

# SOLOMON'S SONG OF SONGS



John R. Barber

# **SOLOMON'S SONG OF SONGS**

**Part 1 - Fired up**

**JOHN R. BARBER**

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# **SOLOMON'S SONG OF SONGS**

**JOHN BARBER**

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## PREFACE

‘Song of songs’, a superlative denoting the best of songs, is one of the smallest, loveliest and most controversial books of the Bible. Sceptical mind treats this book as mysterious and incomprehensible, whereas godly people throughout the ages have found of genuine and exquisite joy.

This book expresses the rich love between a bridegroom and a bride. It should be taken in a spiritual sense, the mutual affections that pass between God and Israel, for God sometimes spoke of Himself as husband of Israelites. It should more be taken by the church, because the communications of divine love appear more rigid and intense under the Gospel than under the old dispensation. Christ is frequently represented as the Bridegroom of His church and the church as the bride, the Lamb’s wife.

So, as we submit ourselves to the study of this book, we must put off our shoe from our foot, as Moses did, for the place we tread upon is holy ground, particularly Mr. John Barber has taken special interest in meditating and contemplating ‘song of songs’ for quite a long period in order to write this book. During the last 25 years I have been privileged to associate with him in the mission field as well as personal affairs. Hence I have sensed his concern for the church and the unevangelized people throughout the world. Since he has been pleased to select a Keralite lady to be his wife, he is expected to love the Indians.

Beyond this, Mr. John has a gift of expression which makes this book a delight to read and which takes the reader along with him into a lover - beloved relationship that surprises the human love and affection - the presence and power of the living Christ. The author has done a great job in explaining clearly the great need of love which should express between Christ and His church.

So, it is my earnest prayer that thousands would read the passages that follow and heed the message that unfolds in this book.

**O.J. JOHN**

Vagdanam, Manarcadu, Kottayam, S. India

# Introduction

I am told that serious writers, which is what I aspire to be, should precede what they are about to say with a preface. The two important things I could think to write by way of a preface are: firstly, the message of the book is one that has touched my own heart, the presentation of which has, to an extent, taken over my own life and secondly, what follows is part one of a two part series (part 2 to follow within a year) based on one of the books of the Bible - the Song of Solomon:

## **Part 1 - Fired up**

## **Part 2 - Pure Intimacy**

I have chosen the subtitles not only because these are sometimes banded around in the circles I move in but because they not only encapsulate the major themes of the Song of Solomon but they also represent the great needs of the human heart: to be excited and enthused about something or someone (here it is God) that matters and to personally experience intimacy that is real, clean and wholesome (as opposed to much that is seen around us which is not). These things are what people need greatly and what many are searching for, often in the wrong place.

Some of the things authors often write about in a preface, such as why they are writing, useful background information, things to look out for, issues to address, the intended audience and so forth, are included in the first chapter, as these are intrinsically bound up with the exposition that follows. Since I can not think of much else worth saying that is not contained in the subsequent text, it only remains for me to thank you for reading this book and pray that in some small way it may be helpful and instrumental in causing these great needs to be met in your own life,

**John Barber, Southend, England, March 2007**

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to gratefully acknowledge the many who have helped me in the preparation of this book. Some names I no longer recall but over the years they have been instrumental in my coming to an understanding of these important truths. I have in mind people like Bryn Jones and Dennis Bowman (both now deceased), who were members of the Brethren assembly I attended as a youth and who gave short but sweet mediations on one or other verse from this Song during our Breaking of Bread meetings. I am grateful to Alex Buchanan, who once so ably preached on the text: “my beloved is white and ruddy” and which so touched my heart. These people have helped to open my mind to thoughts concerning the glory of Christ, which can be got from this Song. While some have ably expounded parts of this Song, others have said but a few simple words or have demonstrated its truths through personal example. Some have written about the Song, sometimes long ago, thus setting off various trains of thought, and their words still resound in my ears.

I am grateful to Faith Gage and Gill Kimber for doing much needed proof reading. I am grateful to my friend, O.J. John, for doing the publishing. He has been a valued companion, guide and translator on my visits to India, since 1983. This is a land whose people I love, and one I want particularly to see won for Christ. I have been particularly blessed by the USA based ministry, Focus on the Family. It tackles important, often complex, relationship issues, boldly, sensitively and truthfully. Besides the wealth of wisdom found in book form, there is an even more assessable media: the Internet. Google search engines, and such like, have unravelled an enormous wealth of material that I have been able to use in

writing this book.

I dedicate this work to Jolly, my wife. Our relationship often seems tumultuous compared with the one depicted in this Song. I am far from being the perfect lover that is being portrayed yet she is still my beautiful darling, my dove, my fair one and God's gift to me as my unique and most valued help meet. I would also like to dedicate this to Matthew, my son, praying he will fall in love with the Lord Jesus Christ, the lover of our souls and the one whom my soul loveth. I am conscious of my many failures as a husband and a father but I hope at least this book shows something of what is truly on my heart. And I should not forget those hungry souls who read this, who want to be fired up for God and discover for themselves the pure intimate relationship with him that he has intended all along.

## **Chapter 1**

# **Introducing Love**

“Heaven forbid that 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**

I am inviting you to join me on a journey of discovery where there is treasure to be found on the way and at the end beyond our wildest dreams. Please permit me to be your guide as I talk to you about Solomon's Song of Songs, which tells where that treasure is to be found. This Song is just what we need for our journey. You need to carefully read it, and think about what you have read, but even then there will be lots you may not understand. What follows is not intended to be heavy going, but it will not be light



either, for we will be engaging in some serious study. I admit I have long been fascinated with Solomon's Song of Songs, realising there are riches contained within its few lines, which we would do well to discover. I want first to let you know where I am coming from and why I am enthusiastic for you to take this journey, which is not without trials and tribulations, and of some of the struggles and perplexities I have faced in the preparation of this commentary.

What I am about to share is the result of untold hours of reflection over a period of nearly forty years. I have listened to and presented many talks on and read much about this Song. I have pondered a great deal on the meaning of the text and have referred to many commentaries. I am aware that I do not live up to



as I ought to many of the implications of its message. Although much of the Song is not easy to comprehend, especially in all its fine details, we should not be deterred, but instead take heart. No one has all the answers. This is borne out by the many and sometimes conflicting interpretations of this Song, even among respected pundits. Although I would have liked to take into account the centuries of accumulated wisdom concerning the Song, I have only been able to consider a small amount.

The things that occupy one generation may not occupy another to the same extent. Meditation has always been an important part of the Judaeo-Christian heritage, and there are many verses in the Bible that talk about meditation, for example: “My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord” (Psalm 104 v 34). Yet the discipline of meditation does not naturally fit in with today’s busy, relativistic, sophisticated and hedonistic culture and 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 oneself entirely and by this means open 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 and I want people to rediscover this discipline and be blessed as a result.

I began to write this book five years ago, but abandoned the project. More recently I resumed and have felt compelled to complete it this time. I have been as a man possessed, coming to terms with my subject: reconciling how things could be (for that is how I interpret the message of the Song) to how things are. A further tension is that there is no one system of interpretation that satisfactorily explains everything and there is much in the rich

symbolism used I do not fully understand. Personal issues regarding the extent I love both God and my wife were also at the forefront of the struggle. These, as well as a tendency to idleness, indiscipline and being otherwise engaged, were factors that had previously prevented me from bringing the project to a satisfactory conclusion. I resumed, enthusiastically, knowing that there would be a greater prize than merely completing this book: because the exhilarating experience of the heroine in the Song is not just for the spiritually elite but for ordinary people. The price is more than worth paying. Whoever grasps the message gets something of immense worth. The prize is an abundant, fulfilled life.

I am aware that the world is full of books that few read and of people who set about writing books with unfounded hope of reward. Solomon understood the dilemma when he wrote: “of making many books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12v12). When he further wrote: “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1v9), it begs the question of why I should be wanting to write in the first place given the huge amount of material already written about my subject, which would seem to have covered every conceivable angle there is on this Song? It is now approaching three thousand years since Solomon’s Song of Songs was written and thousands of commentaries have been written about it in that time, although most are no longer available. I write because my subject is so important and it is my way of letting out and passing on what has been laid on my heart. I want to encourage others for there is a message that people need to know and which will transform their lives.

It has been my privilege over the years to glean nuggets from some of these deliberations. Part of my task is to discover common themes and reconcile these with the vast differences in approach and interpretation. There are Jewish perspectives as well as those from most sections of the church. I make no apology for my fundamentalist views on matters to do with God and truth. What the Bible says I have no doubt is true, and in most cases can be taken literally. It is the basis of all that matters, without which a full understanding of the Song is impossible. Many see things differently to me though, yet I recognise their valuable insights.

This chapter began with a quote from an eminent first century Jewish rabbi and ends with one from the current Catholic Pope. What they say about the Song and has been said by many among the Church Fathers, Medieval mystics, Reformers, Puritans, persecuted groups of dissenters such as the Covenanters, and various flavours of modern day Evangelicals, including the Plymouth Brethren, is worthy of careful consideration. One thrilling discovery is that the more spiritually discerning among them shared a pre-occupation with God himself. In particular they wanted to experience his love and love him and his Son more. Their reflections on the Song of Songs were often expressed in these terms.

One of the major claims of the Christian faith is that those who believe in and follow Jesus have abundant and eternal life. It might seem difficult to fathom but there is a quirk in the human psyche, a tendency toward self destruction and wilfulness, like that of a wayward child. This is despite the call of a gospel that offers life as opposed to death, freedom as opposed to bondage and light as opposed to darkness. Still people choose death, bondage and darkness. Yet one day the consequences our choices will be revealed. One senses the anguish in the words of Jesus when he said “you will not come to me that you might have life” (John 5v40). Given the importance of these things, and despite people’s rejection, there is no alternative other than to tell about the one who is the “chief among ten thousand” and “altogether lovely” (Song of Songs 5vv10&16). This can and must be done with great relish and urgency. There is no greater privilege or obligation than that of pointing people to my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Just as incredible is that many, who have been rescued and liberated through embracing the Christian message, do not fully live in the light of that message and are somehow held back from living the life God intends. Coming to Jesus is but the beginning. At the heart of the message of the Song is the statement that “the winter is past” (Song of Songs 2v11) and the invitation is to “rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song of Songs 2v10)

to a fullness of life and a life of fruitfulness, far more than has ever before been realised. The intimate relationship between the two lovers and the sense of purpose seen in the pursuit of that relationship is what the Song is all about. No wonder people from all sorts of backgrounds and temperaments, down the centuries, have seen the importance and wanted to live in the good of these things, have loved Solomon's Song of Songs. They have longed for and sought after what it was that the Song's heroine did so clearly enjoy.

The relationship that is developed in the Song is the right response to many of the dilemmas faced by people today. Many are hurting for all sorts of reasons yet may not be able to work out why or take the appropriate action. The response may be one of escapism, denial or harmful behaviour. They may pick up bad habits or take on harmful addictions. These accentuate the hurt and lead to further inappropriate behaviour: a harmful cycle that seems so hard to break. But it can be broken. This is at the heart of the Christian message. We can enjoy a wholesome relationship with God, mirroring the one between the Man and the Woman in this Song.

There are other relationships, linked to the Song, just as important: God and Israel (Old Testament) and Christ and the Church (New Testament). Both themes run throughout the Bible and are both alluded to in this Song. Texts referring to the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a "bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21v3) (when Christ returns) and Christ being the head of the Church (his bride) and giving himself for it (Ephesians 5 vv21&23) are incredible. It shows the importance God gives to the Church, of which I am one of its more unlikely members. I write as one no better than the rest; I just happen to love Jesus.

The Song of Songs says something vitally important to all of us and we need to heed its message. While most who read this will share many of my Christian views, the Song addresses that universal yearning of the human heart that can never be adequately satisfied other than by God himself. The Song therefore is for all of us. It contains a vitally important message and I am writing

because I want my readers, whether they believe as I do or not, to know that message. Deciding my approach has been my biggest quandary, in particular who my intended readership should be and at what level to pitch the book. Already I have quoted parts of the Bible. Solomon's Song of Songs is one of its 66 books. The 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament together comprise the inspired word of God. To fully understand one book you need to see it in context with the others. Therefore this Song has to be understood in the light of the rest of Scripture.

Yet the people who I would particularly like to receive the message of the Song are those who realise the emptiness of their lives. This only God can fill. More often than not they are ignorant about what the Bible teaches. While I need to bear this in mind, I cannot apologise for invoking the power of God's Word, which makes the pertinent points far more eloquently than I ever could, and not succumbing to writing at a superficial, popularist level, for that would not be doing the message justice. I realise people read less and less these days. While I would like them to read this book and, better still, the Song itself, I would like best of all for them to be set on fire for God and experience the pure intimacy that can be found with him. Maybe the answer is for more of us to experience these things for ourselves, and then people will take note. As a friend once said: "it is better caught than taught".

Realistically, the journey I am talking about can only be undertaken by those who already know the heavenly bridegroom. This is the Lord Jesus Christ and it is him I wish to commend. There are further issues as to the precise meaning and translation of the original Hebrew words used, the cultural context in which the Song is placed, the tradition of love poetry around at that time, the language of sexual love and the significance of the many items from nature and places referred to in the Song. While I can hardly claim to do any of these aspects full justice, I am aware these all need to be taken into consideration and I have done my best to do so.

Many of my early spiritual influences were with the Plymouth Brethren and, for all its supposed shortcomings, one important positive thing that stands out about this group of

Christian believers is the high regard many have concerning the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, some among their number have ably expounded the verses of this Song to good effect, illustrating something of the glory of Christ, showing why devotion to him is right and proper and describing the relationship we can have with him. I am grateful to such people as it is they who have opened my eyes to the possibilities. The significant thing I have taken from all this is that Christ must be exalted and given pre-eminence. This is his rightful due. I offer these thoughts as an inadequate endorsement and exposition of such sentiments.

While realising the enormous amount of good material already written about this Song, I felt I still needed to do something fresh and new rather than regurgitate what has already been said, even though it is difficult to avoid repetition altogether. I wanted to offer something invigorating and original that addresses the needs, aspirations and experiences of my own generation, not repeating more than is necessary what has been written by those whose scholarship and spirituality is superior to my own. I wanted to lift the lid of some of the mystery and misunderstandings surrounding the Song and make it assessable to all of us.

My approach has been to try and see the Song with fresh, wide-open eyes, in the light of how the world now is, without preconceptions other than that the Bible is the Word of God and Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Even though it is not explicitly stated anywhere in the Bible, the allegory, depicted by the relationship, to our own, at least potentially, with God, has been my guiding principle. I wanted to write what will do ordinary people good. I see no reason why everyday folk cannot know the truth and gain a deep and helpful understanding about God, life and love, from this Song: especially as insight and wisdom are gifts of God to all who fear him. I hope readers will be as enthralled as I have been, find these thoughts useful and relevant and experience the pure intimacy this Song speaks so poignantly about.

