

He feeds and gathers lilies

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- [0 : 00] Let us now turn for a few moments to the passage that we read, the book of the Song of Solomon on chapter 6, and we may read again at verse 2 of the chapter.
- We may read at the beginning. Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned that we may seek him with you?
- My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens, and to gather lilies.
- And I'd like to reflect upon the words of verse 2. If my memory serves me right, Robert Murray McChain used to say that no book of the Bible affords a better test of the depth of a person's Christianity than the book of the Song of Solomon.
- I don't know whether you will agree with that assessment or not. Spurgeon used to say, The true believer who has lived near his master will find the book to be a mass not of gold, for all God's word is this, but a mass of diamonds sparkling with brightness.
- [1 : 29] He went on to say, If I must choose one book above others, I would prefer, he said, some books of the Bible for doctrine, some for experience, some for example, some for teaching.
- But let me prefer this book above all the others for fellowship and communion. Well, let me ask the question, What is your own view of this book?
- Do you read it? Or do you shy away from it? Some people are hesitant to read poetry, and in essence, this is a book of poetry.
- But let me ask another question, Is there anyone present who is often to be found in this book more than any other book of the Bible?
- I don't want you to put your hand up, but you can answer in the silence of your own heart. It is a book, in my view, that is primarily an exposition of the spiritual relationship between Christ and his people.
- [2 : 48] It is the first book among a group of books in the Hebrew Bible, and this group of books in the Hebrew Bible is termed the Megilloth.
- I'm not really sure how that name was given to it. But the books in this group are the book of Ruth, the book of Lamentations, the book of Ecclesiastes, the book of Esther, and the book of the Song of Solomon.
- And these books were read, and I think this is the important part, were read in connection with the different feasts and fasts in the Hebrew calendar.
- This book, the Song of Solomon, was read especially at the Feast of the Passover, and especially on the Jewish Sabbath of the Passover.
- And I cannot help but wonder whether that is why, in our own cultural background, maybe not so often today, but frequently on a Sabbath morn of communion, you would hear the presiding minister refer to the Song of Solomon at some point in the sermon.
- [4 : 13] If he didn't preach from it in the action sermon, perhaps at the table addresses, he would refer to the teaching of the book of the Song of Solomon.

And in my own mind, I wonder whether that is a throwback to the fact that the Jews read this book, especially at the Feast of the Passover.

One writer makes the observation that one of the greatest needs of the present generation church, along with a fresh grip upon the doctrines of the word, is a fresh and experimental acquaintance with the love of Christ, to know what it is to belong to Christ, to know what it is to be married to Christ, to appreciate the wonders of the grace of God, to be overwhelmed at the sheer fact of being a Christian, and to be moved to a loving esteem for the church of Christ.

Well, just a thought or two from our text, where the church is responding to a question about the beloved. Where has your beloved gone, is the question that is addressed to the church.

Where has your beloved turned that we may seek him with you? And three points. Who is the beloved? Because the answer is, my beloved has gone down to his garden.

[5 : 48] Who is the beloved? Where has he gone? And the response we get from our text is, he has gone down to his garden.

He has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices. What is he doing there? And the answer that the text gives us, he is grazing in the garden, and he is gathering lilies.

So, who, where, and what? Who is the beloved? And to help us answer the question, who is the beloved, you remember that the church was previously asked this question.

Almost beautiful among women, what is your beloved more than another beloved? And you may remember the response that the church gave on that occasion, or at least how she began her response.

My beloved, she says, is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. And although the impression is created in your mind that she begins to answer with much confidence, and sought to elaborate his qualities, it is as if suddenly she discovers that language is totally inadequate to describe the qualities of the beloved.

[7 : 23] And so she concludes, he is altogether lovely. As if to say there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that I would wish to alter or change, to add or to take away from the character of the beloved.

And I wonder, is that who you and I view Christ this evening? You know at times how you might hear a very devoted couple speak, and perhaps one say of the other, I would like to make minor changes.

