



The Burning Bush

ISSN 0219-5984

July 2023

Volume 29 Number 2

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THE BURNING BUSH

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Editor : Jeffrey Khoo
Publisher : Far Eastern Bible College
Website : www.febc.edu.sg
Permit : MCI (P) 018/03/2023

The Burning Bush (ISSN 0219-5984) is published bi-annually in January and July, and contains theological papers, sermons, testimonies, book reviews, College news, and alumni reports. Articles are indexed in the *Christian Periodical Index*. The journal is distributed gratis to the FEBC family and Bible-Presbyterian churches, and is available online at www.febc.edu.sg. Local/Foreign subscription rates in Singapore dollars: one year—\$8/\$16; two years—\$15/\$30; back issues—\$4/\$8 per copy. Make cheques payable to “Far Eastern Bible College.”

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THE BEST LOVE SONG OF ALL: A COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF SOLOMON (I)

Jeffrey Khoo

Should the Song of Solomon be a private or public book? Should it be read only on our own in the privacy of our bedroom or should it be taught openly in the classroom and preached over the pulpit?

2 Timothy 3:16–17 says, “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*” Since all 66 books of canonical Scripture including the Song of Solomon are “*profitable for doctrine, ... for instruction in righteousness,*” then it goes without saying that the Song must be read and studied by all, preached and taught to all just like the other books of the Bible.

However, we do not see this book getting the attention it should get. Now, if there are pastors and teachers who feel that this book can be “safely” or “quietly” left out, how can they then say with the Apostle Paul, “*I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27)? By leaving out this book, have we not “*come short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23)? Peter Van Kleeck in his book—*A Primer for the Public Preaching of the Song of Songs*—rightly observes, “The trepidation of not preaching the Song has given the saint the impression that the Song is indeed off limits. If the pastor, to whom the flock looks for guidance, is uncomfortable with the Song and with his study and training still feels unqualified to preach the book, the Song’s content will be perceived to be even more inaccessible by the saint in the pew.”

In this cyberspace age, the Song of Solomon must be studied and taught faithfully and prayerfully so that our young people may know how to protect themselves from fornication and promiscuity, and the many sexual temptations that plague the internet and social media.

There is also a vital need to protect the traditional institution of marriage and family from an increasingly perverse society that is working hard to destroy it.

The Song of Solomon consists of three parts: (1) Courtship and Betrothal (1:1-3:5), (2) Wedding and Consummation (3:6-5:1), (3) Marriage Life (5:2-8:4).

Courtship and Betrothal (1:1-3:5)

1:1 “*The song of songs, which is Solomon’s*” is the best of all the 1005 songs he composed (1 Kgs 4:32). Solomon was the songwriter. His name appears six more times in the book (1:5; 3:7,9,11; 8:11-12). Solomon was Israel’s king (succeeding David his father—Israel’s greatest) in the 10th century BC (971-931 BC).

The Song is a love song. The rabbis of Israel have traditionally interpreted this book in terms of human love and marriage. This should be no surprise since love between a man and a woman within the marriage covenant was something God created and called good (cf Gen 1:27,31; 2:18). It should also be no surprise that God would dedicate one book out of the 66 in the biblical canon to help us understand the subject properly and correctly. It is a reminder of the kind of exclusive love relationship and activity that God intended for a man and his wife to enjoy since the beginning when He created them in the Garden of Eden.

This book, as with any other book in the Bible, should be interpreted literally. Read in this way, the book obviously describes a husband-and-wife relationship.

Know also that the book refers to God’s covenant relationship with His people—the nation of Israel and His Church. Jehovah, for instance, is called the husband of Israel, “*For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called*” (Isa 54:5). The Church likewise is called the Bride or Wife of Christ, “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*” (Eph 5:25), “*For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ*” (2 Cor 11:2).