The varying approaches toward understanding the Song of Songs are discussed later. Biblical, linguistic and cultural aspects are not the only ones that need to be considered in order to understand the meaning of this Song. Commentators down the

ages have held differing views when it comes to explaining the plot, identifying the characters, making sense of the imagery (often that which relates to the natural world and quite exotic), in working out the significance of the various place names mentioned, understanding the sexual connotations and deciding whether the interpretation should be seen in spiritual or physical terms.

These views usually reflect the theological position and preferences of the commentators themselves. While a study of these differences, and why people have seen things the way they have, would be interesting, this is not one for this book. I suspect many readers do not share my fascination and it might also divert from my main purpose of getting people enthused and enraptured with God. However, it is not an issue that can be avoided entirely if we are to understand this Song. I have tried to steer a balanced course through a complex web of often conflicting ideas, mindful that despite my own fundamentalist tendencies there may be a number of differing yet valid approaches to understanding this Song.

But this book is not directed at theologians. Rather it is for anyone who wants to engage with God in a deeper and more meaningful way, especially in the matter of love. I do not believe God intended things in his Word to baffle and confuse but rather to speak clearly to simple people whose hearts are sincere and hungry. While I would like to thoroughly analyse every word of the Song, I realise this is practically not possible. The approach I intend to take (in Part 2) is to consider section by section the whole Song, noting the wisdom of man but seeking the guidance of the Spirit of God in order to come to an understanding. I am especially concerned to find practical applications for life in the twenty-first century. In order to achieve this I will bear in mind all of those considerations mentioned earlier.

“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 on Song of Solomon**

## **Chapter 2**

### **In Search of Love**

“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.”

**Psalm 45v1**

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

**Ladybird**

“It passeth knowledge that dear love of thine  
Lord Jesus, Saviour; yet this soul of mine  
Would of thy love, in all its breadth and length,  
Its height and depth, its everlasting strength  
Know more and more”

**Mary Sheckleton**

Solomon’s Song of Songs touches on one of the major preoccupations of human kind: how can we find true, lasting, intimate love? We only have to consider the imagery pervading throughout all the media to conclude that intimacy, often with sexual connotations, is a significant preoccupation of individuals and societies throughout the world. They also furnish us with plenty of examples of the absence of love and intimacy. The fact that many seek intimacy in illicit, harmful or failed relationships or through pornography, (particularly nowadays by accessing it so easily via the Internet and other media) would appear to support this observation. Yet it would seem that those who seek intimacy by these means usually fail to be satisfied and that it is damaging to the individuals concerned. The good news is that God has

provided something far more satisfying and enduring.

While the love in this Song encompasses the notion of sexual attraction, indeed sexual ecstasy, it involves much more than that. It is about sacrificial giving, lifelong commitment and complete abandonment. It is about living a life that is fruitful and giving one's whole self (body, soul and spirit) to the object of that love. Love in all its various manifestations is one of the main driving forces behind all human behaviour. It has been a major recurring theme in all art forms and literature. When looking for suitable quotes to use in this book, I was staggered by how many references to love I could find, and the depth and wisdom these contained: from people in all walks of life, from all sorts of religious and philosophical standpoints, living in every culture and right down the ages.

For many, love makes life bearable, and indeed pleasurable. It is what gives it purpose. For many also, the disappointments and failed expectations of love bring pain. Whatever the experience, a relationship of love is not easy to maintain, despite being vitally important. Love relationships work best when those involved are resolved to making them succeed, come what may. Too often our expectations are thwarted, our energies are directed toward repairing the damage when this occurs, or we look for other, often inappropriate, outlets. This Song touches on some of these aspects and shows us the way we all should take. All of us need to be loved and know we are loved. When someone discovers love for him or herself, it makes all the difference. That was the experience of the Beloved in the Song and can be ours too. We do a great service by letting people know that they are loved.

Love is a major theme in the Bible. Contrary to what sceptics and unbelievers say, we do not live in a mechanistic universe in

which, if God exists at all, he is no better than one who set the wheels in motion and then sat back, taking no interest in its future or helping his creation. Yet consider the Son of God dying on the Cross for sinners (all of us). God is shown here, not as the stern judgemental figure so often caricatured by those who do not understand, but as the one who longingly desires to engage with his creation and to do it good. The Bible portrays God as holy who hates and judges sin, but also loving sinners, longing for his human creation to respond lovingly to him and live abundant, fulfilled lives.

There is much in the Bible that has a bearing on the subject of love that helps toward our understanding of this Song. From an individual perspective, love is shown as both vertical (me and God) and horizontal (me and others) with both aspects intrinsically linked. It is important not just to know about these things, because this is something for the heart more than for the head, something very practical. I am reminded of the Apostle John, who lived to a ripe old age. Towards the end of his life it was customary for this feeble old man to be carried in to address the assembled gathering. His message was invariably the same, simple yet profound: he told them that they must “love one another”.

1. Leviticus 19v18: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself
2. Deuteronomy 6v5: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might
3. Deuteronomy 7v9: Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him
4. Psalms 63v3: Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee
5. Jeremiah 31v3: I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee
6. Hosea 11v1: Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel

7. Zephaniah 3v17: 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
8. Matthew 5v44: But I say unto you, love your enemies
9. John 3v16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life
10. John 13vv34-35: A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples
11. John 15v13: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends
12. Romans 5v8: But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us
13. Romans 8v35: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
14. 1Corinthians 13v13: And now abideth faith, hope, charity (love) ... but the greatest of these is charity (love)
15. Ephesians 5v25: Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church
16. Hebrews 12v6: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth
17. 1John 3v1: Behold what manner of love the father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God
18. 1John 3v18: Let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and truth
19. 1John 4v7: Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God
20. 1John 4v18: there is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear

The greatest example of love is that between the creator God and his erring creation. Yet there is another consequence of God's love just as amazing! Jesus prayed to his father, just before his death, for his disciples who were living then and for those not yet born: "keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one" (John 17v11). Jesus' great desire

was “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.” (John 17v21-23).

Sadly, too often the world sees followers of Jesus as anything but “one” when they fail to see the love Jesus spoke of being demonstrated. Yet if we were “one” and understood and practiced that love, then Jesus tells us the world would believe. Moreover, that is how he wants his Bride (the Church) to be. The most profound aspect of all this is the oneness of the Father and the Son (together with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity). This has to be the right model for the relationship between husbands and their wives.

This Song can be viewed as the logical continuation to what God did in creation. After he created Man (Adam) in his own image (Genesis 1v27), God created Woman (Eve) “bone of my (Adam’s) bones and flesh of my flesh” so that he be “united to his wife and become one flesh” (Genesis 2vv23,24), representing the oneness that exists in the Godhead. While living in the Garden of Eden, they enjoyed a perfectly harmonious relationship with each other and with God. They then did the one thing they were told not to do. Seeing the tree of “knowledge of good and evil” bore fruit that would open their eyes and urged on by the serpent (Satan) they ate. According to the Bible, that is when sin came into the world and all the pain and misery that followed afterwards, including broken relationships.

None of us can escape the effects of this first act of disobedience. One of the consequences of “the Fall”, as this event has come to be known, is the loss of innocence, as well as death and decay. The Bible relates that, as soon as their eyes were opened, Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves to hide their nakedness. As we go further away from God we become more hardened and less innocent. There are spiritual forces and people intent on evil

attempting to destroy that innocence and replace it with something less than wholesome. Yet we see something of the innocence, which Adam and Eve had before they fell, in the lovers in the Song.

The good news is that relationships can be mended and this Song gives us a glimpse of what we can be if relationships are right. One amazing aspect of the Genesis account is that God, even before these events happened, had both redemption and Calvary in mind. He spoke of the woman's seed one day bruising the serpents head (Genesis 3v15) and he clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins before expelling them from the Garden (Genesis 3v21). This meant that animals first needed to be sacrificed, thus foreshadowing Christ's supreme sacrifice. Although high among the benefits of Christ's sacrifice is the restored relationship we can enjoy with our Creator, we have to be reminded that we still live in a fallen world and therefore daily suffering is going to be our lot. The further good news is the prospect of the restoration of how things were before sin entered into the world. The closing chapters of the Scriptures (Revelation 21, 22) give us a glimpse of a new Heaven and a new Earth. Those who are living there are enjoying once again a garden and, more importantly, unbroken loving relations with their Creator.

Solomon's Song of Songs is essentially a story of an intimate, exclusive (but not inward looking) and maturing love between the two lovers in the Song, which in places is overtly sexual in tone. In trying to find spiritual significance in this Song we do a disservice if we overlook the fact that pure sexual love between a man and his spouse is what the Song is principally about and this is something God deems to have profound significance and beauty. Equally, we do a disservice, if as some modern commentators do, we ignore the spiritual implications of the Song. There is always the tendency to want to redress past imbalances such as the church playing down the wonder and joy of sex and spiritualising things that should be interpreted naturally. This could lead to the Song being looked at purely in physical terms, ignoring the spiritual relationship it portrays. Yet a right understanding of this Song is to see it as encouraging sexual

intimacy between a man and his wife and at the same time urging us to experience for ourselves that spiritual intimacy with God.

The Song extols the love that is there and rejoices in the sexual intimacy enjoyed by the two lovers. However, their relationship far exceeds the purely physical and involves every aspect of the human experience and whole-hearted commitment. This provides the right context for sexual activity to take place. It is likely that those who are completely, holistically fulfilled in this most intimate of human relationships, are few. This includes married couples, for physical intimacy can only legitimately take place in marriage. Besides, there are many who are single, for all sorts of reasons, and unable to enjoy such intimacy. The good news is that in God's eyes we all are equally important and valuable. The single person, like the Lord Jesus himself, can be fulfilled, maybe even more so, than the married person. This may be reflected in the catholic practice of celibacy to allow for a fuller abandonment to God, something the apostle Paul would have well understood.

God wants us to have a pure intimate relationship with him. This surpasses other relationships in depth and quality. Those who enjoy such a relationship are likely to be a tiny minority of the human race. Seeking a personal intimate relationship with the Almighty, until we find it, is the most important thing any of us can do and it must be done at all costs. Many that long for such a relationship go about seeking it in the wrong way. While the cost may be high and few seem to reach the heights, just having an intimate relationship with God is far better than anything else this world can offer and, unlike them, lasts for eternity. I speak neither as a detached onlooker nor as one who continuously moves in these high places, but as a fallible fellow traveller. I know where I am going, am longing to get there, and follow the One who not only shows us the way, but who is the Way (John 14v6).

One of the marvellous things about enjoying such a relationship with God is that we do not need special talents, beauty, brains, privilege, experience or status. We may be someone most ordinary and not rated at all highly in this world. Even better: we may be failures, life's rejects, or the worst of sinners. It can be as

the hymn writer, Anne Ross Cousin, no doubt mindful of this Song, put it: “O I am my beloved’s and my beloved’s mine; He brings a poor vile sinner into his house of wine”. Just like the Beloved in the Song, so we too can enjoy an extraordinary wonderful and most intimate relationship with the most fantastic of lovers, can hold our heads up high and be thankful. It is the grace of God, and only that grace, and completely by that grace, that makes any of this possible for any of us.

We need then to say something about “grace”, as well as love, even though the word is not used in this Song. This Song abounds in beautiful illustrations of grace, for example when the Lover speaks tenderly to his Beloved when she was low or had faltered or has had some setback. Without ignoring the many examples of grace that occur outside of Christianity, I am persuaded that this is a particularly and possibly uniquely Christian concept. Grace is behind God’s incredible gifts to needy, helpless, contemptible sinners. It is undeserved, unearned and unexpected. The greatest example of grace I know, and one that is central to the Christian gospel, concerns the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (1Corinthians 8v9).

Grace does not give us a licence to do what we want, but rather do what God wants. We need to cooperate with God for grace to work in our lives, yet there is nothing we can do to earn God’s favour. While our natural tendency is to think we need to do something in order to get on the right side of God, God’s principle of grace shows us that it is a matter of trusting in him rather than trying to do things in our own strength. For someone like me, who has so often dismally failed even when I try to do the right thing, this is a liberating message. By coming into a deeper experience of God’s love and grace we know God better and can accomplish more for him. Our love for God is shown by our love for others, especially the unlovely. It is the grace of God working in our lives that enables us to love. William Cowper understood these things when he wrote: “Lord it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint. Yet I love Thee and adore; oh for grace



to love thee more.”

As has been stated, the Song can be viewed at both a spiritual and a natural (human) level. This is the approach this book takes. We need to balance the two views and not over or under emphasise either the spiritual or natural aspects of this Song. This dual approach to understanding can be applied to some of the Psalms, as well as elsewhere in the Old Testament, as evidenced by the fact that New Testament writers often applied what appears to be the Psalmist’s own experience to that of Christ (e.g. Psalms 22, 34). They also recognised some Psalms as being overtly Messianic (e.g. Psalms 45, 110). Psalm 45 has several parallels with this Song, but differences too. I would love to know what scriptures the risen Christ referred to as concerning himself when he spoke to the two men on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24v27), and whether this included verses from this Song. There is much imagery in the rest of the Bible that relates to what is found in this Song.

I do not intend this book to be a counselling manual on successful marriage nor an exploration of sexual intimacy from a spiritual perspective, although the Song does provide insights in these matters. Nor will I dissect and look for deep spiritual meaning in each phrase or word written. There is a balance between looking for such significance and confining one’s attention to what is clearly there. I will not try to provide a systematic, in-depth commentary covering each verse, although every word has been taken into account in order to try to reach a full understanding. Inevitably, there will be gaps and insights missed. Some of the imagery in the book I have yet to grasp. Some sections of the Song I am bound to give more attention than others, despite attempting to provide an even, balanced coverage. Besides which, I have yet to find any commentator that has totally succeeded on all counts.

One of the delights of studying the Bible is that we can always find something fresh and new to comfort, challenge and convict, all at the same time, even in its most familiar sections. Moreover, different people see different things. I think how often when I or someone else comes out with some insight into a particular Bible passage, and later on someone else, unbeknown,

comes out with something else just as profound on the same passage, following a different line of thought. This can be a positive thing. The Bible is like a sparkling diamond that appears in different colours to different observers at different times, depending on the light in which it is viewed. There can never be a final definitive interpretation of this Song, or any of the books of the Bible, at least not on this side of eternity and, besides which, the world is continually changing and there will always be new applications. When I get to heaven I will fully understand and experience what true love is all about. Even the love seen in this Song and that which we might experience now, is but a shadow and a foretaste of the love we can anticipate in the life to come. A word ought to be said about books and writers. All authors approach their subject from a perspective that is rarely completely objective and which usually focuses on particular aspects that interest them. We are all influenced in some way by our own worldview, experience and beliefs, including theological, eschatological and ecclesiological. What we and the society in which we live consider to be important affects what we think and helps explain why there is so much divergence of thought and application when we read different commentaries on this Song. My approach has tried to be sensitive to current cultural concerns. I write as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ who believes all Scripture is inspired by God and points towards Christ, for “the Father has given all things into his hand” (John 3v35).

