

The Perfect Christ

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Date: 06 May 2018

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to the Song of Solomon and chapter 2 and verse 3. Song of Solomon, chapter 2 and verse 3.

And whilst you turn there, can I compliment you on your singing. I have enjoyed every psalm we have sung today. It's been sung beautifully. And so thank you very much for that experience. Song of Solomon, chapter 2, verse 3. As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

When I was in university, albeit over 20 years ago now, I was amazed by the number of straight-A students in my year group who, though they were academically brilliant, were searching for deep spiritual reality in all the wrong places.

Whilst myself and another member of my honours class in chemistry were professing Christians, there were five openly new age students.

[1 : 12] Now these were normal people from normal families. As I say, they were academically brilliant. And yet they knew that there was more to them than pure brain.

And so they turned to the New Age movement to meet their spiritual need. They had spirit guides. They were into deep transcendental meditation. They worshipped Gaia and smoked all kinds of strange grasses.

For them, everything was God. They were looking for deep spiritual reality. Many of them had looked for it in the church. But all they had encountered was pure brain religion.

Whereas they wanted heart religion. Others tried to deny that there was such a thing as spiritual reality at all. They poured themselves into their study pretending to be atheists.

But even they couldn't suppress that deep spiritual need for long. And so they turned too to New Age mysticism.

[2 : 17] With its promise of spiritual nirvana and global peace. On many occasions I tried to discuss the truth of the Bible with them. But they weren't as interested in truth as they were in reality.

They displayed a kind of schizophrenia. From 9 to 5 they were pure brain. From 5 o'clock in the evening to 9 o'clock in the morning, pure heart.

But as all men are sinners before a holy God, I came to realize that what these New Age friends of mine needed to hear from me was not just an intellectually robust defense of Christianity.

They needed to see a genuine, realistic experience of what knowing Christ means. They needed to see that knowing Christ is not merely a matter of the mind.

But also of the heart. And of the emotions. That the glory of Jesus Christ can so possess the soul of a man that every thought and every word and every breath he breathes is filled with spiritual reality.

[3 : 36] But then we Christians have a word for that. The word is piety. Piety. One of the reasons so many of these young people I went to university with rejected the Christian faith was because they had never encountered genuine piety.

Heartfelt spiritual reality. If we want to know what genuine biblical piety looks like, the Song of Solomon is a good place to go.

Written by Solomon as a love song, it holds a far deeper message than mere human love. This is ultimately a song for us which details the relationship between Jesus and his church.

The Jesus who loved his church and gave himself up for her. This is the soul of piety. The deep spiritual reality that is to be found in being loved by Christ and in loving him.

This exceeds and forms the foundation for every other kind of love we experience as human beings. Here we find the mind and heart piety which, if they had seen it among believing Christians, my new age friends could well have been attracted to.

[4 : 57] Now throughout this song we have many images of the love which Christ has for us and the love which the church has for him. Here in chapter 2 verse 3 we hear the church proclaiming its Lord and saying of him, like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men.

I delight to sit in his shade and his fruit is sweet to my taste. We have here this beautiful image of Jesus Christ, the soul of our piety, as the apple tree.

And there are three features of Jesus Christ as the apple tree of Solomon I want to focus our attention on this evening, each of which I want us not merely to intellectually understand, but to emotionally experience.

First, Jesus Christ the perfect. Jesus Christ the protector, secondly. And thirdly, Jesus Christ the provider. First of all, Jesus Christ the perfect.

The perfect. One of the Scottish fathers wrote of the Jesus presented to us in this verse, there is nothing lacking in him to make the soul happy.

[6 : 14] There is nothing lacking in him to make the soul happy. Isn't that what all of us ultimately are looking for? Is he the source of happiness? Happiness of soul? And Jesus Christ, Solomon's apple tree, is the source of all happiness.

Is he the source of your soul's happiness? Solomon writes, like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among young men.

The picture is here of Solomon's lover. And she's wandering in a daydream through the trees of the forest. And suddenly, she happens upon an apple tree.

And in a moment of inspiration, she compares the discovery of that apple tree in the forest to Solomon. And likewise, as we view this verse through the lens of the relationship between Christ and his church, we realize that we have here the church admiring and adoring the perfection of her Savior.