1:2 *“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.”*

The basic rule of Bible interpretation is to take the plain sense as the actual sense unless the context suggests otherwise. The plain sense speaks of love between a man and a woman (not any man and woman, but a courting couple already betrothed and preparing for marriage).

The word *“love”* (Hebrew *dod*) speaks of physical affection. The *“kisses of his mouth”* are kisses not to her lips but her hand, her forehead, her cheeks (cf *“an holy kiss”* in Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20). Sexual intimacy at this point is kept in check. It is only after the wedding that sexual intimacy between the two is seen in all its freedom and fullness (chapters 4–8).

The kiss is a display of loving affection. The loving kiss of God to us is seen when He came down to earth on Christmas Day 2000 years ago to become man. *“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”* (John 3:16). When the Lord Jesus was born, heaven kissed earth: *“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us”* (Matt 1:23). It was a holy kiss of *“peace, good will toward men”* (Luke 2:14).

How should we respond? We should kiss Him—*“Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him”* (Ps 2:12). Kiss Him for your salvation, and kiss Him because His *“lovingkindness is better than life”* (Ps 63:3).

1:3 *“Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee.”*

The kind of man who loves his bride is here described. He is a good man and has a good name. Here, *“thy name”* refers to his character and reputation which smells good (*“the savour of thy good ointments”*). Ecclesiastes 7:1 says, *“A good name is better than precious ointment.”* He is an honourable and godly man that has a good reputation among the *“virgins”*, ie he is not a flirt or a playboy. He has the respect of the ladies.

God has a good name—*“thy name is as ointment poured forth.”* This is seen most excellently in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God

Himself who became the Son of man to save us from our sins and give us eternal life, *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”* (Isa 9:6).

Since the Lord Jesus Christ was born to be our Saviour in every way, His name is a name that is above every name, *“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”* (Phil 2:9-10).

The virgins who love Him are the believers who make up the Church—His Bride (cf 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 14:4). And they love Him because He first loved them (1 John 4:19; Rev 1:5).

1:4 *“Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee.”*

“Draw me” speaks of the man’s role in wooing the lady. It is the man who takes the initiative—he is the suitor. If he were to ask a lady out, he would only do so with a sincere desire to marry (ie, the desire to bring her *“into his chambers”*). He does not play the *“dating game”*—to try out different girls for fun, lead them on, sleep with them, and then break their hearts. He pursues the one he desires with genuine love, and the girl takes his invitation to courtship seriously with a goal towards marriage. The girl and her girlfriends respect him and admire him for his sincerity and integrity.

“Draw me, we will run after thee” speaks of God’s irresistible grace. He draws us to Himself and we cannot help but run to Him for our salvation (Jer 31:3; Hos 11:4; John 6:44-45). The Westminster Confession of Faith X.1 states, *“All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to*

that which is good; and *effectually drawing them* to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace."

1:5 *"I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon."*

The woman is "black" because she is sun-tanned, "*because the sun hath looked upon me*" (v6). She has been assigned by her siblings to cultivate the vineyards and tend to the sheep (vv6,8). The "*tents of Kedar*" (a nomadic tribe) and the "*curtains of Solomon*" were dark in colour. Although she has a dark complexion, she is "*comely*" (ie pleasant-looking).

Spiritually speaking, "*I am black*" means "I am sinful." The Christian though saved from sin is not yet perfectly sinless (cf Rom 7:14). Although still sinful, there is one difference—"I am forgiven, washed and cleansed by the blood of Christ, and saved by His grace" (1 John 1:8-10 cf John 16:6-10). As such, Christians can be said to be "*comely*", ie beautiful as saints (Rom 1:7), having beautiful feet as ambassadors (2 Cor 5:17-21; Rom 10:15). As saints of God and ambassadors for Christ, we may be despised by the world, but are always loved by God (1 Cor 4:11-13; Rom 8:33-39).

