linked to him in his death and burial. The girl asks “*who is this*”, maybe not yet convinced it was her lover that had returned for her. Later a related question is asked about the girl “*who is this that cometh up from the wilderness*” (8:5), where we sense the procession is then complete.

It is an impressive sight: *“Behold his bed, which is Solomon's; threescore valiant men are about it, of the valiant of Israel. They all hold swords, being expert in war: every man hath his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night. King Solomon made himself a chariot of the wood of Lebanon. He made the pillars thereof of silver, the bottom thereof of gold, the covering of it of purple, the midst thereof being paved with love, for the daughters of Jerusalem (3:7-10).* I don't profess to understand all the symbolism or why special attention to the daughters of Jerusalem (Zion) but she invites them to behold the king (her lover) for she is so delighted with him (as we should be with ours) *“Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold king Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart” (3:11).*

As to how we connect this episode into this story of love, I suggest this is the point in the story when the marriage takes place, as indeed it must as the proper setting for the sexual intimacy more than alluded to in the Song. For those who love Christ even though we have not seen Him, we look forward to the time He will come for His Bride (the Church) and we will not merely behold Him in His kingly splendour but we will be wedded to Him for evermore. This is He who was despised and rejected by men, suffered a cruel death on Calvary's cross and who will soon return to reign on the earth: King of kings and Lord of lords.

Day 16 – Like a flock of goats (4:1)

“Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead”

Thus begins one of a number of descriptions of the girl given by her lover. It continues: *“Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them. Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks. Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies”* (4:2-5). Descriptions that follow along similar lines are found 6:4-9 and 7:1-6. I choose not to comment on this further description, despite it being both challenging and profitable. That the lover is employing figurative language, using imagery he would have been familiar with, there is little doubt, begging the question if it were a painting what it would look like.

Back to our meditation, a similar verse is found: *“Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me: thy hair is as a flock of goats that appear from Gilead”* (6:5). That she is fair as far as he is concerned we have little doubt, repeating what he said (1:15) and drawing attention again to her *dove's eyes* and pointing out her locks that part hide the eyes and is suggesting a degree of modesty and understated wisdom. There is something special about her eyes that he finds disturbing, for he asks her to turn them away as they have overcome him. But from both 4:1 and 6:5 we find he does draw attention to her hair, which is described *“as a flock of goats that appear from mount Gilead”*. Why hair; why goats and why Gilead are three questions that might stump us, but that is ok, because we don't have to come up with all the answers or be put off by our failure to do so. Many learned folk have tried and got it wrong, as they have interpreting the description of other body parts.

If I were to attempt to read Solomon's mind on the matter, I can imagine he would be familiar with Gilead (mentioned a number of times in scripture) and no doubt flocks of goats could be found grazing in its grasslands. Hair was a source of strength e.g. Samson (Judges 7) and the Nazarites. It was linked to obedience. It may indicate submission in the case of women, and seen as part of her beauty. For as strange as it may seem, his beloved's hair and a flock of goats appearing from mount Gilead are connected and form part of her beauty that attracts her to him.

Day 17 – A heart that is ravished (4:9)

“Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.”

This verse comes in the middle of a speech by the lover heaping praises on his beloved. He repeats *“thou art all fair my love”* (4:7) and makes the remarkable claim *“there is no spot in thee”*, given on her own admission and as evidenced in earlier chapters there are defects in character as well as appearance. But the lover sees none of this; she is perfect, which in a way should not surprise us as lovers are often blind to faults in their loved ones especially early on in a relationship before adjusting to each other’s faults. He repeats his earlier plea (2:10) to come away, inviting her to see the world from a higher place: *“come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards”*.

He proceeds to make further pronouncements *“Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck. How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices! Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.”* (4:9-11). Ravish is a strong yet apt description of the effect one look of one of her eyes has had on him and the appearance of her stately neck, which just prior was described as a tower, where the shields of a thousand mighty men were hung from (4:4).

In applying this to the relationship we might have with our own heavenly lover, we can reflect again irrespective of how we might think of ourselves, he sees those who respond to his love as fair and by virtue of his atoning blood and our response to him there is no spot to be found. One of the great imponderables of life is why the Almighty and Holy God should create humankind knowing full well we would rebel and then in order to redeem us in the only way possible he sent His Son (our heavenly lover) but here we have a glimpse into this mystery.

Having been so ravished, He proceeds to take delight in those who respond to His call and will lead us out to accomplish his grand purposes in His creation. This is not something to be taken lightly but is a truth is to be humbly received in awe, to think God’s beloved Son might choose to take pleasure in His Bride, the Church.