At the same time I am able to recognise that valuable insights can be found in many places, including those that are least likely. I have taken many of these into consideration realising that all truth is God’s truth. I have likened the Beloved in the Song to Christ because I believe this is what God intended. Entering a relationship with his Son, through faith and repentance and his redeeming grace, is the most important and also most satisfying thing anyone can do. Yet I do not want to ignore some of the important natural meaning found from this text or so separate the natural and spiritual as if they are two unconnected compartments of life.

Many have likened the relationship portrayed in this Song to that which might occur between God and Israel or Jesus and the Church. By Church I do not mean a building or organisation but those people, past, present and future, which love and follow Jesus Christ. Some see the Song as representing the relationship between Christ and the individual believer who earnestly seeks him, in contrast to the majority who are less passionate in their love for Christ and do not enjoy the same intimacy. All these understandings have merit for Scripture is full of imagery portraying the relationship between God and Israel (see Isaiah 54v4, Jeremiah 3v14, Hosea 2v16) and Jesus and the Church (see 2Corinthians 11v2, Ephesians 5v23, Revelation 19v9) as like that between a husband and his wife.

Before developing the framework to help us to understand this Song, we should establish certain principles about scriptural interpretation and follow them carefully. These can be applied to any book in the Bible. Firstly, we need to understand the text with respect to the times and culture in which it is written. Secondly, we need to understand precisely what each phrase or word means. We do this by studying them in the context in which they were written, by comparing where else the words are used in Scripture and finding the meaning of the words in the language of the original text. Thirdly, we need to find how what is written fits in with the rest of the Bible. Thus to know and understand the Bible is important. Solomon's Song of Songs is one of the few Old Testament books not referred to elsewhere in the Bible. It apparently does not contain explicit teaching concerning God, although such teaching is implicit throughout. Many of its underlying themes and truths, as well as imagery, can be seen in other books of the Bible.

I have been helped in these aspects by scholarly commentaries. I draw upon these to understand the language of love and interpret the significance of various objects, but avoid including the material unless strictly necessary. While what follows is not aimed at scholars, it does seek to be true to the meaning of the text and justify interpretations when these have been provided and acknowledge problems in interpretation. There are plenty of

helpful commentaries that emphasise spiritual understanding, even though their interpretations frequently differ from each other and offer different insights from my own. I have looked at a number of these and many have contributed toward my overall understanding. I realise I need to apply sound study principles to find true meaning in the scriptures. While commentaries have been of great help, it is with the realisation that all commentators have pre-conceptions and pre-occupations that inevitably affect what they write. What I covet most is to have a comprehension that can only be given by the Holy Spirit. As important as all these aforementioned principles are when studying the scriptures, we need Holy Spirit guidance to gain proper understanding. Given that the Holy Spirit inspires Scripture, it follows that he is the best interpreter as well.

Many of the things that preoccupy us at any time are related to previous and current experiences in our lives: we cannot divorce ourselves entirely from these things. I have spent quite some time working in the area of mental health, in particular finding ways to help those with mental health needs find a more holistic health, become empowered and be integrated into their local communities. This concern is something I would like to address in the writing of this book. I am also increasingly coming across those who struggle with various addictions, not least in the area of sex, which too often are hidden from others by the addict. I want to speak to such people. My own struggles with depression and addictive behaviour help me to empathise with others in such situations and this has inevitably affected my approach. There are many, including those with a strong faith, who are struggling in this way. Sometimes there seems to be no way out. Yet I know there is, and that is all the more reason why the message of this Song is so important.

During the time while I have been writing this commentary I felt I had to stop writing because I was struggling with depression, so I can say that I do speak from experience. I have also discovered that having the sort of relationship depicted in this Song is an important step towards obtaining good mental health. Someone

once said there are four basic human needs: love, value, significance and belonging. Lack in any of these areas can drive us toward mental illness. The Beloved in this Song had all these needs met in abundance. All of these things can be ours too.

One problem that seems to be prevalent among many with mental health needs is feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem. It is both a cause and an effect of many of the problems resulting from depression, eating disorders, compulsive behaviour and addictions of all sorts. It is also a feature in the more severe psychotic conditions, specifically bi-polar affective disorder and schizophrenia. I have no doubt that our sad, sick, distorted God-forsaking society is a ripe seed-bed for such feelings. Yet this Song challenges why some have low self-esteem without promoting pride or ignoring the need to deal with sin. The Beloved in this Song has many flaws and insecurities and can be hardly viewed as being perfect. But as far as her Lover is concerned she is flawless. This is probably all that matters. As she develops her relationship with her Lover she gains so much in confidence such that she is able to rise to new heights and achieve things hitherto not dreamt of.

A further mental health problem is the inability to cope. Too often people lack purpose and motivation. Telling such people to sort themselves out, more often than not, fails to produce the desired result. It is true that many people cope and do have a purpose and motivation in life despite a lack of interest in God. However, I would contend that the person who does become “fired up” (and by this I mean enthusiastic, impassioned, whole-hearted, fully focussed), as a result of having the spiritual relationship described in the Song, will find he/she does have purpose and motivation. With this comes the ability to cope despite having struggles. Moreover he/she is “fired up” about something that matters. Problems that are all too real and debilitating, that hold people back from being the liberated and whole men and women that God had intended, have led me to believe there has to be a way out of this mental malaise. The Song shows us just such a way.

Another aspect of mental health that bears upon my understanding of this Song is to do with the strange fact that mental health problems often beset those who are spiritually minded. Aware as I am of the deep spiritual implications of this Song, I am tempted to be circumspect in exploring my subject in an over-spiritual way as I might only add to the spiritual dilemma of those struggling mentally, which is what some psychiatrists might have us believe. But the words of Jesus “come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11v28) are pertinent. That can be our experience, and is the experience of the girl in this Song. The love she found was not merely introverted and esoteric, but it led to her to becoming outward looking and fruitful: a need for many a struggling soul.

An issue relating to mental health is the problem of addiction, which in modern society has reached epidemic proportions. Addiction is a horrible thing to escape from and we live in an age where the very culture is a breeding ground for addicts. My plea to the addict is that you know you may find temporary solace in drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex, or even watching television and playing video games. For a while you may feel great and can escape pain, but this is not real. Moreover, there is the empty void and other harm such behaviour brings, not least the tendency to self destruct and hurt others. Jesus can fill the aching heart and heal the hurting soul. Therefore, relinquish the counterfeit and virtual and embrace what is true and real. Allow his grace to lift you out of this terrible mire into his beautiful place where his love reigns and so be liberated and empowered to face the real world.

Mental health problems may not be the only ones we might face. These could be poverty, infirmity, sickness, unemployment, imprisonment, persecution, loneliness, betrayal, failure, being hated or unwanted or any number of things or there may be no problems at all. Whatever our situation, we learn from the Song many wonderful things, not least: “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is toward me” (7v10). These provide the assurance and incentive to cause us to want to continue on our journey.

I want now to further turn our minds to the important part played by Scripture. Since we ought to substantiate what we say, the Bible,

which I regard as authoritative, is often referred to, despite those who extensively quote from the Bible to support all sorts of strange ideas. Quotations are shown in italics, usually with the reference, and these are mostly from the Authorized Version (AV, King James). I use it because the beautiful language is appropriate to the poetry of the Song. It is the version I know best even though some modern versions are more accurate and understood better by more people. Sometimes, by way of contrast, I use the New International Version (NIV) and the New American Standard (NAS) or even a modern paraphrase such as the Message, although there are many other versions and we are spoilt for choice. But it is the AV I have grown up with and there is incisiveness and beauty about the language I find compelling: phrases sound better in the language of the AV and are (in my view) more appropriate to memorize.

Finally, before turning to look at this Song as a whole, there is a tradition that you need to be of a certain age before you can commentate on it in detail. Jewish men were prohibited from studying this Song before they were thirty because of its raunchiness. A further Jewish perspective is that of the three books where Solomon is the author, Ecclesiastes represents the cynicism of old age, Proverbs the wisdom of middle age and Song of Songs the vigour of youth. It is true that age does bring with it valuable experience, and that much of the Song is to do with experience. Age also brings with it the inclination to pontificate (too much maybe) about intricate and less obvious details concerning a particular subject. There is much scope for this in the Song. However, since there are many different approaches that can be adopted for tackling its subject matter and great depth that still needs to be carefully explored, having such tendencies could perhaps be an advantage.

But this Song is for all ages, especially the young at heart. The energy, enthusiasm, passion, spontaneity, longing and creativity, seen in this Song, is something we normally associate with young people. Yet those of us who are older should not be deterred if we feel some of these things are lacking, and more reminiscent of a long gone past. I am convinced that the One who

knows all of our hearts can restore what is missing and that the fire can be rekindled. For those who lament the wasted years, God promises to “restore the years the locust has eaten” (Joel 2v25). Our longing for life and God and doing things that matter can still be great, even when we have become slow physically and world weary. Evidence of decay is all around us and we may well mourn the loss of youth and health. Yet we can look forward to a day when we will have new bodies (1Corinthians 15) released from limitations and able to fully enjoy a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The greatest joy I find in this life in loving relationships cannot compare with what is yet to come.

“We are about to look at a book of Scripture which, I suppose, has often exercised the minds of many of us. But it is remarkable that although modern thought might presume to speak lowly of such a book, there is no part of the Hebrew Scripture which has more distinct, positive authority. That is to say there is not a single groundwork of divine authority which it does not possess, save one, perhaps, that might be brought up against it, and that is, that it is one of the very few books of the Bible which is not quoted in the New Testament. But there is not the very slightest ground for question on that score, and for this simple reason: that although it is not cited, the very groundwork of it is constantly before the mind of the Spirit of God. The first book of the New Testament most plainly alludes to the great thought of Canticles; that is the bridal relation as the sign or symbol of Christ’s special love to His people. For although, undoubtedly, we have in the New Testament the place of children and the Father’s love; and although we have also the figure of the shepherd and his care for the sheep, still we see this very relationship taken up and used by the Holy Ghost as the peculiar figure of the nearness of love in which the Lord stands to ourselves. This, however, has exposed the book, I think, to be misunderstood.”

**William Kelly**



## Chapter 3

# The Context of Love

“Love is a fruit in season at all times, and in reach of every hand”

“I have found the paradox that if I love until it hurts, then there is no hurt, but only more love”

“The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread”

“The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved”

“Intense love does not measure; it just gives”

“Let us always meet each other with smile, for the smile is the beginning of love”

“We can do no great things; only small things with great love”

“Spread love everywhere you go: First of all in your own house... let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God’s kindness”

**Mother Teresa of Calcutta**

“If all is right with the family, then all is right in the world”

## Confucius

“I N. take thee N. to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth

I N. take thee N. to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

### **(1662) Book of Common Prayer - Solemnization of Matrimony**

When looking at the text of this Song in detail, we should first consider its underlying themes, be aware of its background and think about its plot, characters, imagery and symbols. We will try to identify some differences and difficulties in interpretation and begin to address the bigger picture of how this Song fits into God's overall revelation to humankind and the deepest needs of the human heart. We need to realize the context in which this Song is set, as well as the individual verses. The differing approaches toward understanding this Song have a significant bearing on the lessons that can be drawn.

We must not be unduly dogmatic or we may find meaning that is not there and miss truth that is there. This is particularly true for areas where there is no clear-cut interpretation and where we must humbly acknowledge that only God has the full answer. It never ceases to amaze me how an innocuous phrase can be subjected to some incredible exegeses, including by those who share many of my perspectives. It is understandable that even a single word can trigger off a whole series of thoughts, as shown in much preaching. We need to find out what is the intended meaning. Sometimes this leads us to conclude that some words do not have the profound meaning we might have hoped for or mean something different to what we first thought. Yet we cannot sit too much on the fence otherwise our gleaning becomes too generalised and vague. My approach to interpreting this Song has

been on the lines of “simple (plain, straight-forward) is best”. I try to ensure my conclusions are consistent with the rest of Scripture, respectfully noting what others say and what my own heart and mind tell me. I need to recognise there may be profound, but not yet realised, insights to be had, which we could profit from. Even if we fail now we can look forward to when all mysteries will finally be revealed.

In Part 2, one chapter is devoted to each of the eight chapters of the Song. Not that each chapter is a logical, self-contained piece of text and sometimes a particular line of thought runs from one chapter into the next. Some commentators consider the Song contains a number of separate but related poems, not necessarily in sequential order. One suggestion is there are six poems, covering the themes of:

1. initial love - 1v2-2v7
2. testing love - 2v8-3v5
3. growing love - 3v6-5v1
4. restoring love - 5v2-6v9
5. maturing love - 6v10-8v4
6. enduring love - 8v5-8v14

Whether or not this is so we need to be practical and break the Song down somehow. Doing so on a chapter-by-chapter basis at least provides manageable passages. To help the process, at the start of each chapter, the section of the Song that is being considered is given and, in the rest of the chapter, reference is made to the individual verses that are being commented on.

I believe that all the words in this Song are spoken by one of three actors:

1. the Lover
2. the Beloved
3. the Chorus

While there are differences in opinion as to who says what, particularly concerning when the Chorus speaks, there is usually a consensus as to what words are spoken, by whom, although we cannot always be entirely sure. For example and as will be discussed, some consider there is not one lover but two. Where

there is dispute, I usually opt for what seems to be the obvious choice. I reckon though it would not detract too much from a correct exegesis if I sometimes make a mistake, knowing that the best commentators do not always agree. But it is helpful to identify who says what in the Song. Therefore, as well as providing the words that are spoken by each actor, an indication of who it is that is doing the speaking is also provided.

The Song begins “The song of songs, which is Solomon’s”. From the outset we can identify the author as King Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba (2Samuel 12v24, 1Chronicles 23v1), although some commentators would dispute this. A significant part of 1Kings and 2Chronicles concerns Solomon’s life. It was during his reign (971-931 BC) that the Kingdom of Israel reached the zenith of its glory and wealth, having been previously made secure by David. Not only was Solomon a rich and powerful ruler but he was also endowed with wisdom and knowledge. He had asked God for these rather than wealth, riches or honour. God, being pleased with Solomon’s heart’s desire, gave him all the things he asked for as well as the prosperity and power most men crave (2Chronicles 1vv7-12). Solomon probably wrote much of the book of Proverbs, all of Ecclesiastes, and Psalms 72 and 127, as well as this Song. The message of love provides a refreshing contrast to that of human vanity found in Ecclesiastes, and powerfully complements Proverbs which extols the importance of divine wisdom. Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs and composed 1005 songs (1Kings 4v32), of which this Song is the Song of Songs.