We are aware that though born-again, we are still influenced by sinful tendencies and drives. But in our struggles against sin, the Holy Spirit is the dominating influence. He makes and moulds us to become more and more like Christ. Christians must fill their minds with heavenly thoughts (Col 3:2). Colossians 3:5-6 says, "*Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience.*" If we are children of obedience, then we must put on the "*new man*" (Eph 4:24) which involves "*righteousness and true holiness.*"

1:6 *"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."*

The woman appears to be embarrassed by her dark complexion ("*Look not upon me*"). Although she kept the vineyard well, she remarks that her "*own vineyard*" (ie her physical appearance) was unkempt because she paid no attention to herself. This speaks of how

hardworking she is. She is hard at work in the fields tending to the crops without minding or caring for her own appearance. She is not a spoilt or idling woman, but a responsible and industrious one, ready to soil her hands. She is like the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31:13-17, *“She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.”*

She labours also in difficult circumstances, being bullied by her siblings—*“my mother’s children”*. Yet, she endures and does not retaliate. For our faith in Christ, we can expect to be persecuted by those in the world. But do not be surprised when persecution comes from those in the church (1 Thess 3:3-4; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:12-13). Certain “brothers and sisters” so called are actually “false brethren” (2 Cor 11:26; Gal 2:4). They are the tares among the wheat, the wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt 10:22,25,35,36; 13:24-30 cf Acts 20:28-30). They prevent true believers from doing God’s will and work by their sinful anger and evil deeds.

1:7 *“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?”*

She expresses her longing for him. She wants to be with him in his place of occupation, and is sad if his co-workers have his attention and she does not. This is only natural when a person is in love. People in love desire to be in the company of those they love.

This should be the desire of all believers if they love their Saviour. They should have a great desire always to be near Him, to be close to Him. Psalm 73:23-28 expresses this well, *“Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works.”*

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Despite all the troubles and tribulations believers go through on account of their faith, they will ever love their Lord and Saviour and will never turn away from Him but rather run to Him for refuge and strength in their time of trouble or need (Ps 46). The Lord Jesus, our Great High Priest, enjoins us to seek His good and ready help, *“Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb 4:14–16).

1:8 *“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.”*

She is told by her friend that there is no reason for her to feel that he does not desire her company or would set her aside. She should not doubt him, for if she doubted him, then it would be better for her to return to her flocks and have her sheep and goats as her companions.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should keep on believing and trusting in His love for us. Once He has loved us, He will love us to the very end. Has He not commanded and promised us, *“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee”* (Deut 31:6).

Our journey of love must also be a journey of faith, *“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith”* (Rom 1:17). *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him”* (Heb 11:6).

Let us not be double minded for a *“double minded man is unstable in all his ways”* (Jas 1:8). *“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded”* (Jas 4:8).

Christ affirms His love for His Bride, for she is altogether lovely to Him (Eph 5:25–27; Rev 7:9; 21:2). The Church should follow in the steps of the saints who had gone before—the heroes of faith (Rom 4:12; Heb 6:12; 11:1–14). The Church should do the work of teaching her members the Holy Scriptures (Matt 28:19–20; John 21:15–16).

1:9 *"I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots."*

Her fiancé assures her of his love for her, addressing her in very endearing terms, *"O my love"*. He tells her she is very precious to him, comparing her to the best of Pharaoh's horses. In the time of Solomon, Egyptian horses were of the highest pedigree and Pharaoh had the best of the lot. As much as the woman should not doubt her fiancé's love for her, it is also important for the man to assure her of his love and how much she means to him.

The Lord often told Israel how much He loves her, *"The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; ... the LORD thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee, because the LORD thy God loved thee"* (Deut 7:7-9; 23:5).

God loves His Church. In the same manner, *"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;... So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:"* (Eph 5:25,28-29).

1:10-11 *"Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold. We will make thee borders of gold with studs of silver."*

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." He is physically attracted to her. He adores her well-chiseled cheeks and stately neck. Her friends want to make her even more beautiful by adorning her with fine garments and jewellery. But her natural beauty is enough for him. The godly woman herself cares not for gold and jewellery, *"Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price"* (1 Pet 3:3-4).