Day 18 – A garden inclosed (4:12)

“A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed”.

Having been earlier introduced to the motif of a vineyard, we now have that of a garden. In both cases these relate to, and in this case is synonymous with, the girl herself. We note it is a walled garden that can only be entered into by the lover, who holds the keys, and is both her husband and her brother (a term that was to be repeated (5:1,2)). Given the imagery that is then presented is that of a sensuous nature and could be taken as to do with the act of making love, it is well to remember that such activity, at least as far as God is concerned, is exclusive, only for those who are married to each other. Within the garden is a *spring shut up* and a *fountain sealed*, serving the garden alone, without which the fruits and spices we are about to be introduced to would not be able to flourish.

Regarding which, as far as the garden goes *“thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices”* (4:13,14) and again we are brought back to the importance of water, whether to do specifically with making love or reminiscent of the life giving water that comes from heaven itself, like that which Jesus promised to those who believe on him *“he that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. This spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive”* (John 7:38,39). Here the water is presented as *“a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon* (4:15). As far as the lover is concerned, his beloved is that garden that is yielding this wonderful array of fruits and spices, which he hopes to enjoy.

As we reflect upon our own relationship with our own heavenly lover, it is well to realise that we are that garden, the purpose of which it to yield all manner of delights for the one we love. But in order to do so it needs watering, given the rivers of living waters promised by Jesus to His disciples is also the activity of the Holy Spirit and is the work of the Holy Spirit that enables us to be fruitful. Gardens also need to be cultivated or else they will be overcome with weeds etc. As we consider our duties and priorities, which can be many and various, the overriding consideration should surely be that of yielding fruit that is pleasing to Him and for our lives to be a sweet smelling savour so he will find delight in its aroma. And when tempted to stray, we should remember who the garden is meant for.

Day 19 – North and south winds (4:16)

“Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits”.

We have seen for any garden to flourish it needs to be watered and cultivated. Yet there are certain things, humanly speaking, that can't be controlled but if present might add to the delights that are on offer. We talk now about the wind, specifically the north wind and the south wind, without which it will not be possible to enjoy the sweet smells that result from these blowing in the garden.

As I understand it, north and south winds are quite different when it comes to intensity. The north wind is often associated with bad weather and could appear quite hostile, whereas the south wind is altogether gentler. But both winds do disturb; chemically speaking they shift some of the molecules in the various spices into the wider atmosphere. The lover is inviting these winds, mindful it might disrupt her routine, because she understands the ensuing effect will be the spices from her garden being wafted abroad such that her lover can enjoy.

Speaking personally, more often than not, I like to feel in control and don't like my routine being disturbed, especially if without warning. I see the north wind as the big disruptions in life which may be unpleasant and unwelcome. It can be death and suffering or major disappointment. Whatever happens, the important thing is how we are going to respond. Sometimes it leads to bitterness and resentment, a desire for revenge when people wrong us or a going into our shell to avoid repetitions etc. but it can also be an opportunity to grow character, to be a sweet smelling savour for Christ so not only is Christ blessed but so are others. As for the petty, relatively speaking, disruptions of the south wind, it could be one of many daily irritations and annoyances that come our way from unwelcome or unexpected sources, and how we respond to this, through winsome and forbearing behaviour or otherwise is how well we come through the test and whether spices will flow.

Before we leave the garden and enter the next episode in our story, we note that the lover does respond: he comes *into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits* and again addressing his beloved as *“my sister, my spouse”* he is able to declare that *“I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk”* (5:1), making it all worthwhile.

Day 20 – Knocking at the door (5:2)

“I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.”

One of the big discoveries of my own life is after having discovered some profound truth events conspire to test me as to how I have taken on board that truth. In our previous reading we find the girl inviting disturbances into her life because of the good that will follow and now she is being disturbed and it is evident she does not pass the test, at least first time round. As in 3:1 we find her on her bed resting but this time her lover is knocking at the door. He appeared to be in need with his head *filled with dew* and *locks with the drops of the night*.

This would have been even more reason to open up and let him in but this was not a convenient time: *“I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?”* (5:3) Not to be deterred, we read *“my beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him”* (5:4). This time she does respond: *“I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock”* (5:5). But it is too late: *“I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer”* (5:6) and she quickly ventures on a search of the city to find her lover.

