

Song of Songs – Lovely to God (1:5-11)

We hear the SEVEN cries of the bride's heart, followed by the SEVEN words of love from the bridegroom.



A. v.5 – the Paradox of God's Grace

1. As soon as the bride has clarity about her goal and vision, i.e., life of intimacy and service, her journey begins with a disturbing self-discovery, common to all sincere believers. *'I am dark'* - the darkness of our sinful flesh - 'because sun as tanned me.' She is aware of the darkness within her. C.f. *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?'* (Jer 17:9).

Apostle Paul cried, *'The good that I will to do that I do not do, but the evil that I will not to do that I practice'* (Rom 7:19). His self-understanding progressed as follows:

- i. *'For those who seemed something (the prominent apostles) added nothing to me.'* (Gal 2:6) →
- ii. *'For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle...'* (1 Cor 15:9) →
- iii. *'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief.'* (1 Tim 1:15).

The closer the holy men of old walked with God, the more aware they became aware of God's holiness and their sinfulness. It will continue until Christ returns. This is a shocking and unpleasant discovery to us, but not to God. He knew it all along. Even so, this realisation poses a great challenge to all sincere believers and our quest to get close to God.

2. In such times our understanding of how *'God feels toward me'* holds the key to rising above it or being overwhelmed by it. The greatest longing of our hearts is to be enjoyed by God. *Is God mad, sad, or glad over me?* Is God disgusted toward me? Or disappointed? Or is God still smiling as He picks me up from the mud and stands with me and strengthens me?

How I perceive God sees me will often determine whether I will move closer to God or hide from Him. We do not want to live under condemnation, nor presume God's delight when He may be grieved at our rebellion and disobedience. How do I know what God feels toward me in the hour of my weakness? The answer lies in how I feel toward God, and toward sin and compromise.

It is important to separate 'immaturity' from the 'spirit of rebellion.' They may both look the same outwardly, but they come from the different responses of the heart. One grieves at the failure, sin, and compromise and looks to God for grace and strength. The other has no intention to obey God at all. C.f. *'The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.'* (Matt 26:41)

3. The temptations when we discover the darkness of our heart:
 - i. Revert to performance and shame driven Christianity (afraid to find out and connect with how God feels toward me)
 - ii. Renegotiate constantly the terms of relationship with God (presume God is upset and disappointed)
 - iii. Accept second rate Christianity to avoid further pain (accept God's disappointment but hope in God's good nature to smooth out the situation)
 - iv. Accept defeat and close heart (believe God disapproves my life, unsure of His goodness toward me).

Remember God loved us when we did not even think about Him. God didn't overcommit Himself to us when He saved us. God is not shocked. He is unshockable. I am still work in progress.

4. In such times of struggle, sustained confidence in God's delight in us gives us the needed breakthrough. Hence, the Shulamite bride makes this statement of faith on the paradox of God's grace: (i) I am dark (in heart), but lovely (before His eyes); (ii) Like the 'Tents of Kedar', like the curtains of Solomon.

Kadar was the son of Ishmael from the Arabian desert tribe (Gen 25:13; Is 60:7). This is a wordplay in Hebrew, which means *'a dark one' versus 'curtains of Solomon'*. Dark dirty camel skinned tent AND intricately woven white curtain in the temple of Solomon.

5. How can we be lovely to God while we still struggle with inner darkness?
 - i. God's gracious nature (John 1:16) - 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'
 - ii. The gift of righteousness (2 Cor 5:17-21).
 - iii. God sees our willing spirit. *'The beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit is precious in the sight of God.'* (1 Pet 3:4, c.f. Ps. 51:12; Matt 26:14; Rom 7:22-23)
 - iv. God can see the final picture of what we will one day become. *'And I say to you, that you are Peter, and on this rock...'* (Matt 16:18, C.f. 1 John 3:2; Phil 1:6). *'God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that were not.'* (Rom 4:17)
6. When we are confronted with the revelation of our dark heart we must respond by:
 - i. Not losing confidence in God's love (Rom 8:1; Jn 15:9)
 - ii. Nor being presumptuous of His love (wholehearted repentance and return, Ps 19:13)
 - iii. Run to God not run away from God (Rom 8)
7. There are THREE Stages to the Full Breakthrough
 - i. Sincere intention to obey God (1 Pet 3:4-5).
 - ii. Partial breakthrough with continued struggle.
 - iii. Substantial breakthrough.

We must celebrate stage (1) & (2) breakthroughs as much as (3) as they are all gifts from God!