Let's say, use the example that either person be a little more tidy than they are in the house, just as an example. But what the church is stating in the context of her description of the beloved is that there is absolutely nothing that she would wish to change.

He is perfect. However, you look at the beloved, he is perfect. He is altogether lovely. That is what is implicit in the statement, he is altogether lovely.

And the psalm that is closely linked with this book, the messianic wedding psalm that we sung this evening together, we sung two sets of verses there, sets before us the qualities that identify the beloved.

[9 : 02] Thou fairer art than sons of men, into thy lips a store of grace infused. And you notice how, and therefore God, therefore thee, hath blessed forevermore.

And when you begin to reflect on the opening words of that stanza in the psalm, Thou fairer art than the sons of men.

And you reflect on the depth that is contained in that statement, because it takes you right back into the eternal realm. He is fairer than the sons of men as the eternal son of God.

But then he is fairer than the sons of men as the eternal son of God in our nature, as he is revealed in the world. Because there is a beauty that adheres to his person that does not adhere to any other living person apart from him.

And you know, the New Testament never gives us a physical description of Christ, who is indeed the beloved of the church.

[10 : 16] You know, if you and I were to give a description of someone and we were describing a person to someone, amongst other things, we would describe their physical makeup, what they were like.

And then perhaps we would tell some of the characteristics that we see in them and set them apart from their fellow men. But the New Testament is silent on the physical characteristics of Christ.

New Testament doesn't tell us whether he was tall or short or of medium build, well built or wiry. We don't know the color of his hair or whether he was prematurely bald.

These things are not important. although I cannot help but think that there was nothing physically in his build or looks to draw the attention of men.

In other words, that would set him out amongst those amongst whom he dwelt. In my own view, he blended seamlessly into the sea of humanity that surrounded him.

[11 : 29] And you see, his physical characteristics are not important. What is important are the wonderful characteristics that he displays as one who reveals the Father.

One who has dwelt side by side with the Father and who reveals God to us in his works and in his person.

and although as a writer to the Hebrew states he had to be made like his brothers, in every respect we always have to remember that he is the sinless Son of God in our nature.

And you remember how Mary was informed about the child that she was carrying. Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.

He was Holy, perfect without sin. And how very attractive is this person, the God-man, in comparison to the whole of fallen humanity of whom it is true that they were brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.

[12 : 47] And we cannot and we must not underestimate the catastrophic effect of sin upon the nature and the life of every person.

It doesn't matter what qualities God may have given to you, yet sin has eroded these qualities to such an extent and distorted the people that you are to such an extent.

but here is the God-man and he is perfect, holy, without sin, in any shape or form.

So, he is attractive in many ways. And in his development, and we read of his development, for he grew in wisdom and knowledge, many do.

but the difference is that everyone else who grows in wisdom and knowledge has a heart that is deceitful and desperately wicked.

[13 : 54] But that was not true of this person who was designated the beloved of the church. He was perfectly pure. He did no illness, but he did experience hunger and thirst and tiredness.

Think of the work in which he was involved. And some are of the view that because of the pressures that were exerted upon him, that in his humanity he looked much older than he actually was.

because of the fearful pressures that were exerted upon him as one who was carrying the burden of the sin of his people.

But that is just a view. The Bible sort of perhaps alludes to it, but you cannot be dogmatic about it.

Think of his perfect obedience. Think of his suffering as one who was bearing the awful crushing burden of sin and he himself without sin.

[15 : 06] Think of his care as the good shepherd for the flock. Think of his love as the elder brother for the members of the family.

And when you think of all these things, do you not think that the symbolic term with which he uses of himself in this book is very appropriate I am the rose of Sharon.

As if he wants us to understand how the beauty of the God man shines through the life of this person who is described as the beloved.

He also says of himself that he is the lily of the valleys. And apparently the lily was a white flower and often seen with its head bent.