The story reminds us that true love is not limited to time and circumstances and needs to be available at all times and all circumstances, especially when there are needs as there was then. Sadly, the girl had failed that test although she was later to get back to where she was in that relationship. I am reminded of Holman Hunt’s “Light of the World” painting, when Christ whose head was filled with dew comes knocking at the door but it can only be opened from inside: *“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”* (Revelation 3:20). He is knocking at our heart’s door and it could be in the guise of a person with a need, not down in our diary of scheduled appointments that governs us. We can easily do as the girl had done, putting forward plausible reasons like having just turned in, possibly after a long day when what is desired is sweet sleep, but if we are sincere about loving we must be prepared to sacrifice and not acting just when it is convenient.

Day 21 – What is thy beloved like? (5:9)

“What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? what is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?”

We earlier left our mini saga with the girl frantically searching out her lover, having failed to open up in time after he had come knocking, and finding he had departed. For those who have experienced such intimacy, it will cause much distress finding those ties broken. She seeks her lover out. As on the previous occasion when she went into the city in search of her lover, she encounters the watchmen: *“The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me”* (5:7). The response of the watchmen this time is unsympathetic as they proceed to beat her. It reminds us of the wretched feelings and what might then follow when what was a sweet relationship has been broken by some foolish act of wilfulness on our part.

In desperation, she turns to the daughters of Jerusalem, ever present on the scene, who seem to know all what is going on: *“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love”* (5:8), but not on this occasion. They didn’t have enough to go on and asked for more information. *What is thy beloved more than another beloved?* which is then repeated, is an interesting way of saying “describe him for me” or how come he’s that wonderful. But even in her backslidden state they recognise something special about the girl in that they described her as *thou fairest among women* irrespective of her state at that time. She is *sick of love* and the only cure is to find her lover – thus the charge.

From a human love relationship perspective, it is worth noting if we fail to work on restoring relationships when they fail they may do so irrevocably. For a believer, opportunities like being asked to describe Christ may not come often but when they do we need to be ready to respond, as indeed the girl did, as we will see. The Christ we follow is not like other men and stood out *“as the apple tree among the trees of the wood”* (2:3). Moving as I do among those of other faiths and sometimes no faith at all, I am mindful that as a great person, prophet, teacher, leader, the historical Jesus (or myth underlying such) is often afforded much respect but the question is begged when those recognising our special love for him ask *what is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?* It might be worth pondering awhile what our response might be before finding out what the girl said, having been caught on the proverbial hop.

Day 22 – White and ruddy (5:10)

“My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand”

We are still in the mini saga that begun in 5:2 when the girl’s lover appeared and because of her delay in responding went away with her soon after looking for him. As she enquired, she was asked a question: *“what is thy beloved more than another beloved?”* Before meditating on the first verse in her response to that question, it is worth being reminded these words were put in the mouth of the girl by Solomon to describe himself. Given the faultless and lofty description offered that no man can ever match, one might be excused for thinking this description could not be of any mere man, even though superlatives may be the language of love.

We might take this to be a description of Christ in his human form, who is *white and ruddy*. He is white because he is pure and holy and was the only man to have never sinned (which was why he alone could pay the penalty for our sin). But paradoxically he was ruddy too. As we trawl through the gospels we see one who was the friend of sinners, the lowly, rejects and no hopers in society, who roughed it and went without, doing so joyfully, who could also associate with the good and great. He knew how to *“speak a word in season to him that is weary”* (Isaiah 50:3). He is after all the Son of man and could identify with the vast array of experiences, including the disagreeable ones that may befall man, and did so willingly and ably. To use the girl’s words he is *the chiefest among ten thousand* and as such stands head and shoulders above any other, notably the best of the best, who ever lived.

Having been sparked into describing her lover, she excitedly *speak of the things which I have made touching the king* (Psalm 45:1), proceeding to consider the rest of his body, likening each part to something wondrous: *“His **head** is as the most fine gold, his **locks** are bushy, and black as a raven. His **eyes** are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. His **cheeks** are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his **lips** like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. His **hands** are as gold rings set with the beryl: his **belly** is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. His **legs** are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his **countenance** is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His **mouth** is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely.”* (5:11-16) She is therefore able to confidently conclude *“This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.”* As for us, this Christ can also be our beloved and our friend. There may be little of worth we can say about us, but much can be said about him.

Day 23 – Reunited (6:2)

“My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies”.