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How does this apply to the Church? John Gill commented, “The church has her golden chain, or pearl necklace; which are either the graces of the Spirit, so linked together, that where there is one there are all; and which consists of those ten links, or pearls, faith, hope, love, repentance, humility, patience, self-denial, contentment in every state, spiritual knowledge, longsuffering, or forbearance; sincerity goes through them all. Or else the spiritual blessings of the covenant of grace, with which the church and all the saints are blessed in Christ at once, and with one and all; and which golden chain of salvation, one link of which cannot be broken, is excellently described by the apostle in Romans 8:30.”

1:12-13 *“While the king sitteth at his table, my spikenard sendeth forth the smell thereof. A bundle of myrrh is my wellbeloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.”*

The king and his bride are now seen eating together, and he finds her company at mealtimes very pleasant. “*Spikenard*” is sweet perfume. She smells nice to him. “*Myrrh*” is also sweet smelling and Hebrew women often wore a pouch of myrrh around their neck. She desires for him to be very close to her and looks forward to the day when he will lie in her bosom (future tense, “*he shall...*”). Again, there is a longing for sexual intimacy, which is realised only after the wedding. Note the restraint and the discipline exercised in keeping themselves chaste before the wedding.

This passage alludes to the worshipful service the Church renders to their God and Saviour. Spikenard and myrrh which are sweet-smelling were used in olden days to prepare a body for burial. Mary of Bethany for instance broke an expensive bottle of spikenard to anoint the Lord Jesus for this very purpose (Matt 26:6-12; Mark 14:3-9). In another instance, Mary Magdalene, having been forgiven, gratefully anointed Jesus with a bottle of expensive perfume, likely spikenard (Luke 7:37-38). When Jesus was buried, He was covered with myrrh by those who laid him in the tomb (John 19:38-39).

1:14 *“My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi.”*

Now he reciprocates his longing for her and says she is like a “*cluster of camphire*” (bouquet of fragrant flowers) in the restful and refreshing oasis of Engedi.

Engedi is a luxuriant oasis in the barren desert on the western side of the Dead Sea. It is a place well known to the Jews where they can find refuge, rest and recreation. There are many caves that serve as dwelling places and hideouts. The whole place is full of vegetation with flowering plants and vineyards. The many springs there provide clean and sweet freshwater. Wild goats thrive in Engedi and they provide meat. By using Engedi to describe his beloved bride, the man shows how he adores and enjoys her loveliness and liveliness.

Our beloved Saviour likewise describes Himself as the vine that gives life, *“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing”* (John 15:5). His people ought to worship Him and be joined with Him so that they might continue to live and be strengthened in their spiritual life.

John Gill commented, *“The church may compare [Jesus Christ] to a cluster of the grapes of the Cyprus vine, reckoned the best; there being a cluster of all perfections, divine and human, in him; and of all the spiritual blessings of the everlasting covenant, and of all the precious promises in it; and of all the grace of the Spirit, and the fulness of it, which is in him.”*

1:15-17 *“Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes. Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir.”*

He now praises her for her beauty. He says to her, *“thou art fair”* three times. He cannot praise her enough. He loves her so much, calling her *“my love”*, *“my beloved”*. He has eyes only for her. He looks into her eyes and finds peace (the dove is a symbol of peace).

Love is hand-in-hand walks and heart-to-heart talks. They spend time together to walk and talk in a quiet, peaceful garden full of greenery. Parks and gardens are excellent places for such walk-and-talk outings. The *“beams of cedar”* and *“rafters of fir”* paint a rural countryside scene, away from the crowded and noisy city. The quiet and scenic places are excellent places for hand-to-hand walks and heart-to-heart talks.

This is what the Lord Jesus says to His Church. Such words emphasise how much He values and loves her, despite her feelings of

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unworthiness (cf Job 25:6; Isa 41:4; Gal 2:20). The “green” denotes “the fruitfulness of the saints in grace and holiness, like green olive trees, in the house of God” (John Gill).