Some commentators believe Solomon is the lover in this Song, and that this was composed for the occasion of his wedding. The picture of a great king in the guise of simple shepherd wooing a simple, humble girl from the villages has romantic appeal and could look forward to the time when a greater shepherd-king, the Lord Jesus Christ, came from heaven to earth in order to woo his bride, the Church. The wedding procession scene (3vv6-11) would then be Solomon’s own and it could be understood as happening at the time when he revealed himself to his beloved as the king.

However, there is nothing in the text requiring this interpretation, even though Solomon's name occurs seven times (1v1, 1v5, 3v7, 3v9, 3v11, 8v11, 8v12).

Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1Kings 11vv1-3), although at the time of his writing the Song it appears he (only) had 60 wives and 80 concubines. I doubt if the relationship depicted in the Song bore much reality in Solomon's life, though he might have wished it had been different. Despite all his wisdom and wives, it seems unlikely that Solomon truly experienced much of the pure, enduring love that is spoken of in this Song. Tragically, some of his wives led him astray, so that near the end of his life and, instead of his serving the true God, his heart had turned towards following after other gods (1Kings 11v4). That Israel was never to return to her former glory, can largely be attributed to Solomon's unfaithfulness. As so often happens, Solomon knew the truth and what was right but he did not entirely live in the light of that truth, and did not always do what was right.

Others, in attempting to connect Solomon with the subject of this Song and explain some of the more difficult verses, for example 1v4, have suggested that there is not one, but two lovers. One lover is Solomon, intent on adding yet another trophy to his harem. The other is a humble, rustic shepherd, who was the single true object of the Beloved's affections. While this interpretation has a certain attraction, for example it could explain why Solomon is mentioned so often in the text and the evidences of royal trappings seen throughout, I believe this view is flawed and that the text does not suggest or demand such a complex plot. Instead, I am happy to accept that the Lover's identity is unknown, other than that he was a shepherd. He also typifies the Christ, who was yet to come, by virtue of his excellent character and the quality of the relationship he enjoyed with his Beloved. I believe that this Song tells a story, based only loosely on fact. It idealises the marital relationship without overlooking the difficulties, which need working at. The story is intended to illustrate how the relationship between humankind and God ought to function.

As for the Beloved, we know very little about her, other than that she is a Shulammitte. Even what this represents is a matter

of conjecture. It could be a place name, possibly the village of Shunem in Galilee (Joshua 19v18), or a play on words that imply she was Solomon's girl. She has a mother (although no father is mentioned), brothers and a sister. She appears to have done servile work, having been forced to do so by her brothers. She is perhaps someone quite ordinary and possibly somewhat naive, with a certain amount of problems brought into this relationship. Yet what stands out, is her intense passion and single-minded desire, which spilled over into good works. Above all, she is determined to please her lover and experience the most intimate and fruitful of relationships.

The third of the afore-mentioned actors with speaking parts I have called "the Chorus", much along the lines of what appears in many plays. This is a group of people whose identities are unknown. In some commentaries these are referred to as "friends", and in the text they are referred to seven times as the "daughters of Jerusalem" (1v5, 2v7, 3v5, 3v10, 5v8, 5v16, 8v4). This term implies that they were associated with Jerusalem and with its king in some significant way. Not only was Jerusalem Israel's capital when Solomon was king, but it was often considered to be the place of God's dwelling, both at the time and in a future yet to be revealed.

The title, "daughter of Jerusalem", suggests a privileged position, and having divine favour. The group in this Song knew much about the Lover and the things with which he was associated. They were often more aware of what was going on around him than was the Beloved. Likely, more poignantly, their relationship with the Lover, compared to the one the Beloved enjoyed, was an inferior one. There is a salutary spiritual lesson here: many know much about God and much else besides. They seem to do the right things and are rightly considered to be believers. Sadly, however, they do not enjoy the same intimate relationship, as did the Beloved. The question to ask is: am I going to be Christ's beloved and fully partake as one of the principle actors, or be a mere onlooker, a member of the chorus?

There are other actors in this Song, albeit without speaking parts, whose roles seemed relatively minor and whose activities

were fairly restricted. There were the watchmen, who had the important duty to look after the safety and security of the city and who would provide timely warnings if the city came under threat (the sort of role that the Hebrew prophets frequently undertook, at least spiritually). The Beloved's encounters with the watchmen were mixed. On one occasion she asked them for directions and was dealt with sympathetically (3v3). On another they beat her when they found her walking the streets (5v7). There were other shepherds referred to (1v8). Mention was made of her mother, brothers and a sister (8v8) and of course there was Solomon and some of those who were associated with him: his mother (3v11), his warriors (3v7), and his tenants in his vineyards (8v11).

The Beloved, despite possessing great strength of character, resolve and determination, seemed often to be vulnerable and weak (1v6, 2v5, 5v7). She was perhaps too self-conscious (1v5), possessed bad habits (2v15), appeared to be immature (3v2), could be lazy and self-willed (5v3) and was prone to anxiety (5v8). The Lover in this Song, on the other hand, did not appear to have any of these weaknesses, other than perhaps he was not always around when she needed him. The Lover might seem almost too good to be true, which could be disheartening if we use the Lover's example to model our own love relationships. However, if we liken the Lover with Christ, there is no problem, for Christ "knew no sin" (2Corinthians 5v21) even though he was fully man. He "was in all points tempted like us" (Hebrews 4v15). While he is fully man, he is also fully God.

Many relationships flounder following the impasse when the man says to his wife: "If you love me you will take care of my needs, support me in what I do and give me the respect and affirmation I crave for". The woman then replies: "I will do these things if you take proper responsibility in our home, take care of my needs and love me as you ought". One way to break this impasse is for the man to live up to his vows and love his wife unconditionally, and to recognise his responsibility, as the God ordained head in the relationship (Ephesians 5v23), to look after his wife's needs and to take a lead in ensuring their relationship is

as it should be. While this may seem nigh impossible to achieve, he should aspire to the Lover's outstanding character. The woman too can play her part. One reason why Lover in this Song is seen in such a glowing light is because of the words the Beloved used to describe him. She presumably chose to ignore anything negative. Her actions achieved what most men long for for: confirmation that they are respected and esteemed. This at best works as a self-fulfilling prophecy and encourages the man to be the person he ought to be. For both the man and for the woman, such outcomes can be achieved without ignoring real difficulties or glossing over unpalatable truths.

Some of these conclusions contravene current worldly ideas about the sexes being equal: there being no differences, other than the obvious biological ones. While the Scriptures agree that the sexes are equally important in God's eyes, they recognise that there are important differences in roles. Going back to creation, not only did God create Adam first and then Eve from his rib but he also told Eve (following their fall from grace) that her "desire shall be to her husband" and he shall "rule over her" (Genesis 3v18). Moreover, the New Testament writers reaffirm significant differences between the sexes regarding their respective roles. Paul told husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5v25) and wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5v22). He taught that the head of the woman is man, just as the head of man is Christ (1Corinthians 11v3). One reason why the woman had to learn in silence, and not allowed to teach or exercise authority over the man, was because of the creation order: for Adam was formed first, then Eve, and it was the woman who was first deceived (1Timothy 2vv11-15). Peter wrote that husbands are to "treat their wives with consideration and respect", that she is the "weaker vessel" (1Peter 3v7) and "wives are to submit to their husbands" (1Peter 3v1).

The Song contains plenty of evidence of the Lover taking the lead by protecting and directing his Beloved (2v3, 2v13, 2v15, 4v8) and the Beloved following that lead, and caring for and supporting her Lover (1v4, 2v7, 4v16, 6v2). Yet the Beloved is not a passive partner. She has her own distinct personality, with



her own mind and will, and particular wants and needs. Repeatedly she takes the initiative and creates situations whereby the Lover is able to take the appropriate lead. While she can never be the dominant partner, she is not one to be dominated either: she shows herself to be her lover's match in all that is going on. Interestingly, twice as much of the speech in the Song is attributable to the Beloved as to the Lover.

One of the fascinations of this Song is seeing how the relationship develops between the Lover and his Beloved. We see her first attracted toward her lover by virtue of his good reputation and attractive character. We see them come together and their romance blossom. We see some of the ups and downs, challenges and conflicts, successes and failures, pains and sufferings, and the trials and tribulations that they have to face. We see love mature and maintain its freshness, becoming stronger at the end than it was at the beginning. Unlike many a worldly romance, the relationship does not reach its peak when the couple meet, fall in love and consummate their relationship. Instead their love for each other grows. If there is a secret to the success of this relationship it is the commitment and resolve they have and their willingness to sacrifice for each other to make their relationship work.

In viewing the relationship between the lover and his beloved we get a glimpse of the covenant relationship between God and his people, in particular his chosen nation, Israel. It should be borne in mind that some of the Jewish rabbinic commentators saw the Song in this light. This was something which often seemed so elusive: damaged as it was by their apostasy and unfaithfulness. This led to God's judgement, even though God continually sought to bring about restoration and reconciliation. Thankfully we do not have to be Jewish to enjoy a relationship with God: we can all do so by virtue of his Son achievements of coming into this world, dying, and rising from the dead. Christ's Incarnation, Atonement and Resurrection are the main pillars and outstanding doctrines of the Christian faith.

The point when their marriage occurred could have been toward the beginning of the Song (1v4 or 2v4) or remained anticipated at the end (8v14). While we might assume that events

unfolded in the sequence described in the book. Some would argue these could have been flashbacks from the past or even part of a dream, perhaps in no particular chronological order. Some commentators view the description of Solomon's wedding procession (3vv6-11) as being the occasion when marriage took place. In the end we cannot be sure. Maybe it does not matter.

It is clear the relationship was conducted chastely, with due decorum (8v1). Sexual activity would only take place inside marriage, respecting the conventions of the day about appropriate relationships and interactions between the sexes. Some have felt awkward about the expressions of sexual intimacy contained in the Song and have even suggested that it should not be included in the Bible for that reason. Yet it is accepted by most believers, indicating the sexual aspect, so often depicted as dirty and sordid, can also be wholesome and divinely approved. Although sexual intimacy is anticipated in several places (1v2, 1v4, 1v13, 2v6), this is not the same as it being presently enjoyed. This would happen at the time right time within the marriage union. The sexual act alluded to in this Song gives us a profound insight as to how God wants to interact with men and women (even though we must always approach God reverently). The pure intimate relationship we can have with him includes spontaneous creativity, sacrificial giving, unbridled passion, intense longing, tender romance, outrageous grace, wild love and ecstatic joy.

The sort of relationship depicted in this Song, on a human level at least, should only take place in a lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriage union. If either party have objects for their sexual affection besides that of their spouse, then the relationship will be seriously weakened. Constancy is needed throughout life, even though divorce and sexual relationships outside marriage are nowadays common. Earlier societies also took for granted that sexual intimacy could only legitimately take place in the marriage union between a man and a woman. We can no longer make these assumptions. Homosexual practices, for example, are increasingly accepted in societies, and pressure is increasingly being brought to bear on us to recognise the legitimacy of such relationships. While same sex friendships, that are tender and deep, can be

wholesome and proper, the imagery in this Song points to the type of relationship portrayed possible only between a male (lover) and a female (beloved). Sexual interaction between those of the same gender is, and always has been, a sin in God's eyes (Leviticus 20v13, Romans 1v18-32).

Something also should be said about single people because the message of this Song is an all-inclusive one. When Paul suggested that it could be a good thing if individuals were not to marry, it was because he knew this would leave them freer to serve the Lord. A key element of this involves giving practical love to one's neighbours (1Corinthians 7). As one who married relatively late in life, marriage has opened up new avenues for service, starting with my own family. But I recall that as a single person there were opportunities which I no longer have, principally because of family commitments. I have often been moved by the way God speaks tenderly to single people: "Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and daughters" (Isaiah 56v5).

Love is all about giving, and each of us can give something. What is more, those who give most also receive most in return in the long run, and certainly in heaven, We may though not be able to measure these things now. Mother Teresa said, in the quotes at the beginning of this chapter, we should be spreading love wherever we are and thus be a blessing to others. We may not be able to reach the destitute and dying on the streets of Calcutta, but all around us are those who desperately need and would benefit from our love: family, friends, neighbours, members of the wider community and especially the poor and vulnerable. It can be in any number of ways and in the simplest of acts. Even if we are unable to reach people in the way we would like because of our limitations, we can still pray for them to be blessed by whatever means God may choose, with or without our direct involvement. God will surely respond to such prayers, if uttered out of a sincere heart and in faith.

As far as sexual love is concerned, we need to love our partner and to give of ourselves in order to serve and satisfy him/her. This is consistent with the pure intimacy that couples ought

to enjoy and which culminates in the sexual act that is meant to take place (solely) within the marriage union. This is utterly at odds with the pressure, coming from every direction, for us to engage in illicit sexual relationships, outside of marriage. There is no room for this type of love in any place other than the marriage relationship between a man and his wife. All other forms are wrong, as are ways to obtain sexual gratification outside the marriage union. The Beloved's response to her Lover: "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. 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" (8vv6-7) could equally apply to our marriage relationship, and provides the appropriate context for sexual activity, as well as the relationship we can have with our heavenly Lover.

Before turning to the text of the Song, we should consider the extent to which creation (or nature) is described. The Song abounds in images from creation: orchards and vineyards, birds and animals, fruits and spices, trees and plants, mountains and valleys, summer and winter, springs and streams, perfumes and precious stones. There has been a tendency for Christians to link the natural order with what is good and decent, considering anything man-made as not entirely wholesome. The truth is that all creation has been tainted by the Fall and everything we come across is affected by the consequences of sin. Even so, there is much that is beautiful in God's creation and the actors in the Song recognise that beauty. Nature does not merely provide a convenient framework for the Song, but is intrinsically linked in with the story, and every item mentioned is significant. An attempt will be made in Part 2 to find out what that significance is.

Even so, I would not dare claim to have found the precise meaning or relevance of all these natural objects, as some of the esteemed commentators in the past have done. I have none-the-less tried to do so, to the extent that we can derive from them some meaning, significance and spiritual application. Similarly, a

number of place names are mentioned and these too are significant. At least they place the Song in a geographical and historical context. Besides which, as is the case for most poetry, I doubt that the giving of these names is merely incidental, although only the author can say for sure why the names were chosen. That context should be at least explored. As often is the case in Scripture, this has a bearing on our understanding.

Finally, something more should be said about God. In our earlier list of actors God did not feature: he would have done if we had been considering most other books in the Bible. Yet God is the unseen actor in this Song. This is true elsewhere where God is not mentioned directly in the text, for example in the books of Ruth and Esther. Love is something God is particularly concerned about, and so are good relationships. Some would justify the Song's inclusion in the Bible for those reasons alone. Everything about the Song points to the glory of God: the quality of the relationships, the triumph of love, the metaphor of the garden, the pre-occupation with fruitfulness, the promise of new life, the character of the Lover.