The perfect Jesus in whom there is nothing lacking to make our souls happy. We have here two facets of who Jesus is as the apple tree among the trees of the forest.

[7 : 32] First, unexpected perfection. And second, unequaled perfection. Again, let me remind you, these are truths that are not just to be intellectually understood by us.

These are to be truths which are also to be emotionally experienced, so that we too can speak as highly of Christ as the beloved does.

There isn't Christ an unexpected perfection. Although in the UK, apple trees are pretty common, you only really ever see them in cultivated orchards.

I've never come across an apple tree growing wild in the forest. It's therefore a highly unexpected thing to find an apple tree growing among the trees of the forest.

And yet here it is, the apple tree, and it's among the other trees of the forest, and it's bearing fruit, and it's providing shade for the weary traveler. It's such an unexpected delight for him to meet such unexpected perfection.

[8 : 36] When most people in our society think of Jesus, if they think about him at all, they don't think of him as being all our souls ever need to make us happy. They perhaps think of him as being a teacher of good morals, someone who gives good advice, which if we follow will make the world a better place to live.

They say, if only everyone loved their neighbors as themselves, just like Jesus did, the world would be a better place. Others think of Jesus as a political ideologist.

He stood up against the ruling classes on behalf of the common people. They think of him first and foremost as a political socialist, whose values of liberty and equality and freedom for the proletariat provide a paradigm for the liberation of oppressed people everywhere.

They say, if only the common people would rise against the ruling classes like Jesus taught his disciples to do, then the world would be a fairer place.

Before we came to know Jesus in all his perfection, perhaps we thought of him in one of these ways also. Just like another tree in the forest. But then God shone his light into our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[10 : 00] We unexpectedly came upon the apple tree among all the other trees of the forest. And for the first time, we saw in Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel, the Word made flesh, the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

It was so unexpected. But so perfect. At that time, perhaps we weren't seeking after God. Perhaps we were running away from God.

But in love and wisdom, God brought us to stand before the apple tree and brought us to our senses. And we saw in Christ the highest of all perfections and our soul's eternal happiness. Unexpected perfection. But also, there's unequalled perfection. Unequalled perfection here. Solomon's lover says, as an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men.

Here's a language of comparison. The apple tree compared to all the other trees of the forest. For her, the apple tree, though not the tallest of all the trees in the forest, outstrips them with its life and its light and the fruit it bears.

[11 : 20] She values Solomon above all the other young men of Israel. In him, she sees a beauty she sees in no other. She sees unequalled perfection and she loves him with all her heart.

In every other tree in the forest, she sees blemish. She sees crookedness and flaw. But not in Solomon.

This apple tree is perfect in every way. And when we come to know Jesus as he is in his glory and his meekness, we see unequalled perfection and all our soul needs to be eternally happy in him. He stands head and shoulders above all others. He stands superior to Moses, the giver of the law. Try as hard as we like. We will never justify ourselves by keeping the law.

We are lawbreakers from the moment of our conception. Compared to Moses, Jesus is the apple tree in whom we have the law perfectly obeyed and the penalty of our sins paid.

[12 : 34] He is superior to Solomon. The Solomon who wrote this song and started out so well but the old that he got, he was drawn away by the carnal pleasures of this world. We've tried these pleasures.

But we've discovered that in Christ there is a deeper, more lasting pleasure than anything we can find in this temporary world. Jesus, the unequalled apple tree in whom there is an eternal fullness of delight and pleasure.

The Christ in whom there is nothing lacking that can make the soul happy. Compared to all the other trees of the forest, Christ is the apple tree whose perfections exceed them all.

Solomon's lover is walking in a dream through a forest and she unexpectedly happens upon a perfect apple tree. Her dream can be our reality as in Jesus Christ we see the perfect glory of God expressed in his perfect love for us on the cross and all the perfect pleasures that are to be found in him.

Do you know Jesus Christ, the perfect? If you do, are you experiencing soul happiness in him? The kind of deep spiritual reality of which all the spiritualities of this world are but a pale reflection.

[14 : 07] Jesus Christ, the perfect. Secondly, we have here Jesus Christ, the protector, the protector.

Solomon's lover has a heart so filled with Solomon that she daydreams about him and her dreams are delight. Continuing the imagery of the apple tree, she says of him, I'd like to sit in his shadow because the boughs of his tree give me shade against the heat of the unrelenting Palestinian sun.

