"This Is My Friend"

"It is more blessed to give than to receive"—Acts 20:35

SONG OF SONGS 5; ACTS 20

THE Song of Songs is perhaps the most unique book of the Bible. As in Esther, there is no mention of God, but God is throughout it all, more intimately than in any other part of Scripture—its chief character is God manifest in the flesh, intimately described and detailed.

What is the value of this so strange book of love? It is to create and develop a frame of mind—a sweetening and softening of character—a disposition of gentleness and kindness and affection and care.

The spiritual is taught by means of the natural. We are led from something we know to something we need to know. It is spiritual food for the mind.

It is to develop and intensify our affection for Christ, which is the power and secret of all overcoming.

It is to counterbalance present things. By putting the things of the Spirit in the language of the natural, it impresses us vividly with the reality of the former, and their infinite superiority over the latter.

For the eternal spiritual reality must always be immeasurably more intense and meaningful than the mere passing fleshly shadow that represents it.

The book portrays the relationship of Christ and the Ecclesia. It is meant to express, and by its study to strengthen, the bonds between them, and to portray the manifested beauties of Christ, and the required beauties of the Ecclesia, that the contemplation of the one may generate the development of the other.

Generally, a progression can be traced, through acquaintance, interest, deepening of the relationship, espousal, separation, delay, waiting, seeking, finding, ultimate reunion.

While these aspects can be traced, and in general, in this order, still the progression of the narrative cannot, in its very nature, be too mechanically forced, because there are aspects of weaving together, repetition, anticipation, retrospection, to give depth and meaning and interest.

The term used by the Ecclesia for Christ is the same throughout—"Beloved," except at the climax in today's chapter, where the much fuller term "Friend" is added.

But the terms used by Christ for the Ecclesia show a steady development, and this is one of the factors by which the narrative can be traced. His first address to her is 1:8—*"O thou fairest among women!"* This appears to stand apart as a general introduction comprehending the whole. Then in ch. 1 and in the beginning of ch 2 it is *"My love"*—more correctly as in the margin, "fellow" or "companion."

Later in ch. 2 it is *"My love, my fair one."* There are none in ch. 3.

In ch. 4 it is first: *"Thou art fair, my love."* Then: *"Thou art all fair, there is no spot in thee."*

Then 6 times: *"My spouse,"* or even more comprehensively, *"My sister, my spouse."*

There is one occurrence in each of chs. 5 and 6 of a combination of earlier titles.

Then twice at the end of ch. 6 the proper name *"Shulamite"* is introduced, indicating that she now permanently bears the new Name, the name of the Beloved, Solomon, the Prince of Peace.

The last title, ch. 7, is *"Prince's daughter."* Here the aspect of royalty, majesty and rulership appears.

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IN the latter part of today's chapter—in answer to the question, *"What is thy Beloved more than another beloved?"*—the Bride, the True Ecclesia, gives a description of Christ's beauty and excellence:

"My Beloved is white and ruddy"—v. 10.

Whiteness—purity—righteousness, is the first characteristic. Without it, all the rest would be meaningless. There must be this foundation; nothing else will endure.

The word for white also carries the idea of shining brightness, of brilliance, like Moses' face, or Jesus' at the Transfiguration.

"Ruddy" means "rosy." It was used of David when Samuel first saw him. It indicates strength, health and radiant beauty. Strangely, the root word is Adam—red—the word indicating sin and the flesh. But perhaps, it is fitting that we should be reminded that this is the root background of the word, though in the particular form used here it means glowing health.

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"The chiefest among 10,000."

"Chiefest" is literally, as in the margin, "a standard-bearer, an ensign, a bannered one"—the one who leads, and around whom all rally for the conquest.

"10,000" is not a specific figure, but means an innumerable multitude. It is translated elsewhere (Genesis 24:60—of Rebekah's seed) by "millions." So the true, and obviously much more fitting and significant meaning is—"A standard-bearer for an innumerable multitude"—even the great multitude of the Redeemed, *"which no man can number"*—for they are known only to God.

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"His head is most fine gold"—v. 11.

Gold is Faith—specially "fine" or refined gold. This picture of the Beloved, while it is primarily Christ as distinct from and viewed by the Ecclesia, inevitably introduces the inseparable aspects of the multitudinous Christ of which he is especially the head of gold, as the Mercy-Seat, the Ark's coverlid, was pure gold.