Not only do we have the Lover in the Song as a type of Christ but one senses that a spiritual warfare is going on (seen and unseen). Specifically, Satan sows seeds of hatred, seeks to destroy relationships and promotes false intimacy, whereas God sows seeds of love, seeks to build up relationships, promotes pure intimacy, and takes great delight when he sees these things happening among his people. One of Satan's deceptions is to convince people, particularly the impressionable and young, that love means romance and is purely based on mutual attraction. This is done in all sorts of subtle ways and is often reinforced by the media. This love is often more like lust than real love. When the romantic feeling fades, those involved may then feel free to move onto other relationships. As we will see when we examine this Song, the biblical view of love recognises its importance but differs considerably from worldly views. Love, like everything that is of God, endures forever. It is the one thing that gives meaning to our otherwise miserable existence.

“1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,

and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing.

4 Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

8 Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1Corinthians 13)

There has always been a battle between light and darkness, just as there has always been a conflict between right and wrong, truth and error, freedom and bondage, spirit and flesh, love and hatred. We must decide for ourselves which side we are on, not as

an intellectual exercise or as interested spectators, for it is an affair of the heart and we are active participants. It has ever been thus. Light shines in darkness and, even if it seems overwhelming, darkness cannot overcome it (John 1v5).

The Song ends with the Beloved looking to the future with hope and anticipation: “Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices” (8v14). We too can look forward to Christ’s return. Satan and the Antichrist, colluding with the great whore of Babylon (false love) (Revelation 17&18), will one day deceive and control the world. They will persecute those who follow Christ and God’s particular treasure, despite their rejection of the Messiah, the Jewish people. The necessary things for this to happen are already coming into place. Yet in spite of their splendour, power and pretensions, they are doomed to ignominious defeat. God and the Lamb (Christ), together with his Bride (the Church) (true love), the object of so much of the pretenders’ hatred, will gloriously triumph (Revelation 19). God’s chosen people, the Jews, will have the veil taken from their eyes when they see God at work, and fall in love with their Messiah.

But enough of all these diversions and generalities; we need to consider specifics. Let us celebrate love if we do nothing else but also let us take a detailed look at the Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s. Please do not say “it is not for me”. It is!

“7 the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed.

9 And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ...

17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

18 The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”...

21 So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh.

22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

23 The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’, for she was taken out of man.”

24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

25 The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”

### **Genesis 1vv7-9, 16-18, 21-25**

“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**





## Chapter 4

# The Power of Love

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

“That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;”

### St. Paul to the Philippians

“There is, I believe, a basic ingredient which is largely lacking in Christianity today, and the lack of it is the source of most of our problems. It is the cancer which is eating away at the church, but it is no secret. In fact, it is so non-secretive that it is written on almost every page of the New Testament. And yet, because the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked, and because we are so bent on our own way, we do not see (or seeing we do not believe) that the basic message of the New Testament is LOVE!”

### George Verwer

I have this strange thought, in fact it has crossed my mind on several occasions; here I am, going on about the wonderful things to be found in Solomon’s Song of Songs (much more of that in Part 2) and its ramifications for our lives, while at the same time I can hear my wife saying: “let us see more its practical application in your life and our home.” I know I have a long way to go, but I also know that God will not let me off the hook until that reality gap is narrowed, and it will likely be my overriding occupation in life from this point on. I am comforted that providing there is the desire, he will give me grace to be the sort of lover set out in the Song.

This brings me to the reasoning behind this chapter, which is not strictly about the Song at all, although I am going to relate it to the Song anyway, and is partly to do with a decision to publish my commentary in two parts. Strangely enough, if the thrust of the message of this Song is about being “fired up” (subtitle of Part 1) and “pure intimacy” (subtitle of Part 2) then it will inevitably touch on almost every other significant area of life. It also allows me to write about those things which I consider as being important and others should (in my view) too, many of which have been on my heart for a long while, but now is the time to articulate. I know what I am about to write might well have been put in a practical application chapter right at the end of the commentary but the point is that this Song is about being on fire, specifically for God and Jesus, and, for those of us who have one, one’s own spouse. It is also about leading a life of fruitfulness and with it the implication that if we are to be fired up then it must have practical ramifications in all sorts of areas.

I have this burning desire, and if there is a measure of wrong motive God will undoubtedly deal with me accordingly, and that is: from now on to concentrate on those things in life that matter and leave a lasting legacy. Be under no misapprehension, this is no airy fairy stuff. In fact, it mostly includes simple, ordinary, everyday things but these all matter nevertheless. Even if people were to say nice things about me when I am dead, within a few years these will no doubt be forgotten. We are mere dots along the eternal continuum, yet significant dots even so. It is within us all to do something of eternal significance even when it seems our spheres of influence are ever so limited, which makes an important difference to and benefits the human race. This Song should help inspire us to do such things, even if the benefits that result will be

missed by all but God himself and can only be realised in the light of eternity. So think on this dear reader: do you want your life to be significant and do you want to make a difference, and one that matters?

Where is all this leading you may ask? Let me first relate two snippets I picked up for the first time during this past week, about two people who made a difference, helping many, a long time ago (during the nineteenth century), whose impact is being felt today, both of whom are unlikely heroes. I read in Time magazine about a London doctor who was around during the great cholera epidemics and insisted the causes were primarily to do with contamination in the water supply. Despite rejection, he resolutely demonstrated his point and, with much determination, brought about change, so that outbreaks of cholera were greatly reduced. I read in a missionary magazine, of a young spinster who saw the plight of abandoned girl babies in India during a time of famine and undertook what many would have seen to be a futile rescue mission of these babies. Despite experiencing difficulties and tragedies, she began a work that flourishes to this day. I admire such people more than most of the so-called heroes of the media. There are many more that do those things that matter, whose actions are often unsung. We can all be unsung heroes, even if it is doing the ordinary things of life as best we can, for example giving a cup of water to a poor, thirsty soul ... and this Song inspires us to do just that.

I have recently returned from seeing the film “the Nativity”, which tells the Christmas story in a gritty realistic way, depicting the harsh world Jesus was born into, and is a mostly true account of the story that is told in the gospels. There is a point in film when one of the shepherds meets Mary and Joseph just before they get to Bethlehem and bids the cold Mary to warm herself by the fire. The shepherd makes the point we all have gifts to offer and, not knowing who this was, suggested that Mary’s gift was the baby that she was carrying. He is, however, doubtful concerning what his own particular gift was or even if he had one. Later on he meets the new born babe, who Mary introduces as God’s gift to

the whole world.

It seemed to me that this and the earlier scene, which probably did not happen in the real story, showed how someone of little importance from any worldly perspective did something profoundly significant that could have changed the course of history, just as later when Jesus told people that if they give a cup of water to someone who is thirsty they would be giving it to him. It also shows us, yet again, how God delights in revealing himself to and blessing ordinary, simple folk whose hearts are sincere. Let us not under-estimate the gifts (or opportunities) God gives us and use those gifts to bless other people and so bring glory to God.

This brings me to another point. Whether or not I write another word or say anything else profoundly spiritual, God will still judge me on how I attend to the simple, ordinary everyday things he calls me to do. Less important, but important nevertheless, is the impact this has on people around me. I think especially of my eight year old son, who I pray will have a double portion of his dad's spirit. He will be more impressed by how I do as a father than in my profound expositions. Yet I want to spend the remainder of this chapter succinctly reflecting on the most important things in life because we need to know these things. I intend to do this by taking twenty-five related headings and talk about matters of considerable significance, some obvious and others less so, and relate these to this Song. I should first say: much of this teaching cannot be derived directly from this Song. Choosing the headings was not obvious and there is much overlap. I doubt if anyone would come up with the same list. Reflecting on my list: the earlier you start to address the points the better, and that is why I would always want to target the young, even though, because of God's grace, it is never too late to start.

## **1. Balance**

I am mindful that practically addressing each of the subsequent points to the extent that is appropriate requires a delicate act of balancing but then again much of life is about getting

a right balance, even to the extent this may become (as it has with me) a major pre-occupation. As I look at people, particularly Christians, and then take into account their church affiliations, the culture in which they operate, individual social standing, the point in history when they live and personality, I see huge differences in their pre-occupations, that which they attach importance to and, dare I say it, prejudices and misunderstandings. Some differences are perfectly acceptable. After all, we do not have the capacity or opportunity or even the calling to deal with every doctrine or subject under the sun to the fullest extent possible and, moreover, God has given us all different tasks, which will determine our priorities. We are called to be faithful in the little things and work for the Kingdom in the knowledge that God alone has the big picture, and if we let him, is the perfect orchestrator. We also need to be mindful that for those who have been given much, much is expected, when considering how far one should take in the wider view.

What is less or un-acceptable is when we emphasise some truths at the expense of others. Time will not permit a study of dire ramifications, seen when we study the history of the church, when believers have got the balance wrong on such diverse issues as the humanity and divinity of Christ, or where the emphasis lies when it comes to pre-destination and free will, evangelism and social activism, God's love and his wrath (which can only be resolved when considering what Christ accomplished when dying on the Cross of Calvary), the place of the Word of God and the Spirit of God in our individual experiences, the extent to which we maintain our separateness from and our involvement with the world, the place of the Holy Spirit and the priorities and practices being undertaken by the local church. Having a right balance on these and many other issues is beholden on us as servants of God. We can start by looking at the example of the Beloved in this Song. What mattered most to her was knowing her Lover and following hard after him, wherever that might take her. The paradox behind such an approach is that while our focus may be a

narrow one our perceptions will be wide, and while being required to weigh everything carefully we are also required to be on fire for God.

## 2. Initiation

I am impressed by what an English Bible teacher, David Pawson, wrote about Christian initiation. He saw the need to address four key issues from the start of our Christian journey: repentance, faith, baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit. All these are essential and before we get going on our journey these need to happen. These should be central to the message we proclaim and not neglected.

1. Just as the Beloved in this Song made adjustments to the way she lived her life in order to please her Lover, so we need a change in direction. We need to turn from a way of life that is opposed to how God would have us live and follow the way he has set out for us.
2. Just as the Beloved trusted her Lover unreservedly, so we need to put our trust in the unseen God who rewards those who seek him. We need to trust in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to rescue us from the consequences of sin.
3. We declare publicly our resolve to follow Christ by being baptised in water. Some medieval commentators believed baptism was alluded to in this Song but I think such a view was fanciful. And, while I understand where those who believe in infant baptism come from, my understanding is that being baptised is something that each individual believer ought to do.
4. Just as the Beloved in this Song resolved to produce fruit for her Lover to enjoy, so should we for our heavenly lover. We can do so through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. I disagree with some charismatic friends who insist the baptism in the Holy Spirit has to be an experience following conversion, since we receive the Holy Spirit at conversion, but we need to be continuously filled with

the Holy Spirit (dealing with issues that prevent this) and so be fruitful in God's service and effective in serving God. He gives us gifts (of the Spirit) to help us do his work. These gifts have not been withdrawn in this present age as some non-charismatic friends say.

### 3. Grace

There is a temptation to think that we need to be and to do something amazing to do all God wants from us, but that is not so. The reason is the grace of God. Of course, we are required to make an appropriate response but we can not earn favour from God. It is he who bestows favour on the most miserable and undeserving of sinners just because he is a gracious God who delights in being gracious. I cannot get over the fact that the experiences I am describing are for the likes of people like me and are completely unmerited, for such is the abundant grace of God. Having begun the journey alluded to by this Song because of his grace we continue on to our heavenly destination by that same grace. There is a very real danger (and I have come across it in many a sermon) of insisting there is something we need to do.

There is nothing we can do other than co-operate with God, by repentance, faith and obedience. Should we fail, as we may do many times, his grace picks us up and returns us to the narrow path. My becoming a man of God is entirely down to his grace and I can take no credit for that. Despite my feeble efforts and my frequent failings, God is able to bring good out of it all, just because he is so gracious, even though we cannot undo the consequences of our wrong actions. Any good I do is down to the grace of God, because I know naturally there is no good thing in me. I have discovered that it is those who have most appreciated and experienced the grace of God who, so it would seem, are the most grateful for God's gifts and effective in matters pertaining to the Kingdom. Jesus pointed out it is the one who is forgiven much who loves the most (Luke 7v46). The Beloved in this Song had much reason to be thankful for the grace which her Lover bestowed on her.

## 4. God

Just as the Lover in this Song was overwhelmingly the unrivalled focus of his Beloved's affections, so God must also be for us. There once lived a medieval monk called, Brother Lawrence, who wrote a book called "The Practise of the Presence of God". He argued that God was ever present and with him in all that he did, even when doing the most mundane, routine and ordinary things of life, and he felt he needed to continually dwell on the person of God while doing whatever he had to do. Realising God is with us, uttering silent prayers of thanksgiving and requesting that his perfect will be accomplished in our lives and in the world is an important discipline for all of us. It is also linked to our worship of God, something in which he delights in and responds to accordingly. While on the face of it, it may seem rather far fetched (but really isn't), we should occupy every moment of the day in bringing worship to God through our individual thoughts and actions.

Practically failing to recognise or forget who God truly is, is the reason for much of the present spiritual malaise and that which prevents us from being "fired up" for God. To contemplate the character of God: his power, all presence, all knowing, holiness, faithfulness, grace, love, greatness, goodness, mercy, is enough to occupy every waking moment and all eternity and is a worthy occupation for us all. Having right thoughts about God, and the demands and expectations that he has on our own lives, will cause us to have right thoughts about who we really are, how the world really is and should be, and what we should be doing in it. Having wrong thoughts about God is often the main source of the problems we encounter, which are often of our own making. A healthy fear of God will provide motivation to turn from doing wrong things and cause us to do the right things. An ardent longing for God will cause us to put his interests and those of others before our own.

Rabbi Akiba made an important association when he linked the Song of Songs with the Holy of Holies. This was the most sacred of all places in Hebrew worship and one that could be



entered by one person, the High Priest, on one day in a year, the Day of Atonement, and only with the blood of animals that had been sacrificed. This was where God dwelt, literally and symbolically. When Jesus died on the cross: the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom (Matthew 27v51), demonstrating that the way into God's presence had been open up by the efficacious shedding of Christ's blood for sin. We can contrast our entering the Most Holy Place (Hebrews 10v19-20) with our going outside the camp (a place of wilderness and typifying the world), where Jesus was crucified and where the bodies of the animals were burnt (Hebrews 13v11-12), bearing Christ's reproach. We must spend time in God's holy presence and go into the world serving him.