There's coolness and there's protection and there's life to be found under the apple tree so she delights to sit there. The image of shading under Christ is used on various occasions in the Bible each of which picture protection from various kinds of burning, scorching sun.

Jesus Christ is our apple tree. in that he protects us from the burning rays of the sun and we delight to sit in his shade. But from what sun does Christ the apple tree protect us?

Let me suggest just two among many we could choose. Christ is our shade against the raging judgment of our sin first of all. Christ is our protection and our shade against the righteous judgment of our sin.

[15 : 36] The biggest problem any one of us faces is not our own internal unhappiness or the various problems of human life and relationships. The biggest problem all of us face is the righteous judgment of a holy God against sin.

This cosmic treason, this law-breaking, this God-hating cannot possibly go unpunished lest all the laws which make up the universe implode upon themselves.

But this means of course that we are under the righteous judgment and condemnation of God. In 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 10 the apostle Paul calls this judgment the coming wrath of God.

As burning sulfur and brimstone fell from the heavens upon their cities the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah knew only too well what the judgment of God meant.

Where shall we find shade against the coming judgment of a holy God? Shall we find shade in our own good works? Works which are described as being like filthy rags to God?

[16 : 44] Shall we find it in makeshift religious ceremonies? In the Bible we're told there is only one name given under heaven among men by which we are to be saved the name of Jesus Christ.

He is the only apple tree under whose boughs we can find shade from the righteous judgment of our sin. He protects us from the judgment from the coming wrath of God by spreading his branches above us because on the cross he bore that wrath on our behalf.

He paid the penalty of our sin and stood condemned in our place. And as we take our place under his boughs by faith in his blood we have a shelter from the storm.

Christ the apple tree our shade against the righteous judgment of our sin. Christ is also secondly our shade against the raging fury of Satan.

Against the raging fury of Satan. temptation. We sometimes forget in the words of Paul that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the principalities against the powers against the rulers of the darkness of this age against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

[18 : 03] We forget that. Behind all our opponents is the malicious hate filled mind heart and will of Satan.

He will do anything to bring us down and cause us to lose our grip on Christ. He'll try to scare us so that we leave the refuge of the apple tree where he can then mercilessly pick us off.

I sometimes wonder how many dark periods of our lives how many despairing thoughts we have are his attacks on our joy.

Again Paul speaks of Satan firing fiery darts at us. When we stand under the boughs of Jesus Christ the apple tree he himself deflects or absorbs these fiery arrows.

Jesus himself becomes our shade against the raging fury of Satan. Doesn't take away from our responsibility to resist the devil because in so doing we're promised he will flee from us.

[19 : 19] But Jesus himself stands as our fortress, our refuge, our defender. He is the one under whose branches we are shaded from the raging fury of Satan.

When we are under attack, when Satan is tempting us to sin and to despair, we are going to despair. move closer into Christ.

Hide yourself in Christ through a deeper study of the Bible, through a deeper commitment to prayer and through a deeper devotion to fellowship with other believers.

He is Jesus Christ, our apple tree, our unexpected perfection, our unequalled perfection. He is our protector against the righteous judgment of our sin and the raging fury of Satan.

There is nothing, nothing lacking in Jesus which can make our souls happy. Even if that nothing happens to be the branches of the apple tree, deflecting our judgment and the wrath of Satan.

[20 : 35] are you hiding there under Jesus as the storm rages above? Are you protected by Jesus? Are you clinging to the trunk by faith in his blood shed on the cross?

Is he your delight? Jesus Christ the protector, Jesus Christ the perfect, Jesus Christ the protector, and then thirdly and finally, Jesus Christ the provider, the provider.

Solomon's beloved says, his fruit is sweet to my taste. These apples falling from that tree in the forest, they're so sweet.

In her daydream, the lover walks through the trees of the forest and there's the fruit lying on the ground and it's so sweet and it's so satisfying and sustaining. A student of this verse once wrote, there is an inexhaustible fullness in the sweetness of Christ's fruit that will feed the saints in time and through all the ages of eternity.

There is an inexhaustible fullness in the sweetness of Christ's fruit that will feed the saints in time and through all the ages of eternity. He provides us with his own fruit, with himself.