Gold is also preciousness, royal splendor and glory. Here is the true and eternal divine Head of Gold—Ruler of the nations—as Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon were the false, presumptuous human head of gold.

* * *

"His locks are bushy."

The word "bushy," occurring only once in the Bible, is taken by most lexicons to mean "waving palm branches," symbol of victory, peace and joy.

The abundant flowing hair is also the multitudinous unity of the Son of Man (Rev. 1), for the hairs of his head (v. 14) are the many sons he has brought to glory.

* * *

"And black as a raven."

Black normally indicates sorrow and affliction, as of the Bride in 1:5. But here we have not black as such, but black hair. The basis of the symbolism is the natural, and in the natural black hair speaks of youth and strength and vigor and health, as white hair is age and infirmity. Black hair was a welcome sign of health after leprosy (Lev. 13:37).

* * *

"His eyes are as doves."

The eye is perception, intelligence, discernment—the mental viewpoint and outlook. The dove symbol is clear in Scripture. Its highest representation is when the Spirit of God appeared as a dove. From this all other meanings must flow. The dove is humility, guilelessness, gentleness, harmlessness, and peace.

With the eagle symbol, which also represents the Spirit of God, it shares the aspect of free, heavenly flight, of outspread wings; of freedom from earthly bondage. There is an eagle aspect to the operation of the Spirit, but the basic, permanent manifestation is the dove of gentleness and peace. God is a consuming fire as need may require, but God is Love ALWAYS and essentially.

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"By the rivers of waters."

Water is life and fruitfulness: cleansing: refreshing.

Water also can be affliction and tears (Psa. 69:14-15)—*"Deliver me out of the deep waters: let not the waterfloods overflow me."*—not contradictory meanings, but all parts of one great whole. All things work together for good. Tribulation worketh patience (Rom. 8:20)—*"He subjected the creation to vanity in hope."*

All things in life are interrelated, and sorrow and tears will at last bring forth life and joy (Psa. 126:6). The water that destroyed the wicked world saved the righteous Noah; and the water that destroyed the oppressor Pharaoh saved the people of God.

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"Washed with milk."

Again there are many shades of meaning. Milk is primarily the abundance of divine blessing—

"A land flowing with milk and honey."

In Isa. 55 milk and wine are the free Gospel of salvation, the words of eternal life. To be able to digest milk only is a sign of sad infantile immaturity (1 Cor. 3:2). But though we must grow unto strong meat, still we must never advance beyond the point where we earnestly *"desire the sincere milk of the Word"* (l Pt. 2:2) as our sound guidance and safe foundation.

Eyes washed with milk means pure and godly vision, a cleansed and enlightened outlook, viewing all things—understanding all things—by the light of the Gospel of Truth.

* * *

"And fitly set."

Literally, as in the margin, "sitting in fullness," a strange expression, but surely intended to direct our minds to the final consummation of the *"fullness of Him that filleth all in all."*

Sitting is completion of work. The dove aspect "sitting in fullness," is peace, end of labor, perfection—

"It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell" (Col. 1:19).

* * *

"His cheeks are as a bed of spices: as sweet flowers."

The flower-bloom of eternal youth and beauty. All things, except Christ, grow old and die. Nothing in this life is lasting, but of him it is said—

"Thou hast the dew of thy youth" (Psa. 110:3).

"They shall perish, but thou remainest: Thou art the same: thy years shall not fail."

The greatest of present joys must so quickly pass into sorrow, and loss, and final loneliness. But Christ is ever young and ever new.

It is hard to really enjoy anything we know must at last and before long pass away. We have all experienced intense pleasures which in their very enjoyment have been sadness from knowing that in a short time they would be over and would never return. On only a slightly larger scale, this is life itself.

But there is more to "cheek" than this. "Cheek" or "cheeks" occurs 11 times in Scripture, other than in this Song. In all but two (and even one of these is related) there is a reference to submission to smiting and affliction—

"They smote the Judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek" (Mic. 5:1).

"If any man smite thee on one cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt. 5:39).

Cheek, therefore, inescapably turns our minds to patient submission to abuse and loss and suffering for righteousness' sake.

It is this that gave Christ all his value and his beauty, and his present never-ending bloom of youth.

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"His lips are like lilies."

Most of the scriptural references to lilies are in the Song (8 times). All the others but one are either in the description of the ornamentation of Solomon's temple, or in Christ's comparison of Solomon's glory to the greater glory of the lily.