## 5. Life

One of the yet to be revealed mysteries is what Jesus actually did in the first thirty years of his life, of which we know so very little, especially when compared with the next three years. We might imagine him growing up in his village along with the people who knew him and his family very well and joining his father as his apprentice in the carpenter's shop. Whatever he did, it is unlikely that the things that practically occupied much of his time and attention were so much different from that of his contemporaries. We might construe that much of what he did was fairly ordinary and mundane and was to do with every day living and that he was as much subject to the circumstances that affected his life, over which he had little control, as the next man. From what we can make out, life was hard, although he was blessed by having a supportive family, which many children in the world do not have. Given what we know about his character it is unlikely he squandered life's opportunity and whatever he did he did well. I would love to have handled something he made in his father's workshop. I suppose those of us who live in the more affluent countries of the twenty-first century have an advantage (if that is what it is) over much of the rest of humanity, in that we have considerable choice over how we spend our time. Yet how we spend the time during the few days we have on this earth is of great importance, not least because we have to give an account of

our words and actions at the Day of Judgment.

The Beloved in this Song was pre-occupied with being and doing things that were fruitful. It was her primary intention to give her Lover pleasure and delight. I see being and doing something similar for God as a far superior alternative to the yearnings for power, wealth and pleasure that occupy most people in the world today. Notwithstanding the seeming lack of spiritual application of what faces us amidst the daily grind, we do well to ask what Jesus would do if he were in our shoes. The ordinariness of everyday living might include the work we do (which for many of us is not what we would rather be doing) in order to support ourselves and our families and fulfilling our obligations to our family and community. These usually will involve things we do on an every day basis that are unspectacular and give rise to very little which has romantic appeal but will likely, nevertheless, take up most of our time and energy and should be done joyfully. Whatever we decide to do, although trying to make good choices is important, we must do it as best we can. The events of life will undoubtedly bring with it pain and suffering as well as joy and triumph, and we do well to be prepared for all eventualities.

## **6. Holiness**

Holiness is not something that concerns most people but for those who do see it as important there is often a misunderstanding of what this means or a realisation of being found wanting or a self-righteousness that is unwarranted. Holiness is to do with being set apart. When God chose his special people, Israel, he commanded them to be holy as he is holy. The same obligation faces the Church as well as individual believers. It practically means living a life consistent with the character and purposes of God and being separate from those things in the world which are contrary or not conducive to the sort of life God wants us to lead. Many sincere believers are flummoxed because holiness seems to be barely attainable or they fall into the error of thinking it is merely a matter of doing some things and not doing other things. One of the lessons we might derive from this Song is that the most ordinary and unpromising of people can be holy. Aspiring

to holy living is essential for a close relationship with God, to enjoy the good things he has in store for us and to be useful in his service. We are called to “follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12v13).

Holiness has both negative and positive implications. As a young believer it was impressed upon me that there were certain things and places I needed to avoid in order to be holy. While separation from the world is a thoroughly biblical concept so is being involved in the world. It is right that avoidance of evil and harmful things should be given high priority and it was a lesson the Beloved had to learn in order to make her vineyards fruitful. Also important are the positive aspects of holiness. It involves our attitudes and actions. It means becoming more like Jesus is all we are and do. It means being fruitful: exercising the fruits of the Spirit and taking the side of the poor and the oppressed and defending their cause. It means practically showing love, particularly to the lowly and outcasts. There is also a cost for being different and that is suffering as a result of being rejected by the world.

## **7. Humility**

While the Beloved in this Song did not appear to be overtly intent on serving anyone other than her Lover she was nevertheless aware of the needs of those around her, including those whose circumstances were less favourable than her own. While confident in her position as one loved by her most wonderful of lovers, she did not forget her humble origins or laud it over those who were in a less exalted position. God calls us to a life of humility, brokenness and contrition and a life intent on serving the needs of others before our own, just as Jesus did while he lived upon this earth. It is the key to experiencing God’s blessing.

It seems to me, both through reading scripture and personal observation, that the people who are closest to and are most used by God and who most experience his blessings in their lives are those who are the most humble. Jesus once told a story about a servant who, after working hard all day in the fields, upon returning to his master’s house was not thanked but was instead ordered to

prepare his master's supper. Rather than be affronted by this lack of appreciation, the servant declared himself to be an unprofitable servant who was merely doing his duty. The principle of the Kingdom is opposite to that of this world. The path to greatness requires a commitment to lowliness. The one who was greatest of all, the Lord Jesus Christ, became a servant, concerned for the needs of others before his own. Such an example is one we must follow. Our greatest joy in this life and in the life to come is to serve our God, and that often means through serving others. All our energies should be directed to serve Him as best we can. We should be broken before God realising he dwells "in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit" (Isaiah 57v15). There is a need for us to come to the end of our natural tether, realise how vile and reprehensible we are and ask God to come in and take over and so use us in his glorious service. And he will!

## **8. Relationships**

When I read through my Bible I can only conclude that God puts great store in the quality of our relationships. All of us interact with people, often a great many, and in all cases some sort of relationship exists even if in most cases these are at the most superficial of levels. Perhaps the next time we encounter the supermarket check out assistant or beggar in the street we should reflect upon the way we deal with that person, even in the briefest of moments, as this could have eternal consequences. The questions: "what would Jesus do?" and am I bearing a good witness might be particularly apt in deciding how we are going to deal with others.

The first relationship we need to attend to is our relationship with God. Jesus promised that, if we obey him, he and his father will make their dwelling place in us. The only thing that could disturb that relationship is our sin. It is imperative that we deal with sin in our lives through repentance and confession and maintain a good relationship through obedience to the will of God and in a continual attitude of prayer. The next relationship in order of importance is with our own families, starting with our spouse,

our children, our parents and our other relatives. Many a zealous believer has had cause to regret that they have not attended well enough to developing these relationships, which require our time and attention.

Then there are the relationships with other believers, some we may disagree with, realising they are members of our (adopted) family. Then there are the relationships we have with our work colleagues, neighbours and others we have dealings with. We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves and we need to reflect on what this means practically. Finally, there is the relationship we have with the world at large. While the world may be living in enmity with God, we are called to live in peace with our fellow man as far as possible, be a means of reconciliation when we can and undertake our obligations as citizens of the world with due diligence.

## **9. Discipline**

There was no question of the allegiance of the Beloved in this Song. She was prepared to follow her Lover to the ends of the earth. As for discipline this was something she learned, sometimes through facing hard situations in her life and by making mistakes, and this was part of the maturing process. While there was a spontaneity and adaptability in what she did, she was disciplined too (she had to be when tending her garden). We are called to be disciples of Jesus and call upon others to follow him just as he called people to follow him when he was on earth. He never promised it would be easy but he did promise he would always be with his followers who have the greatest of all privileges, that of serving the Lord of all.

Looking at the life of Jesus we see it was a disciplined one. He rose early for prayer, did not get distracted by doing things that were unprofitable, used his time effectively, was able to suffer hardship and subjected his body to face the rigour of his arduous ministry. While most of us may not want to live regimented lives we do need to be disciplined in our living. That means setting

aside specific time to eat, pray, study, work, rest, play and attend to the practical issues affecting our lives. It means planning our day and the days ahead and keeping to that plan where possible, making contingency plans when it is not, spending time with the people who matter, in particular our family and people we have particular responsibility for, being punctual for meetings, organising and being in control of our own affairs as far as we can, including budgeting, maintaining order in our home, allocating our time wisely and not acting frivolously. We should resist the temptation to do those things that are not conducive to disciplined living or are not promoting the extension of God's Kingdom and do the tasks set before us efficiently and with enthusiasm. Many a sincere disciple has stumbled through lack of discipline. We need to take pains to be disciplined so that later on there will be a rich reward.

## **10. Faithfulness**

The object of the Beloved's endeavours in this Song is to be fruitful so that her Lover can enjoy the fruits. We are told (Galatians 5vv22-23) about nine fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and temperance. All of these are important and require our careful attention just as we would need to attend to our garden for it to yield its individual fruits. In highlighting faithfulness, I wanted to point out a quality that is often overlooked by many who live in a society that tends to look for instant results and if these are not forthcoming, or something more exciting comes along, looks for new projects where such prospects for success are more likely. Often people start well but are later discouraged because of the pressures they have to face, including an apparent lack of success, just like the seed that fell on stony ground in the parable Jesus told about the Sower, and so they give up.

While we want to be successful in what we do and question when success is not forthcoming, success should not be our main object. Being faithful to what God has given us to do should be our goal. Sticking with the task before us, providing that is the

right one, and doing what it takes to see it through to the end, is what is needed. I have in mind, for example, pioneer missionaries who laboured for many years without seeing the fruit of their labours, yet years later fruit was realised that was of a substantial quality, simply because they had persevered. As God's servants we are here to serve him as best we can, doing the will of the Master, and leaving the results to him, including allowing others to take the credit for our efforts. We do well to remember that, whether or not we are faithful, God is always faithful!

## 11. Work

When I look at the start (Genesis) and at the end (Revelation) of the Bible and at the books in between, I read much about men and women who were working and it was these people God called for special tasks. God's original purpose for us was to look after the earth and to prosper and multiply. God's final purpose for us is to serve and do those things that are part of God's grand design. The problem we face now is that at some point early in the history of humankind the Fall occurred. Adam and Eve, our first fore-parents, were disobedient and were expelled from the Garden of Eden as a result. Instead of being in a situation that was perfect and where their occupation was pleasurable and purposeful they were placed in one that was often painful and unproductive, and this applied to all aspects of life, including that of work. Such is the reality of the work which we find ourselves having to do now. The Beloved in this Song worked hard tending her garden and some of that work was no doubt wearisome, knowing at the end there would be more fruit for her lover to enjoy and disposable income! Yet the importance of work cannot be under-estimated. Not just the Beloved, but all who God calls need to be workers.

Establishing a sound theology about work is needful yet is so often lacking, leading to untoward consequences. I see the following as important aspects in coming to an understanding of the right way to approach work:

1. God's purpose for all of us is to work and to work hard.

The work could be paid or unpaid. There is no place for idleness in God's economy.

2. When we work we must do so to the best of our ability and to the glory of God, even if it may not be naturally agreeable.
3. If we do not work we cannot expect to eat. The business of daily living for ourselves and for whom we are responsible is dependant on our working. As an aside, in western democracies where much of the government's welfare budgets is given to help those who do not earn money through paid work, the right model would be to encourage, train and support those who could work, to work, and provide benefits only for those who can not or should not work.
4. Doing work that most benefits humankind and best uses our abilities and gifts should be our goal (which is why other aspects such as education are so important), although in a fallen world this may not always be possible.
5. Work is generally the main means of raising money and other resources for doing the vital work of extending the Kingdom of God.
6. So called "God's work" is not necessarily any better than any other work. Doing the most mundane of tasks, if done to God's glory, is God's work. Conversely, some work, including religious, if the end product is not what God approves and owns is not "God's work" and should not be undertaken.

Before leaving the subject of work something should be said about entrepreneurship. While most people have to content themselves with working for someone else as their main occupation, we should realise that if we are made in the image of God he has given us a creative streak to do those things that benefit others and, in hard commercial terms, meet the needs of the market and be profitable. While serving God in a more overt spiritual



sense, such as being a preacher or missionary can be a good thing, the person who does an activity that is financially profitable can be doing something just as good. This is providing the aforementioned principles are adhered to and making money is not an end in itself. The greater end may be to use business as a means to employ others, especially those of a lowly estate, operate good employment practise, influence the policies of national and local government and be a platform for extending God's Kingdom.

## **12. Education**

Whether or not the Beloved in this Song had a formal education is unknown and is probably not all that relevant. What is clear though, despite having a certain naivety, she had an acute awareness and understanding of the environment in which she was placed, especially the natural world, and of what was going on around her. Returning to our own situation, how far we might go up the academic ladder will depend on our aptitude, interest and opportunities afforded to us but even this is only a part of what education is all about. Some people know much about some things, some know a little about most things and some know little about almost everything. The key factor is whether or not people put the knowledge they have gained to good use. Formal schooling is only good if it serves that end.

We should reject the utilitarian notion that the only desirable knowledge is that which enables us to do specific tasks. I have observed that few people take every opportunity to find out all they can about the world in which they live and all its possibilities, which is regrettable because that should be the point behind education. The point of these educational deliberations is that we do well to be educated and in the broadest sense, according to aptitude, interest and opportunity. It is beholden to us to be excellent in all we do, to extend our knowledge as far as we are able and as in as many subjects under the sun we are able to take in, and that requires us seriously to attend to our education and that of our dependants. It also involves much investment in time and resources, balanced of course by other demands.

Being educated in the sense of knowing lots is not the same

as being wise, which is a gift God bestows on those who fear him, including the “unlearned”. More than being educated, we should desire the wisdom that comes from God, enabling us to apply what we know to making right decisions about the situations we encounter in life. We should aspire to being educated, realising it is a life-long process and the more we know, the less we know we do not know, provided it is complemented with godly wisdom. It also needs to be coupled with our searching after truth.

The end result will be to:

- understand better the world in which we live
- deal with the issues we have to face more effectively
- be better able to deal with the various possibilities and alternatives, for example in the world of work and to consider opportunities for serving God
- be more useful in our work and in our service for God
- be better communicators of the gospel
- discern what is true, right and wholesome

### **13. Money**

It is not money that is the root of all evil but the love of money. Money issues tend to occupy a considerable amount of time and energy for most of us, even for those whose materialistic aspirations are rightly modest and who take seriously the Lord’s directive not to worry about our material needs because our loving heavenly Father will provide for all our needs. It is interesting to note that the Beloved in this Song was mindful of how much money was being made from her vineyards, and was able to apportion the profits accordingly.

There are differing understandings among believers about how money should be distributed. Some churches have done a disservice by placing unnecessary burdens and restrictions. I believe the following principles are biblical ones:

1. Everything we own belongs to God. We are merely required to be good stewards of what he has entrusted to us. We are called to be wise stewards, budgeting and accounting for the money we do receive and making the

best use of the money and other resources we have at our disposal.

2. We should see making money principally in terms of the wherewithal needed for daily living and extending the Kingdom, and not as an end in itself.
3. The “tithe” principle of giving ten percent of what we earn to God’s work is a helpful guideline, although I prefer the John Wesley principle whereby from the time he was a young man he allocated a portion of his earnings to his daily needs and the rest he gave to God’s work. His income increased many times over the years yet his daily needs remained almost the same. Money can be given through our local church but it does not have to be.
4. We should never lose sight of the fact that we cannot out give God and as we give to others and for his work he replenishes that. It is a great privilege to be able to give and there are many possible areas to give to.
5. As far as it is practicable we should live simply and modestly and, while I see no directive toward austerity, God calls us to care for the poor and needy.
6. We should wisely invest our money while we can, including planning for the future. If I had done that from a young age I would be in a better position to give to that which extends God’s kingdom and do those things that matter.

#### **14. Prayer**

Much of this Song records an ongoing dialogue between the Beloved and her Lover. There was an expectation of listening and response. That is what prayer is about. Those who are active in the Lord’s service sometimes have a tendency to do too much and pray too little. While we can pray and not acting in accordance with what we pray or recognise the answers to our prayers, there is perhaps an even greater danger of doing things in our own strength and neglecting prayer. Surely, above everything else, we must long for God’s anointing on what we do, which is where prayer comes in. Prayer is often linked with fasting in the Bible.