That might be used symbolically but certainly we may say this, there is no glory like Christ's. It is the wonder surely and the glory and the hallelujah of heaven that divinity could stoop so low and not be less divine and that humanity could rise so high and not be less human as he is at the right hand of the throne above.

[16 : 43] There is no glory like Christ's glory, no beauty like Christ's. But who, who is able to adequately describe the beauty of his character?

His person is so lovely, his nature is so holy, his spirit so gentle, his voice so soft and so gentle, his whole character life is so inlaid and resplendent with every human spiritual and divine perfection.

Who then is the beloved? And the answer that we get is the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, where did he go? And the answer we get, my beloved has gone down to his garden to the beds of spices to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies.

what are we to understand from the language that is used here? He has gone down to his garden.

This word garden, if we confine our thoughts to this book, we find that the word garden is used two ways in this book, the Song of Solomon.

[18 : 10] It is used to describe the heart of man, but especially in my view, used to describe the church, the bride of the lamb.

For example, you find this language, a garden locked, in the fourth chapter, is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed.

And the imagery is suggestive of an enclosed garden. That's what I understand from the terminology, a garden locked.

It is also evident that however locked this garden might be, that the beloved has access to it, for it is his garden.

Note what I said, he has gone down to his garden. That's very important. The fact that it is locked or enclosed suggests security and safety.

[19 : 14] And that prompts the question, what makes the garden so secure? Seems to me that because it is enclosed, that the picture we are given is of the church enclosed within certain walls.

that surround under these walls may be understood to be initially the walls of the covenant of works.

Because to begin with, that is where the church was placed. When God created man, he placed him in the garden of Eden. He surrounded him with the walls of the covenant of works.

But these walls were unable to keep out the tempter, the enemy of the soul. Remember how he gained access to the ear of man within the enclosure of the covenant of works.

The Bible tells us the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

[20 : 47] How skillfully the tempter sowed the seed of doubt in the heart of the woman did God actually say? And you know he is still sowing the seed of doubt to the present hour seeking to undermine your trust in the inerrant foundational unshakable word of God.

That is what he did in the garden. He questioned the goodness of God as if to say God is not really good. Does God really speak the truth?

Can you really depend and believe on God? And you see the whole point of the conversation there is not so much about the fruit of the tree that is forbidden but about the honesty and the sincerity of the word of God.

And the moment that our first parents yielded to the element of doubt it's as if they're blown by the four winds. And then Satan begins to oppose the witness of God.

You see and in consequence of what the conversation when the woman saw that the tree was good for food that it was a delight to the eyes that the tree was to be desired to make one wise she took of its fruit and ate and also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate.

[22 : 17] Sin is dominant and belief reigns because man has rejected the goodness and the truth of God and the walls of that original covenant are no longer able to provide shelter and yet Christ speaks or the Bible speaks here of the church as an enclosed garden using hall around the

back area of our home it was so private and I think an enclosed garden suggests to me the inner secret life of the believer you know you have meetings with the beloved and they are only recorded in heaven.

The secret meetings that you have with your Savior. No one else knows about them. No one else is aware of these meetings.

It may be that these meetings, when you have them, are reflected in your countenance and in your behavior. But these meetings are recorded in heaven.

And you remember how the Bible sets before us what Christ said to Nathaniel. When you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

[27 : 25] And the impression created there is that Nathaniel was doing business with heaven. I saw you.

The believer has been set apart by Christ or by the Lord for his enjoyment. And you remember how the book of Psalms bears this out. Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself.

And there's something else about this garden. There is a spring or there is a fountain there. That is suggestive of a constant water supply. Now everybody here who is at least my age will remember before piped water came into homes how people used wells where the wells, particularly if it was a deep well, never run dry in the summer in the hot weather.

and in hot weather how you appreciated the cold water that you found in that well. How refreshing it was.

What fountain is to be found in this garden? Well, in my view it is the word of God.

[28 : 52] You go to the word of God with thirst and you are seeking that your thirst might be quenched. And that is where your thirst can find quenching.