B. v.6-7 - the Bride's Heart Cry

1. *'Do not look at me...'* (NKJV), *'Do not stare at me [with disdain]'* (NASV) – The condemning eyes of her brothers hurt her. She was already overwhelmed at her dark heart - 'because the sun has tanned me', i.e., the influence of this world, the life under the sun, the original sin, etc. *'All is vanity...under the sun.'* (Eccl 1:2-3)
2. *'My mother's sons were angry with me,'* – She was rejected by her angry brothers. (Church as a mother - Gal 4:26). 'My mother's sons' are the Shulamite's older brothers. i.e., Church leaders? Why are they angry? At her youthful zeal without maturity and humility? She wasn't dedicated enough? It is a sign of immaturity to quickly condemn others for not measuring up to our standard.
3. *'They made me keeper of the [their?] vineyards'* – The Shulamite was mistreated by the angry sons who overworked her with many responsibilities in different vineyards (plural). Some commentators believe her own 'vineyard' as a metaphor for her personal appearance. She is at a stage of spiritual burnout. 'Burn out' comes from not so much working hard, but from working with wrong motives – seeking or needing man's approval, or being forced into service without the willing spirit.
4. *'But my own vineyard I did not keep'* – She kept others' vineyards but did not keep the vineyard of her own heart. She started her journey, wanting intimacy with the Lord as her highest priority. But as time went by, the garden of her heart was choked by the weeds - spiritual coldness, burnout, compromise, sin, shame, and the conflict with her brothers. On top of this, the Shulamite feels the painful distance with the Lord in the exhausting work without the heart connection she once had with Him. We must take care of our own vineyard by nurturing our personal communion with God and doing His will.
5. *'For why should I be as one who veils herself?'* – The most painful of all is that the Shulamite feels like a veiled woman - a stranger - serving the Shepherd from far away. In the ANE culture, women had to veil themselves when working with strangers unfamiliar to them.
6. The Shulamite's heart cry – She is sick in her heart and desperate to encounter Jesus in a fresh way again! No ministry activities and promotions in themselves are enough to truly fill our hearts! Hence, the bride speaks: (i) *'Tell me O You whom I love'* – Confessing our love for the Lord is the turning point! (ii) *'Where do you feed Your flock?'* – 'Where can I find you to be spiritually fed by You?' (iii) *'Where do you make it rest at noon?'* – How do I find the rest in You from the heat of the day? As I used to rest in the King's

chamber before? The Lord is the good Shepherd (Ps 23). Where do I find You, feed on You, and find the rest I once enjoyed in You? The bride is crying out for the first love she has lost!

C. v.8-11 - The Bridegroom's Seven Words of Counsel and Affirmation – Wonderful Counsellor!

'If you do not know O fairest among women,' 'the most beautiful among women' (NASV). Surprisingly no scolding from the Lord! He speaks with great tenderness. Even though the garden of our heart is sometimes messy and we struggle to serve Him far from His presence, the Lord still enjoys us. We who long to be close to Him are still most beautiful to Him! She may seem 'ugly' to her angry brothers, but she is lovely to the Lord.

THREE Words of Instruction – The Lord calls the Bride, 'the most beautiful among women' - Affirmation #1

1. *'Follow in the footsteps of the flock' [No Isolation]:* Stay connected to the Body of Christ. Don't isolate yourself. Do not overreact to the brothers and cut yourself from the fellowship of the believers. This is exactly where the devil wants you to be - alone. *'Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together as is the manner of some...' (Heb 10:25).* Rather, trace the footsteps of the spiritual fathers and mothers of faith, and stay with God's people. Do not embrace churchless Christianity. (C.f. Matt 16:18)
2. *'And feed your little goats' [No Self-centredness/Idleness]:* Stay committed to the lifestyle of serving. Refuse idleness and self-centred lifestyle. Take care of God-given responsibilities, even though they may seem little or insignificant or even unfruitful (feed the goats?)
'... the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body... (Eph 4:16)
3. *'Beside the shepherds' tents' [No Independent Spirit]:* Stay committed and honour the spiritual authority over your life. Refuse independent spirit. Although they are imperfect, submit to spiritual authority the Lord has put around you (Heb 13:17). Every leader God sets over our lives has been imperfect and will continue to be imperfect. He uses imperfect shepherds to temper us and reveals the unsettled issues in our hearts. Spiritual submission is essential for developing deep humility in our character.
'Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive [cooperate with], for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you...' (Heb 13:17)

THREE Words of Affirmation – The Lord calls the Bride, 'My love' - Affirmation #2

1. *'My love, to my filly among Pharaoh's chariots' –* A young female horse is a symbol of great strength and honour. Pharaoh owned the finest and the greatest warhorses on the earth that money could buy. And only the greatest among them pulled Pharaoh's chariot.
2. *'Your cheeks [countenance] are lovely with ornaments' –* The symbol of our emotion because our emotion is seen through our countenance. Even though we struggle with emotional issues, yet our love for the Lord and passion to live a holy life moves Him greatly!
3. *'Your neck with chains of gold' –* The symbol of our will, e.g., Stiff-neck refers to rebellious people in the Bible. Chains of gold around the neck are a symbol of royalty and divine nature, and godly submission.

Final Word of Promise

'We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver.' (Heb. 'inlaid with silver') - Gold speaks of divine nature. Silver speaks of redemption. Believers are called to partake of the divine nature of God through redemption in Christ. *'His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.'* (2 Pet 1:4).

The bridegroom is still answering the question from the Shulamite, *'How can I find you? Where will you feed me?'* (Note: It is likely v11 uses the 'divine we', i.e., God speaking, rather than the daughters of Jerusalem, i.e., other believers joining in with encouragement. c.f. Phil 1:6) The Lord's answer is, *'I will more than feed you. I will redeem you, and you will partake of the divine nature of holiness. You are my work in progress. When I am done with you, you will be like the most awesome warhorse the world has ever seen.'*