Jesus told his disciples, who were concerned that they were unable to cast out certain demons: “this kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” (Mark 9v28).

God calls us to a life of prayer and we have no better example than the Lord Jesus, who, when the demands of his ministry were greatest, spent much time in prayer. Often the men and women who God seems to use most have put much emphasis on prayer. If we think about it logically, the work we should be engaged in is the work God has called us to do, and if that is so he will provide the resources to do the work and deal with the obstacles that might prevent the work getting done. So involving God in all what we do, which is what we should be doing anyway, is the smartest thing we can do. Prayer can take many forms: worship, praise, adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, supplication. There is a place for all of these. There is a time to pray individually (in secret), in small groups and in great congregations. We need to be mindful that God himself is blessed by the sincere prayers of his people and promises to answer prayer in accordance with his will.

## **15. Bible**

The Beloved in the Song knew a lot about her Lover, his preferences and his ways, thus increasing her appreciation of her lover. While we do not yet experience the delights of being in the presence of our heavenly Lover we can find out much about him through studying his Word. There is no doubt that the Bible is a book unlike any other, as it is God’s own book and it tells of all those things needful for a life in his service. The sixty six books of the Bible are all so different in theme and style and yet each is important and together form a unified whole.

Many believers know little about the contents of the Bible and many fail to apply what they do know. The ancient Hebrew directive was for the people to “lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest

down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates” (Deuteronomy 11vv18-20). We ought to set aside time daily to study the Bible, with or without helpful notes, and set ourselves goals such as reading through the whole Bible at least once each year. We should listen to preachers who can soundly expound the Bible and read books by authors who do the same. We need to commit verses from the Bible to memory. This is the treasure we need to store up to help us in the dark days that may be ahead of us! We should start young. How else can we know God and his ways and purposes or address the needs of our lives, the situations we find ourselves in and the world at large, other than by having a sound understanding of God’s Word? Bible study coupled with prayer will always remain the principle plank by which we grow in the knowledge of God and be equipped for his service.

## 16. Church

If we take the view that the Song is an allegory of Christ and the Church, then we see a glorious end for the Church and a role for it of unparalleled significance and central to the way God will deal with the world. That is what will happen when Christ returns to claim his pure and radiant bride, but it also applies to the here and now. This is a far cry from charges of schism and heresy, impotence and apostasy that have often been laid against the institutional church. We need to be clear about what the Church is not and what it is. The Church is not a building and it is not (according to the Bible definition anyway) those people who belong to a particular organisational setup, either personally or by proxy (in the case of children). It can, however, be equated to individual “assemblies” or gatherings of faithful believers (those who are committed to following the Lord Jesus Christ) in a given locality, although these days the reality is that there are several such gatherings that (sadly) too often have little to do with each other, a far cry from the ideal of scripture. The Church can also be seen in universal terms as comprising all those believers in Christ who have ever lived; past, present and future, out of every nation.

Israel is God’s special possession, but to qualify you need to be a Jew. The Church is also God’s special possession and is

open to Jews and Gentiles alike. It is the completion and fulfilment of Christ. He is the head and the Church is his body. It is God's instrument through which he reveals his glory to humankind, fulfils his purposes in the world and is the object of his love and attention. The Church (local and universal) has many blemishes, compared with what God intends and how it will turn out in the end, which causes us much sorrow and disappointment. But if we are believers we are part of it and should serve it as best we can. While we have obligations to our local assembly we have a greater one to the universal Church.

We need to practically realise that the sum of its parts when brought together will accomplish more than the sum of its parts when acting in isolation. When considering individual churches there is none that does everything they should, some which do most things, most who do some things and a few who do none of those things. All are called to serve, to encourage and be encouraged, and to be accountable for what they do. The call to the Beloved (you and me if we love Christ) is to help enable all the parts of the body to function as part of a unified whole, effectively and in a way that honours God. This requires great humility and wisdom as well as knowledge of the truth. We need to be prepared for the disappointment when realising that presently the Church falls far short of Christ's intentions and however painful it might be it is something we must endure.

So much could be said about the practical details concerning church life that would be outside the scope of this chapter and where there is much difference in opinion:

1. The purpose of the Church is to serve and glorify God through its members, of which there is no bar by way of caste, status, age, gender etc.
2. Rituals, symbols and sacraments may have a part to play in church life providing they help us to appreciate more the Lord Jesus Christ and glorify God while not detracting from its God ordained mission. Except for the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, none of these are essential.

3. The Lord's Supper, whereby we meet with fellow believers to remember the Lord Jesus Christ using the symbols of bread and wine, is of great significance but I do not see that he is present in the actual bread or wine.
4. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is an important one that must not be ignored. All members of churches have a part to play in its ministry toward one another and to the wider community and need to be so encouraged to make their contribution within the Church.
5. Issues of church government and administration can be contentious. In the current climate I favour networks of autonomous yet inter-dependent local assemblies governed by a plurality of elders and deacons that are always seeking to establish relationships with believers from other churches and be accountable. I believe there is still a role for the office of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher but even in those offices there is a great spread in calling, application and gifting. While I have no doubt on the important role of women, I do not believe they should serve in a leadership capacity. There is a place for all the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the Bible.
6. The unity of the Church should be our great goal although the present reality is this is regrettably far from being achieved and it is difficult to see how it can be other than by direct intervention from the Lord.

## **17. Evangelism**

The Beloved in this Song delighted in taking every opportunity to tell people about her Lover, saying what a wonderful person he was. That is what evangelism is about. Few of us are called to be evangelists in the sense we have to preach the gospel to the masses. All of us, however, are called to be witnesses to Christ and the gospel and testify to its truths as the opportunity arises, even if in simple and low key ways that are relevant and can be innovative. This requires wisdom and courage, knowing the right approach, recognising and taking the appropriate opportunities when these arise. We need to depend on the Lord, sensitive as to the right time and words to use, realising too the

adverse and hostile reaction that might result. We need to practise what we preach; for that is the best witness we can give!

We need to be clear what the evangel (gospel) is, for there are many who evangelise whose message is not that of the Bible or whose motives are impure. The good news is that Jesus Christ came into the world to rescue sinners who if they are not rescued will go to hell rather than heaven. It is a wonderful message and a grave one at the same time. The wonder is the gift of sins forgiven and eternal life. The gravity is that if we do not respond to the message of the gospel by repenting of our sins and putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ then we will not receive God's gift of forgiveness and eternal life. Evangelism must be given high priority. While there are no clear directives as to how we should go about it, we need to find appropriate ways to reach the peoples of the world with the gospel.

## **18. Activism**

It is not clear to what extent the Beloved in this Song was attentive to the social needs of the people around her, although it is evident she was aware of these needs and was concerned they be met. I disagree with some believers who do not feel the need to be involved in the social needs of the world, other than helping the poor who are specifically known to them. It seems perverse and pernicious to attend to peoples spiritual needs and neglect their other needs, for God is interested in the whole person. Some argue we are not of this world and our energies are better utilised in preparing ourselves and others for the world to come. Some are socially active but do not preach the gospel. Both are wrong. We are called to show compassion concerning all the needs and there seems little point in devoting all our energies to helping peoples' temporal needs and neglecting their spiritual ones such that they spend an eternity in hell. But as with all things there is a need for balance.

The principles of the Kingdom combine righteousness and justice, compassion and industry, freedom and responsibility and transcend all political systems (left and right). When I read the Bible, I repeatedly find mention of God's concern for the poor



and the oppressed and the need to address those concerns. When I look at the world around me, I find countless examples of poverty, unfairness, suffering and oppression. I feel hurt and frustration that the world system and the wickedness in peoples' hearts is one that propagates such a state of affairs. I continually cry to God as to how we can remedy this. I know when the King comes back physically to reign in his Kingdom, and not until then, it will be dealt with in a perfect way that I can hardly imagine and can only cause me to worship the one who does all things perfectly. In the meantime I must venture out into a world full of contradictions and imperfections and practically uphold the values of the Kingdom as best I can.

But where does all this leave us now? I suggest we can do the following:

- all the things stated in this chapter
- help the disadvantaged and the oppressed who we come across in ways that are appropriate to meeting their needs
- get involved in projects that uplift the poor and downtrodden
- practically involve ourselves in the communities in which we are placed
- think about the issues of the day biblically, e.g. abortion, sexuality, bio-ethics, religious freedom, refugees, taxation, world trade, global warming, environment, regeneration, education, work, welfare, health care, war, crime, art, technology, poverty, social justice. We need to work toward just and right solutions by taking a lead and supporting and encouraging those who address these issues, if need be (in a democracy) by being politically active.

## **19. Mission**

World mission is the logical extension to our call to evangelism. I doubt whether the Beloved in this Song had particular aspirations for world mission yet her words exalting the merits of her Lover have been read by millions the world over

and have contributed to that cause. When I read the final words of Jesus, recorded in all four gospels and the Acts, I discover his directive to us is that we preach the gospel to the whole world. That alone makes the task of world mission one of high importance, since by doing so we are being obedient to God. As missionary secretary in my own local church I am all too aware of the huge needs and opportunities facing us regarding world mission. I often feel we have hardly begun to scratch the surface of the issues around doing world mission. I am thankful for those who make contributions and will pray and support them as far as I can. To elaborate on the hows, whys and wherefores of world mission is beyond our present scope. Issues to address include: theology, divine direction, partnership, accountability, strategy, compassion, culture, discipleship, support and approach. Mission needs to be a priority in a far greater way than is currently realised by most churches. This has all sorts of practical ramifications. My heart's desire is that these be realised and the Church will be effective in carrying out the Great Commission.

## **20. Recreation**

It is easy to get the impression upon reading the previous sections that there is little room left for rest and relaxation after attending to so many other important issues, which might seem to take precedence. Such a view would be mistaken and is not the one of the beloved in this Song, who took time to enjoy the environment in which she was placed and to make love to her lover. While we should reject the hedonistic mind set of western culture that exalts self gratification above other things, we should also reject the extreme Puritanism that scorns anything that is not overtly to do with serving God or being holy. Again balance is needed.

It is right that we take care of our bodies through appropriate exercise and diet and getting adequate rest. Going back to the Sabbath principle, first set out in the first chapter of the Bible, we see how important this is. This can bring about useful side effects like healthy living, social interaction, evangelising our neighbours, getting involved in and building bridges into our communities

and understanding the world in which we live. It can help to recharge our batteries such that we can undertake the work God has given us to do with renewed vigour and widen our horizons. What might occupy us by way of recreational activities will depend largely upon individual circumstances and tastes and preferences. Activities could range from anything to do with sports and games, art and culture, reading and writing or the environment and nature. The list is exhaustive. We should undertake these with enthusiasm and enjoyment but not neglect other duties or undertake activities that do us or others harm. God gives us these things to enjoy if done in the right way.

## **21. Suffering**

The Beloved in this Song experienced suffering both of her own making and also for reasons outside of her control. That is likely to be the experience of all us. She also understood that suffering was a means for building her character, which would result in her being able to bless her Lover. Throughout the ages, going back at least to Job in the Bible, great men have pondered the reasons for and purpose of suffering, especially of the innocent, and have failed to obtain satisfactory answers. There are those who argue against God because of arbitrary suffering, especially among those who are poor and vulnerable. The response of the Beloved (4v16) goes some way in finding an answer. The fact the Son of God died a painful death on a cross provides a further glimpse into the heart of God when trying to unravel the mystery of suffering, for we learn that suffering is something God understands because he also suffers. Yet ultimately we have to admit we do not have many of the answers (although we know God does) and never will this side of eternity.

There are some who preach that being a follower of Christ should lead to a life of prosperity and ignore that fact that it might also mean more suffering (including material deprivation) than if we remained unbelievers, particularly in cultures where believers are a persecuted minority. Undoubtedly, God wants to bless us, spiritually and materially, but Jesus told his followers they will have to suffer persecution besides that which is the normal lot of humankind, and that was their experience. History provides

countless examples of those who suffered for their faith, including death. While this may appear to be a daunting prospect, we should also remember that the one we follow has promised never to leave or forsake us and that anything we lose because we choose to follow him will be more than compensated for in eternity. As believers we should be like St. Paul who wrote: “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Phillipians 3v10).

## **22. Eternity**

The Song of Songs ends with the Beloved looking forward with eager anticipation to the return of her Lover. It is the same attitude that might be expected of us as we expectantly wait and prepare for the soon return of our Lord Jesus Christ, not knowing whether we will die first or he will come again while we are alive. Theologians are often divided as to the precise sequence of events around Christ’s Second Coming. Some from the groupings I associate with believe in a “secret coming” for believers only, followed by a period of Great Tribulation on the earth when the Antichrist wreaks havoc, defying the living God, after which Christ will then return for and with his people and set up his millennial reign. Then comes the last judgement when all men and women who have ever lived will stand before God and give an account of their actions and will be assigned their eternal place. This should also be seen as a fearful prospect for those who are not saved.

While the actual sequence of events is beyond the scope of this study, I have no doubt as to Christ’s imminent personal return to this earth to set up his kingdom, before the new heaven and new earth is revealed. But as to how and when all this will happen, I cannot say. All believers need to live in the light of Christ gloriously returning to this earth. So is the realisation that “this world is not our home, we are just a passing through” and we are citizens of a heavenly realm. While, as has been stated elsewhere, we need to take seriously our earthly responsibilities, we do so in the realisation of our heavenly obligations and citizenship.

Doing so puts life into perspective. We have a great hope and this helps us to endure whatever suffering and inconvenience

that may come our way while living upon this earth, realising our trials will soon be over. We do so realising our time on earth is a pin prick compared with eternity, but a significant one nevertheless and one we need to make the most of. We look forward to the time when God will wipe away all tears and while we cannot imagine what our final destination will be like we know it will be so wonderful, far beyond our wildest dreams. These things should fill our hearts with joy and cause us to praise our God. For those of us who are getting older, increasingly experiencing the aches and pains and restrictions that come with old age, we can look forward to the time when all these things will disappear. We will have new bodies with amazing capabilities and without restrictions. As believers, we should continually anticipate heaven.

We should live each minute of our lives and make our decisions in the light of eternity. Not that we should be “so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good” but rather that we find we are able to do earthly good because we are heavenly minded.

### **23. Truth**

One of the attractive aspects of the Beloved in the Song is her innocence and simple faith and that her actions were invariably truthful ones, without any sense of duplicity or wrong motive, and this can serve as a model for us all. We live in an age where the pre-dominant culture sees truth as relative such that two people can believe or say things that are contradictory yet both are deemed to be speaking and acting according the truth. It sometimes seems that everything other than absolute truth is welcomed and tolerated. Yet sometimes there are shades of grey and different ways of looking at things and we need to be humble and discerning enough to recognise when this is so. But for the believer integrity and upholding the truth is a matter of great importance realising often this can only be seen in black and white terms. When Jesus claimed to be “the Truth” it was in the sense that this applied to him and him alone, and when he claimed to speak the truth anything that was incompatible with what he spoke had to be seen as error.