Satisfy it satisfies your soul in drought as the Bible says makes your bones strong shall be like a watered garden a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

Where did he go? He went down to his garden. And as I said that is noteworthy his garden.

You see he cultivates the garden. It didn't just happen. Gardens do not happen. They are areas that are cultivated and it's not just cultivation that it suggests but growth.

And it is the beloved who promotes growth in the garden. You remember Paul writing to the Corinthians states I planted Apollos watered but God gave the growth.

[30 : 10] So neither he who plants and he who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth. To him belongs the glory for the growth.

And I think there is something else that I might say about this garden that he sifts the growth so that the chaff is removed.

You will find this I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve but no pebble shall fall to the earth.

He even permits Satan to sift. Remember what he said to the disciples Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat that he might sift you like wheat.

And remember Satan was given his request but there are boundaries to Satan's sieve. It is enclosed by the Lord's massive sieve.

[31 : 16] But and it is also bound around by this I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. He went down to his gardens enclosed it's a cure it's a place of growth and a place of cultivation.

That's the picture of the church. But he says to the beds of spices. Now that's kind of difficult to understand.

When you think of the word bed you think of a place of rest a place of renewal a place of refreshing. when I was a university student I obtained summer work in one of the local Harris Tweed Mills in Stornoway.

It's like a distant memory today Harris Tweed Mills in Stornoway. It was a very busy time. You worked Monday to Wednesday from 8 in the morning until 9 at night.

It's quite a shock to someone who was used to study hours and not physical work. Thursday night I used to get off at 6 o'clock for the prayer meeting and the prayer meeting was like wine to my soul.

[32 : 42] It was most refreshing. I used to feel at rest and peaceful a sense of belonging as if the weariness of the daily grind of work just lifted off you.

You were in the fellowship of both public and private prayer and that was surely a bed to rest on. You were hearing the word of God being expounded in the lecture or the address that the minister gave and again that was a bed on which you rested.

And you might be saying to me, well, that was 50 years ago. Well, I can say there have been many beds since then.

And even the last time I was with you in the prayer meeting, on the way down here, I felt I should go back home. I was feeling pretty blue and I thought, ah, I'm only going to bring darkness to those to whom I'm going to address in the prayer meeting.

Do more harm than good. But by the end of the prayer meeting, I felt spiritually refreshed. And you see, that's how it is.

[34 : 11] although by your feelings sometimes you're tempted not to go. And the enemy of your soul says to you, you're better staying at home. But if you come out faithfully in obedience to what he teaches and what he asks of you, you will receive the refreshing that your soul seeks.

The beds, one commentator says, are symbolic of the means of grace. And I find that comforting because when you go to the catechism, what are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the word sacraments and prayer, all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

The word, sacraments, and prayer. So, the beds, I understand, are symbolic of the means of grace.

But you notice here the language is the beds of spices, which makes it even more complicated. Well, in the fourth chapter, the writer speaks of some of the spices, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon with all, trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes with all choice spices.

[35 : 49] And what I make of that is this, how the graces are stimulated through your participation in the means of grace.

Your love is deepened, your faith is warmed, your hope is strengthened, your peace increasing, your joy growing, your patience deepened, your repentance made sweet, because none of these things grow naturally.

They are all the product of the working of divine grace in the souls of men and women and boys and girls.

And that is part of what I understand by the beds of spices. How the graces are stimulated through the means of grace.

Where did he go? To his garden, to the bed of spices. Who is the beloved? The Lord Jesus Christ. What finally does he do?

[37 : 01] And we are told that he goes down to the garden, to the bed of spices, to graze and to feed. And what I understand from that is that this is a two-way process.

Not only is he feeding them, but he also feeds on them. there is a reciprocal relationship here between Christ and his people.

So that the church is desirous of being constantly in the fellowship of Christ. And you remember the petition that the church has earlier on in this book.

tell me whom my soul loves where you pasture your flock. And that surely speaks of the sense of anticipation and the depth of desire that exists in the heart of the believer to be in the fellowship of the beloved.