Before giving her amazing description of her lover’s qualities, the girl had been asked *“what is thy beloved more than another beloved?”* Now, no doubt moved by her rendition of her lover, the question is changed: *“whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? whither is thy beloved turned aside? that we may seek him with thee”* (6:1), so instead of her asking them, the Daughters of Jerusalem are now asking her, recognising again her own beauty. Not only so, but they had been won over, wanting to seek him with her. Here we have an example in how to do personal evangelism and how we might win others for Christ. We do so in part by speaking highly of the one who is *altogether lovely*.

No sooner had this question been asked than she knew the answer to her earlier question and the search and this mini adventure was ended. She could declare with confidence *“my beloved is gone down into his garden”* and given she is that garden (4:12) we find the lover back to where he belongs, with his beloved. He had returned *“to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies”*. Once again she could declare *“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies”* (6:3). For her this reconciliation following her distressing time apart from her lover might be translated into real time and might apply to couples when they have tiffs and need to get back together again. While hurt pride etc. may prolong estrangement, far better it is to be reconciled. Sadly, human nature being what it is, reconciling broken relationships are too often needlessly delayed.

When we relate the story to our own relationship with Christ, we realise we have never seen him although he is very real and should be the most significant part of our own lives. But one day we will see him and we will be with him forever, but in the meantime we walk with him by faith, assured of his promises *“I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”* (Matthew 28:20) and *“if a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him”* (John 14:23). There will be trials and tribulations along the way and times when we may stray and fail to respond to his call, but always he is there to lovingly receive us if we return to him. The sort of intimacy enjoyed by the girl in this Song is ours to enjoy too and we too can declare to a watching and sometimes unsympathetic world *“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine”*.

Day 24 – An army with banners (6:4)

"Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners."

Much of this extraordinary chapter (6) is dominated by the Lover who begins by speaking highly of his beloved with who he is fixated. Having likened her desirability to pleasant Tirzah and comely Jerusalem, describing her as *terrible as an army with banners*, he continues *"turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me"* (6:5). While he re-visits familiar themes like goats' hair and sheeps' teeth, it seems from his description she has developed far beyond that of a timid, self-conscious bride and is now a formidable force in her own right. She ever remains *"my dove"*, seeing no fault in her; she is uniquely *"my undefiled is but one"* (6:9). He ends his description: *"The daughters saw her, and blessed her; yea, the queens and the concubines, and they praised her"* (6:9).

The Daughters of Jerusalem merely reinforce this view: *"Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"* (6:10) and *"Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee"* (6:13). She is an object of wonder. The Lover's description is followed up: *"I went down into the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, and to see whether the vine flourished and the pomegranates budded. Or ever I was aware, my soul made me like the chariots of Amminadib"* (6:11,12). While the ending is strange, almost as if ready for war, this is reinforced by *"What will ye see in the Shulamite? As it were the company of two armies"* (6:13), a veiled reference to Genesis 32:1 when Jacob and his entourage, with much foreboding went to meet his estranged brother, Esau, and en-route were met by a heavenly host.

Sometimes, I am tempted to be despondent when I think about the church, which too often appears weak, having lost its way. But also, and we are seeing more of this, the church is an object of hate and revilement with believers suffering as a result. And while suffering is to be expected, the picture painted in the Bible is of a glorious church and that is how it will be when Christ returns. This should inspire us to what will be and provide comfort in adversity. The church He sees is *terrible as an army with banners*, suggesting it will be a powerful force in confronting the powers of darkness, joining with the angels of God as did Jacob at Mahanaim. What we see here is what He sees (as well as those closely associated with Him) that is something glorious, and this gives us good reason in which to hope.

Day 25 – Like a palm tree (7:7)

“This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes”

Chapter 7:1-9 incorporates the third elaborate attempt by the Lover to describe his beloved, continuing from 4:1-15 and 6:4-9. It is again full of imagery that is outside the scope of these meditations. But at least three things stand out: The growing maturity and confidence noted in chapter 6 continues. The Lover once again reveals himself as besotted with his beloved, without any reservation, and included in his description is his declaration of ardent passion. And then there is the theme of fruitfulness, which is both a priority of the Lover and as we will see (7:9-13) in the Beloved’s response. This is seen, for example in his observation *“thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies”* (7:2) and in our text today.