[22 : 02] as the hymn says, all I have needed thine hand hath provided great is thy faithfulness Lord God to me. We have a variety of needs.

things that the Lord provides for them all. There are so many ways we can talk about Jesus providing for us, but let's focus down on just two.

Christ the provider of our peace. Christ the provider of our hope. Christ the provider of our peace. let's face it, there are so many things in this world which cause us anxiety and concern, so many things which tend not to peace, but to dis-peace.

Since almost the very beginning of the human race, we have become detached from one another, detached from God, detached from ourselves, alienated from God, living in isolation and suspicion and broken on the inside.

At the end of the 19th century, the Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch, painted four works of art called The Scream. Some of you might have seen The Scream.

[23 : 16] And in his diary, Munch describes the inspiration for these priceless works. He says, One evening I was walking along a path.

The city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked over the fjord. The sun was setting and the clouds turning blood red.

I sensed a scream passing through nature. It seemed to me that I heard the scream. Does this sum up your life?

One long scream of exhaustion, confusion, loneliness, and frustration. In Philippians chapter 4, we read these words which have meant so much to so many people over so many years.

The apples which fall from the apple tree who was Christ. Peace that passes all understanding. The peace that soothes the scream and eases the pain.

[24 : 25] Through his death on the cross, he makes all things new. He makes peace between us and God so that we are no longer in rebellion against our maker. He makes peace between those who trust in him so that we are no longer alone.

He makes peace within us so that we need no longer live fractured, broken lives. If you're looking for peace, and which of us isn't in this society today, in faith reach up and pull an apple down from Christ's tree.

There is nothing lacking in Christ to make the soul at peace. In other words, invest in your relationship with Jesus Christ through prayer, through the reading of the word, the fellowship of God's people, and you're investing in your peace.

Jesus Christ, the provider of our peace. Jesus Christ, the provider of our hope. Of our hope. If we live in a world which lacks peace, how much more do we live in a world which lacks hope?

In Psalm 8, King David is doing what many of us have done so often. He's looking up into the vastness of the universe, and asking himself the question, what does it all mean?

[25 : 56] I want to know if I'm worth anything more than a flake of dust in a snowstorm. I want to know if I have any more worth or meaning than a spot of mud on the sole of a giant's shoe.

Does the universe care that I exist? will the stars notice when I'm gone? In a world without God, the universe is silent.

Silent when we rejoice. Silent when we cry. There is no consciousness. There is no reality. There is only the cruelty of decay, and finally the cold death of a universe which has expanded too far.

there is no meaning. There is no purpose. There is no hope. If we should allow the harsh reality of such a nihilistic worldview to take a hold of us, we would quickly give in to despair.

fear. But you know in Jesus Christ the world is a very different place. We know where it came from. We know why it exists.

[27 : 16] We know where it's going. We know our place in the universe. But despite the universe being far bigger than any of us can ever imagine, the God who created it all cares for us.

He entered into the life death cycle of the universe and decisively broke it once for all. He rose on the third day to new life and if we have faith in him, we are united to him in his new inextinguishable life.

We who shade by faith under him have meaning in life and hope beyond death. death. We need not fear death.

We need not fear the vastness and emptiness of the universe. Our God who holds it all in the palm of his hand, he says, I love you my child.

We have assurance, certain assurance, that when our eyes close to this world, they shall immediately open in glory to Jesus Christ, the apple tree.

[28 : 28] I'm not calling on us this evening just to know tonight's truths in our minds, that Jesus is perfect, that he's the provider, that he's our protector.

I'm calling upon us to know them, to feel them, to live them in our hearts, to live out the heart of reformed biblical piety.

Who needs the counterfeit spiritualism of the new age movement when the reality of devotion can be found only in Jesus Christ, the apple tree.

And I guess if there's one thing I was asking us all here this evening to do, it's this. Be fascinated with Jesus Christ, fascinated with him. Let your life be all about Jesus Christ.

Your thoughts, our feelings, let them all be filled with Jesus Christ. Our words, Jesus Christ. Our home life and work life, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 35] Our actions, Jesus Christ. Then maybe as we ourselves take the light in his shade and find him sweet to our taste, as we find ourselves walking in a Christ shaped dream, when our friends look for spiritual reality, reality, they won't go looking to the religions of the east, they'll come looking for Christ, and they'll find him, and he'll have the glory, both now and always.

Let us pray. honor