The “beams” and “rafters” speak of the strength and stability of the Church for it is built upon solid material. Cedar wood has a pleasant smell and very durable. Fir wood according to Pliny “is the best and strongest wood for roofing and raftering”. The Church is built with the Tree of Life—the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and laid upon that firm foundation that can never be moved. Jesus said, “*and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Matt 16:18 cf 1 Cor 10:4). Indeed, the Church is the House of God, “*the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim 3:15).

2:1 “*I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.*”

Solomon says he is like the rose which is commonly found in the Plain of Sharon, and the lilies which are plentiful in the valleys of Israel. Although common and abundant, these flowers are most beautiful. Solomon was a man who had found God’s favour.

“And Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father: only he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place: a thousand burnt offerings did Solomon offer upon that altar. In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with thee; and thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people? And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have

given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days” (1 Kgs 3:3–13).

“And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about” (1 Kgs 4:29–31).

Charles Spurgeon commented: “It is our Lord who speaks: ‘I am the rose of Sharon.’ How is it that he utters his own commendation, for it is an old and true adage, that ‘self praise is no recommendation’? None but vain creatures ever praise themselves, and yet Jesus often praises himself. He saith, ‘I am the good Shepherd;’ ‘I am the Bread of Life;’ ‘I am meek and lowly of heart,’ and in divers speeches he is frequently declaring his own excellencies, yet Jesus is not vain! Scorned be the thought! Yet I said if any creature praised itself it must be vain, and that, too, is true. How then shall we solve the riddle? Is not this the answer, that he is no creature at all, and therefore comes not beneath the rule? For the creature to praise itself is vanity, but for the Creator to praise himself, for the Lord God to manifest and show forth his own glory is becoming and proper....

“I take it that he has designs of love in this speech. He would have all his people rich in high and happy thoughts concerning his blessed person. Jesus is not content that his brethren should think meanly of him; it is his pleasure that his espoused ones should be delighted with his beauty, and that he should be the King and Lord of their spirits: he would have us possess an adoring admiration for him, joined with most cheerful and happy thoughts towards him....”

Spurgeon continued, “Doubtless, he commends himself because high thoughts of Christ will enable us to act consistently with our relations towards him. The saved soul is espoused to Christ. Now, in the marriage estate, it is a great assistance to happiness if the wife has high ideas of her husband. In the marriage union between the soul and Christ, this is exceedingly necessary. Listen to the words of the Psalm,

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'He is thy Lord; and worship thou him.' Jesus is our husband, and is no more to be named Baal, that is, thy master, but to be called Ishi, thy man, thy husband; yet at the same time he is our Lord, 'For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Saviour of the body.' ... Brethren, your Lord Christ desires you to think well of him, that you may submit cheerfully to his authority, and so be a better spouse to this best of husbands....

"My brethren and sisters in Christ, I beseech you think much of your Master's excellencies. Study him in his primeval glory, before he took upon himself your nature! Think of the mighty love which drew him from his starry throne to die upon the cross of shame! Consider well the omnipotent affection which made him stretch his hands to the nails, and yield his heart to the spear! Admire him as you see him conquering in his weakness over all the powers of hell, and by his sufferings overthrowing all the hosts of your sins, so that they cannot rise against you any more for ever! See him now risen, no more to die; crowned, no more to be dishonoured; glorified, no more to suffer! Bow before him, hail him in the halls of your inner nature as the Wonderful, the Counsellor, the mighty God within your spirits, for only thus will your love to him be what it should."

2:2 *"As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters."*

Not only is the groom attractive, his bride is likewise attractive, in fact especially so—to him her beauty is incomparable. He has eyes only for her. No other woman commands his interest or attention—only she does.