The palm tree holds for me a particular fascination. I am writing this during a visit to my family in Kerala, noted for its lush greenery, which is a state in India named after palm trees, which grow there in abundance. As I meditated earlier on this section of the Song, I did so from the roof of the house I am staying in, which is surrounded on all sides by palm trees, although in this case the fruit is coconuts, rather than dates or grapes as per the Song. One of the characteristics of the Palm tree is every part of the tree is useful, and this is still the case today. The fruit can be eaten raw or used as cooking ingredients. The tree itself can be used in building houses and bridges and the leaves are used in roofs of houses. Some of the fibrous material, e.g. surrounding the fruit, can be made into rope, and shells can be used as containers. Anything left over can be and is used for fuel.

We can ponder why the Lover should liken the stature of his beloved to that of a palm tree or why her breasts should be compared to clusters of grapes, although physical love making and reinforcing this picture of fruitfulness will be part of why he might have invoked this image. We might further ask why *“I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof”* (7:8)? I have seen people climb palm trees and have been awed by their nimble ability to do so. Clearly the lover is keen and adept in climbing, to get to the fruit. For there is little doubt the palm tree held a particular fascination for the Lover, and is mentioned as we approach the end of the description: *“now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples; And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved”* which the Beloved does then pick up on.

Day 26 – His desire is toward me (7:10)

“I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me”

In his description that preceded, the Lover ends with *"and the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved"* (7:9), to which his beloved immediately responds *"that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak"* and adds to it the remarkable claim *"I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me"* (7:10), which is one of the recurring themes of this sublime Song that should warm our hearts. There appears significant progression to her earlier similar comment: *“My beloved is mine, and I am his”* (2:16) (also 6:3) but this time the emphasis is on him and not her and of his desire that is toward her.

Earlier it was the Lover that was doing the initiating and convincing, inviting his beloved to join him as together they go into the great outdoors to check out how things were (2:8-13) but now it is the girl who is taking the initiative and asking him to join her so they together can sample the delights that she has laid up for him: *“come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves. The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved”* (7:11,13).

Such boldness and firm intent shows how far the girl has come. But it is the reminder that now we read for the third time her making the point *“I am my beloved's”* that makes us realise his ownership is so important to her and now, without any shadow of doubt, she can say *“his desire is toward me”*. Such tender feelings are only to be expected as part of the course of true love and a reminder that in such a relationship the one belongs to the other and can rightly expect such desire to be reciprocated. Not only should this be the case at the outset, but it should be true at the end and is something all couples should keep an eye on, mindful that tests will come and we may easily become over familiar.

What is even more amazing is that what we witness in the Song also represents the divine human relationship, as God does intend it. Firstly, from a Christian perspective, I / the Church belong to Christ and no one else. Secondly, and as incredible as it sounds and despite the number of times I / the Church may have failed Him, His desire is to toward me / His Church. When doubt and darkness beset we do well to remember: *I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.*

Day 27 – Like a brother (8:1)

“O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother! when I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised.”

This may appear an unusual pick for meditation, which continues by giving the reason for the girl making her wish *“I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate. His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me”* (8:2,3) and repeats the charge she had made earlier not to manufacture love before its time (3:5) *“I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, until he please”* (8:4).

It is to do with the relationship of a man and a woman, who while “in love” yet may not be married. It should be noted in the culture in which the Song is set, unlike the western culture I am more used to, notions of freedom for members of the opposite sex to mingle or make their own arrangements for marriage, let alone be physically intimate even in innocuous ways, are alien ones. It begs the question of how this particular relationship was carried out and the context for the physical intimacy that is so apparent throughout the Song. The idea of a brother sister relationship hits the right note regarding due decorum as to how the relationship should develop. It would appear, because the man was NOT her brother, any outward displays of affection was not possible as it would be inappropriate, and if and when that does happen it would only rightly do so in the marriage context. We might reflect the Song is a number of love letters meant exclusively for each other.

For students of ancient middle eastern love poetry (which I am not), the language used in the Song would likely strongly resonate with several of the sexual connotations contained throughout. My purpose is not to pontificate on a subject that has exercised many especially in modern times and has led many to opt for the allegorical method of interpreting the Song, embarrassed at the idea of accommodating notions of physical intimacy, but rather to make some basic points inspired by the wistful desire of the girl for the object of her affections to be like her brother. But he isn't and the time is not yet and even if it were otherwise it would still be necessary to practice restraint. We live in a culture where we are encouraged to act on our sexual urges and impulses. While the Song bears witness that sex is very good, there is a time and a place for sexual activity and we do well to not awaken love until the time and place is right.