The lily as a symbol of purity does not appear to be a scriptural idea, nor do the Bible lilies appear to have been white. The Bible lily appears to be a magnificent flower whose color ranged from pink to purple, and whose scriptural significance was God-bestowed, inherent glory, as contrasted with human, superficial glory.

"His lips like lilies" refer to the divine beauty of all that he said—the "words of grace" at which his hearers marveled—

"Never man spake like this man!"

* * *

"Dropping sweet smelling myrrh:"

The name myrrh is from the same root as Marah or Mary, meaning bitter, and refers to its bitter taste. The combination of bitter taste and a sweet odor make it a perfect type of the sacrificial affliction that beautifies the character and is a sweet incense unto God.

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"His hands are as gold rings"—v. 14.

Rings are a symbol of sonship, royalty and authority. Nearly every reference to rings in Scripture, from Pharaoh's ring given to Joseph, to the father's ring given to the Prodigal Son, carries this meaning.

An inseparable part of the beauty of Christ is his relationship to God and his universal majesty and authority based on his faithfulness—a ring of gold: *"This is My beloved Son." "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth."*

* * *

"His belly is bright ivory overlaid with sapphires"

This word "belly", which occurs 30 times, is in all cases except four translated "bowels." It means internal organs. Its use is literal and physical. A Hebrew lexicon sums it up as "inward parts," and that best conveys the meaning to us, as in Psa. 51 (though not the same word)—

"Thou desirest Truth in the inward parts."

The word for "bright" literally means "elaborately worked so as to shine." The type is clear and beautiful both as to the being worked or wrought, and the resultant shining. Heb. 10:5 contains the same thought: *"A body hast Thou prepared me."*

The point is in the preparing—the inward working, developing, perfecting. Anything in this life that contributes to this process is good and a blessing from God. That is why *"sorrow is better than laughter"* (Ecc. 7).

"Finely wrought ivory overlaid with sapphires." Ivory was always a symbol of splendor—here, of course, of the true inward splendor of a pure and perfect character—"inward parts."

Besides general references of this nature in connection with the kings and wealthy classes of Israel, the most significant reference to ivory is in connection with Solomon's Temple where it would necessarily have a spiritual meaning.

"Overlaid with sapphires" intensifies the splendor of the representation, as though the pure white perfection of the ivory itself though precious, was not sufficient to represent the character of Christ.

Here again the type is clear and striking. All was of God, symbolized both by the fine working of the ivory and the overlaying with the heavenly sapphire blue. There must be the divine element throughout.

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"His legs are pillars of marble"—v. 15.

We have had the "sitting in fullness"; here is the standing in strength—faithful, determined and enduring. "Stand fast" is a frequent scriptural exhortation.

To stand is also to have dominion, to have conquered and overcome, as to *"stand upon the sea of glass"* (Rev. 15:2).

And it is to pass triumphant through judgment—

"Who shall stand when he appeareth?" (Mal. 3:2).

Pillars and marble turn our minds to the Temple, both literal and spiritual—*"Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the Temple of my God"* (Rev. 3:12)—an upholder and supporter of the edifice of God's presence.

The most precious marble is pure white. It is crystalline in structure, and its special luster and beauty is due to the fact that light penetrates the surface and is reflected from the multitude of crystals beneath. There is an obvious typical fittingness in this penetration of the light and its reflection from within.

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"His countenance (that is, general appearance) *is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars."*

The figure of the mountain—(eminence and power and majesty—the mountain that fills the whole earth)—is combined with the royal, unperishing glory of the cedar. A mountain of cedar trees—a living, flourishing, fruitful mountain—each tree an individual part of the glorious multitudinous unity of power that will at last fill the earth with God's glory.

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"His mouth is most sweet."

This is not the common word for mouth, but rather, as the margin shows, "palate." The idea involved is taste, rather than speech, as the consistent use of the word elsewhere makes clear. It is sometimes translated "taste" as in the Song itself (2:3), and in its first use, Job 6:30—

"Cannot my taste (marg: palate) *discern perverse things?"*

The idea of the heavenly beauty of his speech is covered in the earlier reference to the lips. Here the reference is to the unerring and unhesitating discernment and choice of that which is wholesome and good, and the rejection of everything that is in the slightest way fleshly or evil or impure. It is summed up in a similar figure in Isa. 7—

"Butter and honey shall he eat that he may know (that is, learn) *to refuse the evil and choose the good."*

The lesson is that taste, appeal, desire, is not a blind, unchanging force to be catered to, but a delicate capacity and potentiality to be trained and developed and shaped to spiritual ends and satisfactions.