Likewise, the Church is compared to a *"lily among thorns"*. This is because the Church on earth is a mixed multitude. Not all are lilies, some are thorns. There is the wheat (believers), but there are also the tares or weeds (false believers). The Lord Himself said, *"The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let*

both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matt 13:24–30). The Lord loves His lilies and will keep them. The thorns He will cast into the lake of fire on the day of judgement (Rev 20:15).

Let us make sure we are God’s lilies and if we are, we can be sure He will care for us and provide for all our physical and spiritual needs, bread and butter and life everlasting.

2:3 *“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.”*

Likewise, the bride sees her beloved groom as *“the apple tree among the trees of the wood”*, ie, he is the apple of her eyes; to her, he is the most outstanding of all the men. He is her shelter. She finds great security in him. She finds his physical presence with her very reassuring.

The Church sees the Lord Jesus as *“the apple tree among the trees of the wood”*. To her, He is altogether pleasant and wholesome. As much as Israel and His Church are *“the apple of his eye”* (Deut 32:10; Ps 17:8; Lam 2:18), so must we His people feel likewise towards Him (cf Prov 7:2; John 14:15).

There is absolute salvation security in the Lord. His people come *“under his shadow with great delight”* because of His excellent lovingkindness. As the psalmist says, *“How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings”* (Ps 36:7). Once He has saved them, He will save them to the end.

With utmost confidence, the Apostle Paul assures all who are loved by Christ, *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom 8:35–39).

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2:4 *“He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.”*

He invites her to eat with him and showers her with affection. The “*banner*” is a public sign or symbol of identity. He announces publicly that she belongs to him. Today, the banner can be the engagement ring. When a man proposes to a lady with a ring (usually a diamond ring), he is openly expressing his intent to marry her. The ring is a token of the promise to marry. She is his bride and fiancée; all wannabe suitors are to stay clear—no *potong jalan* (getting in the way)—she is taken.

Jesus said, *“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”* (Rev 3:20). Those who open the door for Jesus Christ will eat of that bread and drink of that cup that brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life (John 4:10-14; 6:48-58). All who spiritually eat and drink of Christ will be present at the great wedding dinner in heaven when He returns. *“Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God”* (Rev 19:7-9).

The banner of God’s love is the cross of Jesus Christ. *“For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom 5:6-8).

2:5 *“Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.”*

She is lovesick—so stricken by love, she misses the one she loves very much. The “*flagons*” (goblets of wine or bowls of grapes according to ancient Jewish rabbis, cf 2 Sam 6:19; 1 Chron 16:3; Hos 3:1) expresses her joy, and the “*apples*” are pleasant feelings. Although she has such feelings, she knows she must keep her feelings in check and wait patiently for the wedding day. The engaged couple must exercise discipline to restrain and refrain themselves from sexual intimacy. Premarital sex is strictly forbidden for it is sinful and selfish.

Christians must find strength in the Lord by partaking of Holy Communion. The “*flagons*” points to wine and directs us to the Lord’s Supper (Matt 26:26–29). The Lord’s Supper is a means of grace; a faithful partaking of it will grant us spiritual strength to live our Christian life here on earth (cf 1 Cor 11:23–34). The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ’s appointment, his death is shewed forth; and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace” (Q96).

Besides Holy Communion, the Lord has given to us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter (John 14:16–26). When we remember the Lord through Holy Communion and are full of the Holy Spirit, then shall we find ourselves growing in the spiritual virtues of Christ—“*because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us*” (Rom 5:5).

“We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

2:6 *“His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.”*

A show of physical affection is natural between a man and his fiancée, already engaged and about to be married; but no more than the holding of hands and the occasional hug which is as far as they should go. Strictly no bedroom activity! Both must be fully clothed at all times when together.

There is wisdom in O S Fowler’s warning to courting couples, “All sexual familiarities breed contempt.... Girls note:—‘I tried two years in vain, while courting my wife, to get her to kiss me; but she would not, and I married her because she wouldn’t. I wouldn’t marry any girl who would. The more she wouldn’t, the more I wanted to marry her; for I wanted kisses from one whose kisses were exclusive.’