Day 28 – A seal upon thine heart (8:6)

“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame”

We read earlier of the time when she observed Solomon’s wedding procession (likely her own) *“who is this that cometh out of the wilderness”* (3:6) but now it is the Chorus making a similar observation about the girl *“who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?”* (8:5). Something remarkable has taken place since the girls surprise encounter with the wedding procession. The two lovers are united, and coming up from the wilderness, which is often as far as Bible narrative goes a place of trials and tribulations, with her in her lover’s arms under his gentle protection, and for all the watching world to see.

Before what is possibly the climax of the Song, comparing love and death, she remarks as one claiming her prize *“I raised thee up under the apple tree: there thy mother brought thee forth: there she brought thee forth that bare thee”*. Seals remind us of something irrevocable and legally binding. As far as the beloved is concerned she is set as a seal upon his heart and upon his arm and nothing can alter that fact, not even death. There is a finality about death and it is something none of us can escape, for that is our destiny although we hope for something beyond that. The grave will take us all and is jealous since nothing can cause us to escape its clutches. But love is a match for death. The love that began as an infatuation between two young lovers is no passing fad but is until death do us part. It is hot coals and a vehement flame that continues to burn brightly, regardless of death.

For a Christian believer, notably those who are passing through *the valley of the shadow of death*, there is the assurance that we have been set as a seal upon the heart of our Lord and Saviour and Lover, Jesus, and that it is a love that is as strong as death and takes us beyond the grave with the flame burning ever brightly. We will experience trials and tribulations, doubts and fears, failures and disappointments, but the whole point of the Song and, indeed, the whole Bible, is that God has ever sought to relate to his human creation as a Lover, which is nowhere seen more clearly than in the gospel narrative encapsulated in the hymn: *“Jesus, lover of my soul, Let me to Thy bosom fly, While the nearer waters roll, While the tempest still is high. Hide me, O my Savior, hide, Till the storm of life is past; Safe into the haven guide Oh, receive my soul at last”* (Charles Wesley).

Day 29 – Many waters cannot quench love (8:7)

“Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned”.

Having asked *“set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame”* the beloved continues to contemplate the enduring qualities of love and just as one of the harsh realities in life will be death, this is also the case with waters. As much as we may try to prepare for both, we can't anticipate how and when. I often use the illustration of much water going under the bridge in a defined period of time and by that I mean a lot will happen during that period and often the situation we see at the end is a lot different to that at the beginning for that reason. As we ponder today's text, we can see that this principle aptly relates to the situations that may be found in any love relationship.

One can imagine at the outset our starry eyed young lovers had little inkling on what would be ahead of them and it is ever thus with most such beginnings. But there will be waters and while the Beloved is confident that *many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it*, the sad reality is that all too often waters DO quench love and lovers stop loving and sadly separate. The secret for staying together ought to be simple as well as profound and yet I know as much as any that it takes a lot of hard work, forgiving and forgetting, forbearing and forsaking etc. But if our text and popular love songs like *“Money can't buy me love”* are true it is worth it, for love is a priceless gift for *if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned*.

The challenges (waters) that come our way, whether dealing with our partners faults and foibles or facing the often harsh realities of life that will test even the stoutest of hearts, applies as much with the relationship between the human and the divine. But it is not the intention for those waters to quench love nor for the floods to drown it. It is ever thus that *“the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happenstance to them all”* (Ecclesiastes 9:11), and I wonder, at least as far as believers goes, if life is a testing ground aimed at refining us: *“I will refine them like silver and test them like gold”* (Zechariah 13:9). But it is back to love and that final and inevitable separator, death, and when it comes to waters of which there is enough of to quench and drown, it is that love that will see us through.

Day 30 – The little sister (8:8)

“We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for?”

It is tempting when two persons consider their mutual love to look inwardly. My own observation has been that the love relationships that have impressed me most have been those that look outwardly and in particular showing concern for those who are less fortunate. I am intrigued to know who the little sister referred to here is and who the brothers are who have raised the concern, and whether they are the brothers referred to in 1:6. If that were the case it would be in contrast to the callous impression we might have had when learning of the way they treated their sister. Here there is genuine concern and that is to build on the reality she has no breasts and on what is already there: *“If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will inclose her with boards of cedar”* (8:9). I think the lack of clarity as to the little sister’s identity and how she relates to the girl in the Song is a quick reminder that when it comes to application we are beholden to some extent on having the correct interpretation. But we can agree with the brothers that helping their sister develop is important.