A child's untrained, undiscerning taste rejects the wide range and variety of taste experiences which the providence of God has provided in that which is good for food, and desires only sweets. The adult learns that bitterness mixed with the sweetness is a much richer and more satisfying experience.

In our present imperfect, incomplete, mortal condition, unalloyed sweetness soon becomes monotonous and sickening. We are not constituted to be able to stand it for long at a time.

The immortal state will be a perpetual intensity of joy without surfeit.

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"Yea, he is altogether lovely"—v. 16.

Rather, literally, and much more impressively and vividly—

"The whole of him is loveliness."

The power and beauty of Christ is his perfection. Nothing out of harmony; nothing to detract; no danger of later discovered flaws to disappoint and disillusion. Nothing to fear from the cruel, unsparing microscope of intimate familiarity.

The more minutely we examine him, the more beautiful he is revealed to be. This is an unfailing characteristic of all of God's handiwork, but never of anything of man's.

This is the pattern God has set before us—the ideal to which He would have us ceaselessly strive—the ultimate to which He will finally elevate the faithful.

* * *

"This is my Beloved; and this is my Friend."

Why add *"This is my Friend"*? It would appear to be an anticlimax, but it is not. It is actually a deepening and enlarging of the picture. The figure is taken from natural things. "Beloved" expresses only a narrow and restricted and passing aspect of the broad range of personal relationships.

Upon reflection, we shall perceive that "Friend" is the fuller and the richer and the more inclusive and enduring, less self-centered, term—

"Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

* * *

IN Acts 20, Paul is on his last journey not knowing what would befall him, except that bonds and imprisonment awaited him. The chapter begins at the time of the uproar in Ephesus that brought his preaching to an end there. He had been there two years. It was the principal city of Asia Minor, and a logical center for him to operate from, not only for the increasingly numerous ecclesias of Asia Minor itself, but also of Macedonia and Greece.

Naturally speaking, this would have been the reasonable place for him to stay and work, for the most effective propagation of the Truth. But God's thoughts and ways are not man's. God had a greater and more glorious work for Paul—a work that required abuse and affliction, and a long bondage and imprisonment.

Paul was without comparison the most effective and fruitful instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel to the world, but God chose that he spend at least two years in confinement in Caesarea, awaiting trial, many months on a perilous voyage, and at least two more years in chains at Rome.

The first few verses of today's chapter briefly outline his farewell visits to all the ecclesias of Macedonia and Greece. The detailed story begins with his arrival back at Troas, on the northwest coast of Asia Minor. He has now set his face toward Jerusalem.

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IN verse 7 we get the clearest indication and example we have of the custom of breaking bread on the first day of the week.

The Passover was over, and Paul was anxious to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, 50 days later. This is why he did not visit Ephesus, but called the elders down to the coast to meet the ship.

But here (verse 6) he waited seven days at Troas. It would appear he had missed the assembly of the disciples by one day, and waited till the next first day, when they would all be together again.

As Bro. Roberts points out, the command to assemble and break bread is clear and unmistakable. To fail to do so is disobedience. Therefore, to have any meaning, the required frequency must have been indicated—if not as an unbreakable rule, certainly as the normal, desirable and expected thing.

The first day of the week was clearly not chosen for any particular convenience, because the 7th day was then, among the Jews (who were the first believers), the day of rest and freedom from work. So the first day must have been appointed for its significance—the day of the resurrection they were commemorating. That it might not just rest on this one incident at Troas (which could be just a local arrangement), we find a passing but quite strong allusion to it in 1 Cor. 16:2, which confirms the general practice.

There Paul tells the Corinthians to lay a portion aside each first day of the week, that there be no last minute scurry of collections when he should come to get the gift for the poor in Jerusalem. If he meant just for each to lay by privately, there would be no point in specifying a particular day, nor would it serve the purpose he mentions—of avoiding hurried collections when he came.

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WE wonder what the lesson and significance is in the incident of Eutychus. It was, like many sad things turn out, to be a blessing in disguise. The occasion, of itself, would be one of great sorrow and intensity of feeling.