“Bear that lesson ever in mind, all ye who court, and tremble whenever you violate this sexual law. Courted females, make ‘Hands off’ your motto. Say practically or literally:—‘Seal our love by engagement and marriage, and all I have and am is yours to possess and

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enjoy; but till then 'touch not, taste not, handle not,' lest our blissful affections perish by wrong usage."

"The church, having desired to be stayed, supported, strengthened, and comforted, presently found her beloved with her, who with both hands sustained her; which shows his tender love to her, care of her, and regard for her; and is expressive of the near and intimate communion she had with him, as the effect of union to him, often enjoyed in his house and ordinances; likewise of blessings of every kind she received from him; temporal, mercies, or left hand blessings, which are necessary to support and carry through this wilderness; and spiritual, or right hand blessings, as justification, pardon, adoption, etc. and, moreover, may denote the safety and security of the church, being encircled in the arms of her beloved, sustained by Christ's left hand, and embraced by his right hand, out of whose hands none can pluck" (John Gill).

2:7 *"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."*

In similar fashion (cf 2:4), the girl now betrothed tells all the other girls ("*hinds*" are female deer) to stay clear of her beloved. They must not attempt to "*awake*" him by getting his attention or his interest. Such attempts will be futile for they will find that his pleasure is only in her and for her. The one whom he has chosen is the one whom he has promised to marry. He is totally settled and utterly satisfied with the one he loves.

God's children should love and not provoke their Father to anger for He will surely punish them: *"And when the LORD saw it, he abhorred them, because of the provoking of his sons, and of his daughters. And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward generation, children in whom is no faith. They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people"* (Deut 32:19-21).

Our Heavenly Father commands, *"Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God. And ye shall keep my statutes, and do them: I am the LORD which sanctify you.... And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people,*

that ye should be mine” (Lev 20:7,8,26). He calls on us to separate ourselves from unbelievers and unholy things, so that we might be His true and good sons and daughters, “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor 6:17-18).

2:8 *“The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.”*

The eagerness and speediness of her beloved to see her and speak with her is described here—he is “leaping” and “skipping” from mountain to hill, and from hill to mountain just to see her.

The Church takes a delight in the voice of her Saviour. She constantly reads and studies His Word—the Holy Scriptures. His Word is so precious because it is “none other than the voice of Him that sitteth upon the throne. Every book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it, every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High” (Dean Burgon).

John the Baptist himself said, *“He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled” (John 3:29). Jesus said, “But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:2-5,27).*

2:9 *“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.”*

Her beloved is like a young male gazelle (“hart” is a male deer). When he arrives and cannot get into the house, he strains himself to see if he can catch a glimpse of her through the slight openings of the windows. This shows that they are still courting and not married yet. He is still outside the house, and not inside. Despite his great desire for

her, he shows great discipline and restraint. He looks at her from a distance. The time for intimacy can only come after the wedding.

The Lord will come for His Bride one day (Acts 1:11). Skipping like a gazelle, He will come quickly (Rev 2:5,16; 3:11; 22:7,12,20) and will not delay.

The words “*behind our wall*” and “*through the lattice*” speak of a partial view. Now, we see Him, as it were, in a photograph, but one day we shall see Him personally, face to face (1 John 3:2, cf 1 Cor 13:12). When the Lord finally comes back, He will call us up, ie the Rapture (cf Rev 4:1). The Apostle Paul wrote, “*Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed*” (1 Cor 15:51-52); “*For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord*” (1 Thess 4:15-17).

2:10 “*My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.*”

When he finally reaches her, he takes her out for a walk-and-talk—hand in hand, heart to heart. Courtship is a good time for couples to go out for walks, to talk to each other, to enjoy each other’s company and get to know each other.