The picture painted is one the girl in the Song can identify with. As she compares how she was then to now, we can see she has come a long way. *“I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour. Solomon had a vineyard at Baalhamon; he let out the vineyard unto keepers; every one for the fruit thereof was to bring a thousand pieces of silver. My vineyard, which is mine, is before me: thou, O Solomon, must have a thousand, and those that keep the fruit thereof two hundred”* (8:10-12). What we do see is personal responsibility enacted. How we relate Solomon’s vineyard given to the various keepers he let it out to does not appear too clear. But if the girl is one of the keepers she is very clear what she needed to do – pay 1000 pieces of silver to Solomon, presumably as rent, and 200 pieces to them who *keep the fruit thereof*. She recognises then that having discharged her obligations that *my vineyard, which is mine, is before me*.

As we look to conclude, let us consider that even with the best intention and due diligence in study we won’t always draw the lessons we think ought to be drawn. If there are lessons for lovers of the human and the divine it is one of selflessness, outwardness and responsibility, and to help those who are immature, and whatever our vineyard that we are given to attend to is, we do so diligently and pay our dues.

Day 31 – Make haste, my beloved (8:22)

“Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices”

Now we have come to the last verse of this sublime song. These are words uttered by the Beloved in response to those previously given by the Lover: *“Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice: cause me to hear it”* (8:13). So we read the Lover’s final parting words as he is about to be absent for likely a long time as yearning again to hear his beloved’s voice.

Her response is swift and unequivocal. She longs for his return. We are reminded of her earlier call *“until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether”* (3:17). The image of the roe and the hart is invoked again, conjuring up notions of youthful vigour and the ability to confidently overcome all in its path. But the mountains of Bether have become the mountains of spices, suggesting that wherever he leaps and bounds, like a free spirit, he exudes fragrance. It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder and so it is here as the Lover has to part, again leaving behind his beloved. But needs must and she cherishes him in her heart, eagerly awaiting his return which she hopes (*make haste*) will be soon.

We are brought back to the reason why the Song has been included in the canon of scripture. It is true that sex, love and marriage are hugely important in God’s design for humankind and is sufficient reason why he wants us to be informed as to what He thinks: *“Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled”* (Hebrews 13:4) but it is also a picture of another marriage, that between Christ and the Church *“for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body”* (Ephesians 5:23). While theologians will argue whether this was what was on the Holy Spirit’s mind in including the Song in the Bible, I remain inclined to the belief it was and God lovers down the ages have thought so too and seen these to be words of comfort and exhortation.

It is difficult when considering our text NOT to think about the closing cry from the heart right at the end of our Bible: *“even so, come, Lord Jesus”* (Revelation 22:20). For those who long for the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ, amidst a world full of sorrow and sadness and where all too often the bad guys hold sway in the affairs of men, that while not ignoring our responsibilities to represent Christ on the earth, and act as he would, we can longingly say: *even so, come, Lord Jesus.*

Singing the Song

It is with relief and gratitude I declare my project, which began fifty years ago, as complete, although not the masterpiece I once hoped. If nothing else, it has got off my chest thoughts and insights that have come my way over the years, despite not being the definitive, all encompassing commentary that I had once envisaged. In a strange way, what I have written during a one month stay with my Indian family, at our home in India, surrounded by palm trees and other examples of the natural world taken for granted in the Song, away from the distractions and amenities we take for granted back home in the UK, especially the Internet and libraries of information, may not be what I might have written a year ago or even in a year's time if I had again delayed "the project". There are, after all, many nooks and crannies left to explore, riches to unearth, lessons to learn, including being a better husband / wife, but I hope I can encourage any reading thus far to do just that. Here lies an important observation in the light of the thousands of commentaries that have been written about the Song of Solomon over three millennia covering a multitude of perspectives. While it is true we need to be rightly *dividing the word of truth*, the way we see truth will depend in part on our experience of life, our circumstances, what we know already and the theology that influences us most. For this reason, I am less dismissive of those who offer something quite different to that presented here and give due credit what valuable insights they do share.

If there has been any awakening in the fifty years I have been a Christian, it is God has sought from the outset a people dedicated to him with who he can enjoy a relationship. It is meant to happen both ways and is designed to give pleasure to both God and man. The ideal man woman marriage relationship provides a picture how it should be between the human and divine. Both are important and, while keeping with tradition in emphasising the latter, sound exposition requires I don't ignore the former. Experience as well as the Song tells us relationships contain trials and tribulations, tests and challenges to negotiate and overcome, the detail of which we can't predict. It is bound up in the axiom God made us for himself and we can only find rest in him – to look anywhere else only ends up as a fruitless search. God wants us exclusively for himself, and nothing else will do. Living as God wants us, including the vexed issue of matters sexual, where many fall short of what God requires, is what the Song is mainly about, despite not mentioning God once nor articulating this point. It is because these truths are there at the top of the pile of truths we ought to believe in and live by, that the Song is so relevant.