In an age where falsehood and deceit can be seen all around

us, it is important that all of our choices are based upon truth, from minor decisions to do with our home or work, to coming to a right understanding of the great issues of the day. That means knowing the truth to start with and recognising the gaps in our understanding. Jesus is the Truth, and the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. The Word of God is truth, from Genesis to Revelation, and we can rely on it for that reason. We must turn to the Word in order to come to an understanding of the truth. We must be true to our conscience and act accordingly. We need to recognise how little we know and that our perspectives on life are narrower than we might think. We are products of our culture and environment, the type of religious setup we find ourselves in and inbuilt prejudices we may not be aware of, which affect the way we see things. We need to try to see things through other people's eyes and above all through God's eyes in our quest to come to a knowledge of the truth. Above all we must be seekers after truth and practical exponents of truth.

The history of humankind contains many incidents of people who sacrificed much, including their own lives, because they would not compromise the truth as they understood it. For us to do otherwise would be a betrayal to their legacy. Yet to adopt an isolationist position, because other peoples' perception of the truth does not correspond to our own, can also be wrong. To get the right balance requires wisdom and grace, as well as a humble spirit, to the end that God is honoured and glorified. This may sometimes lead us to concede things of lesser importance for a greater purpose and to work alongside those who do not hold the truth in its entirety. We need to be careful to distinguish truth that is essential and truth that is not. While we need to present a clear message and maintain values we ought not to create unnecessary barriers by insisting people agree to things that are not essential, as so often happens. Sometimes too we are called to put aside past differences for love covers a multitude of sins (1Peter 4v8). Things that are essential include the gospel message, obedience to God and the glory of God and those things we cannot compromise. We need to "contend for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1v3), and not add to or subtract

from it. We must also emulate the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is “full of grace and truth” (John 1v14).

Before leaving this topic, it is important to emphasise that truth is not just a matter of the head but of the heart also. After David’s hypocrisy had been exposed by Nathan the prophet after his adultery with Bathsheba and then trying to hide his sin by murdering her husband, Uriah, he was a broken man before God. In his penitential Psalm (51) he acknowledges that God desires truth in the inward parts. It is one thing to be seen by others in a certain light or give the impression to others that we are something we are not but it is another thing to be that person in real life. If truth (and integrity) is our defining value then there will be no such discrepancies. Who people see and who we are should be the same.

## **24. Faith**

What is clear about the Beloved in this Song is that she had complete trust in her Lover to care and provide for her. All she undertook to do was in order to please him. We can not escape the fact that the journey we embark on when we decide to follow the Lord Jesus Christ requires faith on our part from beginning to end and we cannot go far without it. We think what we think, do what we do and suffer what we suffer because we believe God’s greater purpose will be fulfilled and that he will give us the strength and wherewithal to carry on. While what we do may be scorned upon and dismissed by the world at large, and there will be many disappointments along the way, we do so because that is what God wants us to do and he will bless what we do which is in accordance with his will. This is not some leap in the dark, for everything we know about God is based on factual certainties, many of which are verifiable, for example the resurrection of Christ.

The question that confronts God’s people is whether or not to believe in the promises of God, of which there are a many, and take him at his word. We can take heart at the mustard seed principle. Something so tiny, when planted, can produce a tree of

great size. It is not that we need great faith but rather we need only tiny faith but it is in a great God who will do what he has says he will do. His call to us to believe in and cooperate with him. I have no doubt that what God wants to accomplish in this world through his believing people is amazing and far more than we are currently experiencing. I am so sorry we (I) fail to see the possibilities and through prayer lay hold on God's many promises with regards to things both great and small, persisting until we see his purposes worked out. The question we have to face is a simple one: do we believe God or not? If we do then why do we not expect God to act specifically in those areas affecting our lives and service for him?

## **25. Love**

Love is the underlying theme of Solomon's Song of Songs and will be dealt with more fully in Part 2. Love, after all, is the main reason for our existence. It is the sure knowledge of God's love that gives us the confidence to do all the things set out in this book, knowing that the object of our love has our welfare at heart and does all things well. The question facing all of us is what is our response going to be? Many of us know enough about our heavenly lover to make a radical difference for good in our lives and those of others, yet we do little about it. I can only reiterate that the Beloved in this Song was no more special than you or I but she chose to respond and in doing so discovered for herself the power of love.

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to



the glory of God the Father. Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

### **St. Paul to the Philippians**

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.”

### **The Apostles Creed**

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen”

### **The Lords Prayer**

# Appendix A

## Song of Solgomon (AV)

### 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: eat,

Chorus

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.

### Beloved

- 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

## Appendix B

### Israel

“Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”

### **Genesis 12vv1-3**

“And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth:”

### **Deuteronomy 28v1**

“But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee:”

### **Deuteronomy 28v15**

“His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country”

### **Balfour declaration, 1917**

“I had faith in Israel before it was established, I have in it now. I believe it has a glorious future before it - not just another

sovereign nation, but as an embodiment of the great ideals of our civilization.”

### **Harry S. Trueman**

“If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal; we have taken their country. It is true God promised it to us, but how could that interest them? Our God is not theirs. There has been Anti - Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They see but one thing: we have come and we have stolen their country. Why would they accept that?”

### **David Ben-Gurion**

When earlier I sought to identify twenty-five things of great importance that we would do well to consider for our journey in life, and at the same time relate these to Solomon’s Song of Songs, I always knew that my task would be a challenging one and it was likely it could never be completed. As soon as I finished writing, all sorts of profound thoughts came to mind as to the ways I could have expressed better the things I did and to made further points that seemed relevant at the time. I took comfort that most of the main points were adequately covered one way or another. That is to say: all the points except for one relating to Israel.

Israel is one of the subjects that just will not go away. It is an important one for us to consider for several reasons:

1. A thorough examination of the Bible reveals that God still wishes to maintain a special relationship with his chosen people and will always keep his promises, including those where he has said that he will bless Israel and make Israel a blessing.

2. The conflicting understandings among Christians concerning this important subject, which have important theological and practical implications, should make us even more determined to find out where the truth lies.
3. The media has been guilty of dealing misinformation on many subjects, but this is one where the error is particularly grave, particularly the anti-Jewish bias. The fact that Israel is prominent as end time events unravel makes it especially important that we know what is happening and the reasons why.
4. The preservation of the nation of Israel and the existence of a national homeland that occupies some of the area that God had promised to Abraham is a miracle and begs the question: “What is the purpose behind it all?”
5. While biblical prophecy and future events is these days a less in-vogue subject than for previous generations, it is still an important one, especially in these last days, and one in which Israel will certainly play a major part.
6. While injustices against peoples have constantly featured throughout human history, those propagated against the Jews have been among the worst and there remains a need and an opportunity to redress past wrongs.

Israel is a relevant factor in our coming to an understanding of the Song of Songs. Other than the central relationship depicted in the Song, which can be seen as an allegory of that between God and Israel, the Song is not specifically about Israel and is for Jews and Gentiles alike. Yet to fully understand the Song you need to understand Hebrew culture, history and theology. The church lost something vital when from an early time it made itself aligned to Greek thought, as this undermined the value placed on the material world and physical realities. The Song challenges such notions. Moreover, most of the places, symbols and life situations referred to in the Song have Jewish connotations. Christian understandings of this Song and of the Bible generally have been all the poorer when this aspect has been neglected.

While I have a tendency to want to systematically explain

everything, I also have an aversion to all systems of theology, whether Catholicism or Liberalism, because they respectively add to or take from the gospel, or closer to home, Calvinism or Dispensationalism, because they limit the gospel. While all of these, regardless of the extent they are right or not, help provide us with the framework (as well as our own comfort zone) for understanding most subjects from a theological point of view, including that of Israel, none can fully account for how big the God who transcends all man-made systems is and our limited capacity to discern God's purposes. All systems need to come to terms with God's purposes for Israel. Some would smartly explain away the Israel phenomena by stating that Israel has been replaced by the Church and any future promise that might have applied to Israel now applies to the Church. I have found no biblical warrant for such a view.

Others would seek to establish a duality such that all scripture needs to be carefully weighed and either applied to the Church or Israel, the focus of divine attention switches between the Church and Israel according to which is the current age and that God deals with the Church more along the lines of faith and grace and with Israel more along the lines of works and the law. This duality, inherent in some of the dispensational systems adopted by members from my own church tradition, I find mostly unconvincing and stifling. There is, I believe, a middle way that recognises that when we pray "Thy Kingdom come" for example, which millions of Christians do daily when they say the Lord's prayer, that we should be looking for the restoration of Israel under the reign of its Messiah, that God has a purpose both for Israel and the Church that is both distinct and related and the establishment upon this earth of principles of righteousness and justice, that are those of the Kingdom of God (or heaven), bind us all. Moreover, we should regard the gospel of the Kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God as one and the same thing.

God promised Abraham, around four thousand years ago, that he would make his descendants a great nation which he intended to bless and to be a blessing to other nations. This nation (later known as Israel) would be his special chosen people; a



kingdom of priests and a holy nation. There is nothing to indicate the promise was ever revoked. God was, however, quite emphatic that his blessing was dependant on Israel's obedience to his commands and if they were to be disobedient he would then curse them. The land God had promised to Abraham was conquered under Joshua around 1200BC, although it was Moses who had led them out of captivity from Egypt, through forty years of travelling in the desert to the verge of the Promised Land. The land was ruled first by judges and then later by kings. There were many battles fought to secure the land and it was often under attack. Israel was strongest under Kings David and Solomon some three thousand years ago.

In 926BC Israel divided into two kingdoms. In 721BC the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians. Of the inhabitants who were spared, most were forced out of the land and replaced by foreigners. In 587BC the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. This was declared by the Hebrew prophets to be God's judgement on the nation for their apostasy. In 538BC some of the exiles were able to return to their ancestral home. Thereafter, a succession of foreign powers was to rule over the land (Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Crusader, Mamluk, Ottoman, British). It was not until 1948, when the modern state of Israel was declared, that the Jewish people again able to govern some of that land. The time since then has seen many wars and conflicts over the land and, while Israel's intent to maintain sovereignty remains resolute, it would seem there are many formidable powers at work that would seek otherwise.

The return of Jews in any great number to Israel is a modern occurrence although most still remain scattered around the world. Still, few Jews believe in Jesus as their Messiah and a widespread repentance seems largely absent. The history of the Jewish people since the exile has seen them, in the main, seeking to live peacefully with their neighbouring hosts while maintaining their distinctiveness. It has also seen many atrocities being perpetrated by those among whom the Jews have been placed, not least under Nazi occupation (1933 - 1945) when some six (out of eighteen) million Jews perished under a program of systematic genocide.

Tragic as these events were, it no doubt provided a great deal of the impetus to set up a Jewish homeland, which is what the British government said it intended to happen in its Balfour declaration of 1917, when governing what was then known as Palestine. This mandate came to be widely accepted by the international community and the British were tasked with bringing about the mandate.

While the mandate and certain other actions by the British, such as taking in Jewish refugees, shows them acting favourably toward Jews, they were also obstructive in many other ways, especially when the need of Jews to settle peacefully in their homeland was the greatest. Some say (cynically) this was in order to appease the Arabs in order to achieve economic gain. Abraham had two sons: Isaac (the founder of the Jewish nation) and Ishmael (the founder of the Arab nations) and their descendents have been in conflict up to now. Although the promised blessing was primarily aimed at Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob, we should also bear in mind that God had declared that Ishmael would found a great nation.

Some respected commentators have seen the British demise as a world power as, in part at least, God's judgement for its lack of support for Israel. Maybe the USA ascendancy has been partly due to God honouring their standing by Israel. Certainly the British were not alone as many other nations have also failed Israel, not just in recent times but throughout history when many instances of anti-Semitism have occurred. While we cannot undo what has been done in the past by those who are now long dead, it does beg the question of whether there are wrongs still to be redressed, especially in the present age when a solution for peace in the Middle East seems so far away. While there is widespread misinformation regarding social injustices perpetrated by Jews and toward Arabs, there are legitimate Arab grievances, as well as the Jewish ones, that remain to be dealt with.

The preceding paragraphs contain a brief (but hopefully balanced) account of the current situation regarding Israel and how it came about. Much has been written on the subject but is

outside the scope of this book. However, the need to understand why things are as they are is beholden on us because the will of God in these matters is what matters most. While it is imperative for us to love Israel and its peoples, we must not apologise for affirming the need for Jews to repent and believe in Yeshua of Nazareth, their promised Messiah, as a thing of utmost importance. God's word on blessing and curses must be taken seriously. The hope for the restoration of Israel and its peace and security under its Messiah, who it will eventually come to accept, looms ever stronger. The need for social justice for Jews, Arabs and all peoples must also remain an important concern.

In concluding this section on Israel, I would summarise the important points as:

1. Israel and the Church are distinct, although one can be an Israelite and a member of the Church. The Church has not replaced Israel. The expectation of faith and obedience, and the principles of God's saving grace, apply to all.
2. The promise made to Abraham that through his descendant Jacob (Israel), he would found a great nation, God's special possession, has not been revoked.
3. The preservation of the Israel nation and the existence of an Israel homeland are miracles. Israel's divine destiny is one we must acknowledge.
4. There are many yet to be fulfilled biblical prophecies relating to Israel.
5. There will be days of great blessing for Israel as well as more suffering.
6. God will hold nations accountable for their mistreatment of Jews, of which there have been many instances. He will also bless those who bless the Jews.
7. A significant part of Israel's woes is as a result of its disobedience and rebellion and is a means used by God to call Israel to repentance.
8. There will be a future turning to the Messiah by a large section of Israel.
9. There will be a millennial age under the rule of Israel's

Messiah, which will also be Israel's golden age. The babe of Bethlehem, the one who became a curse and was rejected when he died on a cross, the one who was raised from the dead, who is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven, is the same one who will come again and reign in Zion.

10. The gospel, to the Jews (first) and to the Gentiles, is of primary importance.
11. The Church should seek ways to effectively proclaim the gospel of the repentance toward the Jews, yet should still be offering friendship and providing support wherever it can.
12. We should uphold the need for social justice toward the Arab.

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.”

### **Psalm 122v6**

“For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her. Ho, ho, come forth, and flee from the land of the north, saith the Lord: for I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heaven, saith the Lord. Deliver thyself, O Zion, that dwellest with the daughter of Babylon. For thus saith the Lord of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye. For, behold, I will shake mine hand upon them, and they shall be a spoil to their servants: and ye shall know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord. And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto thee. And the Lord shall inherit Judah his portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again. Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation.”

### **Zechariah 2vv5-13**

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved.”

### **Romans 10v1**

“Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”



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