Can you follow that in your own soul? Where there is such a hunger and a thirst to be in fellowship with Christ.

[38 : 25] And he is there for a specific purpose to gather lilies. You remember the description is given in this book in chapter 2 as a lily among brambles so is my love among the young women.

And as I said before the lily is sort of bent that the head of it falls down. And it seems to me a beautiful example of humility.

I don't mean false humility. The kind that you have in Charles Dickens' book, David Copperfield. Those of you who are familiar with Dickens will remember a character by the name of Uriah Heap who displayed much false humility.

But here it is symbolic I believe of true humility. Humility of heart. Holiness of life.

People who use their talents, unlike the wicked and slothful servant. People who use their talents in the service of Christ dependent solely on the grace of God to render service to him.

[39 : 44] People who bear a likeness to him because of what he has done for them and in them. People beloved by him. Because remember as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

And he has come to gather the lilies. There weren't always lilies. There were once ugly weeds growing in the wilderness of life. But he transplanted these ugly weeds, these unfruitful weeds, and he set them in his garden.

He rooted them in a fertile area in order that they might grow. And you remember that part of the place of fertility is love, as we saw in our study of the prayer in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

You know, if you are into gardening and you take cuttings from your hedge in the autumn and you put them in rooting powder and put them in compost and pots, your hope is that these cuttings will grow roots, draw nourishment from the compost, and that you may be able to insert them in gaps in your hedge in the spring or maybe a new hedge.

And you know that only good ground will promote growth. It is important where the roots are placed, because without roots the plant will die.

[41 : 22] And the psalmist in Psalm 1 speaks of the believer as a tree, like a tree planted by streams of water, yields its fruit in its season, its leaf does not wither, in all that he does he prospers.

And it seems to me that those who are lilies in the garden are rooted in the love of Christ. They are embedded in love.

That implies that they are controlled and motivated and governed by the power of Christ's love. And the end result is this, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised.

Well, it is important to be rooted in love. And he gathers them. That is his desire.

You know, the flowers in every garden that comes a time when they wither and die at some point, and there's a lesson there too. But these ones are gathered.

[42 : 38] They're not left to wither and to die. Every lily is gathered. And yes, to my brother who was praying, every lily will be there when the role is called up yonder.

Every lily will be there in all its beauty. in all the glory that is attributed to it as it reflects the beloved who is in the midst of the throne.

Because you remember that is the petition of the beloved. father, father, father, I desire that they also whom you have given me be with me where I am, that they may see my glory that you have given me.

They are displayed in the house of the father. And everyone knows how attractive a vase full of flowers is when it is placed, wherever it is placed in a home.

how much more attractive the house full, the father's house filled, with the lilies that have been in gathered, all bearing the fragrance of the land, as those in whom he wrought his work, and who are the result of his work.

[44 : 10] Well, they are gathered in, reflecting the beauty of the true lily. They shall never wither. They are eternally fragrant.

Someone put it, I'm satisfied with glory, near to God unveiled I move, and I'll spend eternal ages in the ocean of his love.

When does he gather them? He gathers them, when they are ripe. Some, they don't remain long in the garden until they are ripened.

Some are only a short time. Like the thief who believed on the cross today, you will be with me in paradise. Oh, well, ought to be a lily, growing in the garden of the Savior, for they and they alone are the ones that he gathers to be with himself.

He engathers the lilies. You may feel unlike the lily. You may feel so far from what you might wish to be, but this is the glorious destination of everyone who is designated a lily in gathered into the garden and the home of the eternal Father.

[45 : 40] Who is the beloved the Lord Jesus Christ? Where did he go? To his garden, to that place that is secured, to the beds of spices.

What does he do? He feeds and he gathers. Oh, may God grant that we know much of the feeding that is experienced in the garden before being transported to that place of eternal beauty and glory.

Let us pray. Oh, he