The Song

Chapter 1

1 The song of songs, which is Solomon's.

Beloved

2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. 3 Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. 4 Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers:

Chorus

we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine:

Beloved

the upright love thee. 5 I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. 6 Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept. 7 Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?

Chorus

8 If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents.

Lover

9 I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots. 10 Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold. 11 We will make thee borders of gold with studs of silver.

Beloved

12 While the king sitteth at his table, my spikenard sendeth forth the smell thereof. 13 A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts. 14 My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi.

Lover

15 Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes.

Beloved

16 Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green.

Lover

17 The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir.

Chapter 2

Beloved

1 I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.

Lover

2 As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

Beloved

3 As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. 4 He brought me to the

banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. 5 Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love. 6 His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me. 7 I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please. 8 The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. 9 My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice. 10 My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. 11 For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; 12 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; 13 The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

Lover

14 O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely. 15 Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.

Beloved

16 My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies. 17 Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether.

Chapter 3

1 By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. 2 I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. 3 The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth? 4 It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me. 5 I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please. 6 Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant? 7 Behold his bed, which is Solomon's; threescore valiant men are about it, of the valiant of Israel. 8 They all hold swords, being expert in war: every man hath his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night. 9 King Solomon made himself a chariot of the wood of Lebanon. 10 He made the pillars thereof of silver, the bottom thereof of gold, the covering of it of purple, the midst thereof being paved with love, for the daughters of Jerusalem. 11 Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold king Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart.

Chapter 4

Lover

1 Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead. 2 Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is

barren among them. 3 Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks. 4 Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. 5 Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies. 6 Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense. 7 Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee. 8 Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards. 9 Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck. 10 How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices! 11 Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon. 12 A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. 13 Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, 14 Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices: 15 A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.

Beloved

16 Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.

Chapter 5

Lover

1 I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk:

Chorus

Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved.

Beloved

2 I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night. 3 I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them? 4 My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him. 5 I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. 6 I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. 7 The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me. 8 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love.

Chorus

9 What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? what is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?

Beloved

10 My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand. 11 His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven. 12 His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. 13 His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. 14 His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. 15 His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. 16 His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

Chapter 6

Chorus

1 Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? whither is thy beloved turned aside? that we may seek him with thee.

Beloved

2 My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies. 3 I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies.

Lover

4 Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners. 5 Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me: thy hair is as a flock of goats that appear from Gilead. 6 Thy teeth are as a flock of sheep which go up from the washing, whereof every one beareth twins, and there is not one barren among them. 7 As a piece of a pomegranate are thy temples within thy locks. 8 There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number. 9 My dove, my undefiled is but one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bare her. The daughters saw her, and blessed her; yea, the queens and the concubines, and they praised her.

Chorus

10 Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?

Lover

11 I went down into the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, and to see whether the vine flourished and the pomegranates budded. 12 Or ever I was aware, my soul made me like the chariots of Amminadib.

Chorus

13 Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee.

Lover

What will ye see in the Shulamite? As it were the company of two armies.

Chapter 7

1 How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman. 2 Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies. 3 Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins. 4 Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools

in Heshbon, by the gate of Bathrabbim: thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus. 5 Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple; the king is held in the galleries. 6 How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights! 7 This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes. 8 I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples; 9 And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved,

Beloved

that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak. 10 I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me. 11 Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages. 12 Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves. 13 The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.

Chapter 8

1 O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother! when I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised. 2 I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate. 3 His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me. 4 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, until he please.

Chorus

5 Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?

Beloved

I raised thee up under the apple tree: there thy mother brought thee forth: there she brought thee forth that bare thee. 6 Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. 7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.

Chorus

8 We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for? 9 If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will inclose her with boards of cedar.

Beloved

10 I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour. 11 Solomon had a vineyard at Baalhamon; he let out the vineyard unto keepers; every one for the fruit thereof was to bring a thousand pieces of silver. 12 My vineyard, which is mine, is before me: thou, O Solomon, must have a thousand, and those that keep the fruit thereof two hundred.

Lover

13 Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice: cause me to hear it.

Beloved

14 Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.