Paul would tell them as he told the Ephesians a few days later, that they would see his face no more, and that he was leaving them to face foretold but unidentified perils and sufferings. Paul spoke to them until midnight. The brethren would be enjoying, for the last precious time, the pleasure of Paul's inspiration, and deep understanding, and godly example.

The sudden tragedy of Eutychus at this point would be a terrible blow of grief and shock, added to the general sadness of the occasion. And the equally sudden, glorious resurrection, dramatically effected by Paul after the manner of Elijah (verse 10) would be an even greater shock to their keyed-up emotions.

In view of this manifestation of the supreme divine power of life and death, the whole atmosphere of the assembly would be changed. Though saddened to lose Paul, they could hardly continue to be sorrowful or despondent.

They would see so much more vividly that all things—even the sleep of death itself—were harmonious parts of a triumphant divine plan—all in God's hands—and that Paul's labors and trials were a necessary part of that plan.

The sudden, dramatic death and resurrection of Eutychus at the midnight hour was a direct divine commentary and confirmation of Paul's teaching.

After this experience, few could have been tired, few could have slept. Paul continued the discussion many more hours until daybreak.

At daybreak, Paul took off alone to walk the seven miles across the peninsula to the port of Assos on the other side, while all the rest of his company went the longer way around by ship.

Why did he choose—after an active, sleepless night—to walk, and to go alone? We are not told why, but we are told that he did so, and so there must be some lesson in it for us.

Though he had many close companions from time to time—brave, devoted, pure-hearted men, like the disciples of Christ—Paul was still in reality, like Christ, very much alone.

In fact, everyone is, in the ultimate, very much alone. Communication, even at its most intimate, is very imperfect and limited, and leaves 9/10ths of the inner soul unreached.

But with Paul this was more than ever true. He was a special man, with special revelations, a special mission and a special burden. He had communications and revelations of which he could speak to no one.

On this final journey, via Jerusalem to Rome, all his companions endeavored to dissuade him, though he knew by the Spirit that he must go. It does not seem that anyone was close enough to him to understand.

After the experiences of the night—the many long hours of intense and active communication, of which he was the continual focus and source of power—after the emotionally and physically exhausting experience of the death and raising again of Eutychus, he would have to be alone to think and to recuperate, for the trials that lay ahead.

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THE next stop of which we have detail was Miletus, the seaport for Ephesus, to where he called the Ephesian elders to meet him. Verse 18 to the end is his farewell address to them, in which, like Moses, and Joshua, and Samuel, he reviews to them his ministry and his way of life among them.

It is a very moving and instructive address, as he reminds them of his many trials, of his faithful, ceaseless proclamation of the "whole counsel" of God, of his emphasis on their responsibility, of his charge to carry on after he is gone, of his solemn warning and prophecy that of their own selves misguided men would arise whose teaching would rend the Body and lead many astray, of his earnest commendation of the all-powerful Word of God's grace which was able to supply all the strength and wisdom needed to overcome every obstacle and deliver from every error, and finally, of how—though with a great burden of teaching—he had not only supported himself but labored so as to be able to support others also.

He closes his exhortation with the one direct precept of Christ that does not occur in any of the records of Christ's own teaching, and yet which sums up all his life and teaching—

"It is more blessed to give than to receive."

It is not necessarily material things. That's a very small part of the picture. And the amount is quite unimportant. The widow's two mites were more than all the rich men's combined abundance. It does not have to be much at all. It just has to be EVERYTHING we have, to mean anything.

Nor does it mean that, in any particular instance, the giver is more blessed than the receiver.

Everyone can always be givers. Sometimes we give best by receiving. Sometimes it is the only way open to us.

It is giving of ourselves—giving as a way of life, rather than wanting, and getting, and hoarding.

It is living outwards instead of inwards.

It is more blessed; it is more happy; it is more exciting and satisfying; it is more constructive and unifying; it is more Christlike and more Godlike.

That is the main point—it is more Godlike. God Himself is the Great Giver—

"He that spared not His Own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

What could God, Who has everything in limitless abundance—what could He give and make it a meaningful sacrifice?

He gave His only beloved Son: His greatest treasure.

"IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE."

It is the precious privilege of partnership with God. These were Paul's last words to them. Kneeling down, he prayed with them, and then bade them farewell and returned to the ship.

—G.V.Growcott, The Berean Christadelphian, September 1966