The Lord speaks through His Word, the Holy Scriptures. The Church lives by His Word. “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*” (Matt 4:4). “*Consider how I love thy precepts: quicken me, O LORD, according to thy lovingkindness. Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever*” (Ps 119:159-160). The Lord desires for us to spend much time to study His Word just like Mary of Bethany who sat at His feet and not Martha who busied herself with the mundane (Luke 10:39-42).

The Lord also desires for His people to pray to Him. *“Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not”* (Jer 33:3). He delights to hear His people pray to Him. *“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”* (Matt 7:7-11).

2:11-13 *“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; 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; 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.”*

Being in love is like spring time. The sun is bright, the trees come to life, the birds sing, the flowers bloom, the air is cool and fresh. It is a nice time to be out.

“Winter” and *“rain”* speak of the troubles and tribulations of sin and of this world. When the Bible is believed and Jesus received, man is delivered from sin, and his troubles and tribulations are *“past”*, *“over and gone”*. The darkness of winter and of the storm clouds is gone, sunshine and light have come. *“Flowers”*, *“singing”* and *“turtle[doves]”* speak of Spring which symbolises life and light (Isa 12:1; John 8:12; 2 Cor 5:17-18; Eph 5:8; Col 1:13-14).

The fig tree and the vine are fruiting—summer is near (cf Matt 24:32-33; John 15:1-5). The Church lives for Christ and readies herself for His return. When He comes, He will call her up and take her home (Song 2:9-10). *“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”* (John 14:1-3).

2:14 *“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.”*

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Her suitor restrains himself from being physically intimate with her. She likewise restrains herself. Like a dove, she flies to places hard to get to—the *“clefts of the rock”* and *“secret places of the stairs”*. She is shy and bashful.

There are boundaries to physical affection. Lines must be drawn and not crossed—the wedding is yet to be. The groom should be contented just to hear her sweet voice telling him how much she loves him, and to admire her beautiful face.

The *“dove”* which is a symbol of peace refers to the Church. The Church desires to *“live peaceably with all men”* (Rom 12:18). Owing to opposition and persecution, she goes into hiding in rocks and caves and mourns for her sorry estate (Heb 11:38; Isa 38:14; 59:11). Her own infirmities and imperfections also cause her to be abashed and ashamed of seeing the Lord (Job 42:1-6; Isa 6:5; Luke 5:8).

The Bridegroom delights to see His Bride and hear her voice. So Christ encourages His Church to seek Him in prayer for He loves her and is able to deliver her from her distresses and to forgive her of all her sins (Isa 55:6-7; Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-23; 1 John 1:9).

2:15 *“Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.”*

The *“foxes”* are troublemakers. The troubles may be *“little”* ones, but they can *“spoil”* a good thing. Such troublemakers may come from within or without. They may be our own personal idiosyncrasies and shortcomings that the other finds annoying or irritating, or they could be enemies who are trying to break up their relationship by spreading falsehoods and rumours. Shut the mouth of troublemakers and talebearers, *“Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth”* (Prov 26:20).

“The disturbers of the vineyard, or the church; seducers or false teachers, who are fitly compared to foxes here, and Eze 13:4, partly to distinguish them from great tyrants and persecutors, who are compared to *wild boars*, or other *wild beasts*, Ps 80:13, as to *lions*, 2Ti 4:17; and partly for their fox-like qualities and actions, because they are very crafty and deceitful, 2Co 11:13-14; Eph 4:14, and very mischievous also, Eze 34:2-3; 2Ti 4:17; Tit 1:10-11; 2Pe 2:2. He mentions foxes, because these abounded in that country, as is manifest

from Jg 15:4; Ps 63:10; La 5:18, &c., but under them he comprehends all noxious creatures, upon the same reason. The little foxes: this he adds, not as if the great foxes were excused or exempted, but for more abundant caution, to teach the church to prevent errors and heresies in the beginnings of them, before they spread and grow strong and incurable" (Matthew Poole).

2:16 *"My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies."*

Despite the troubles and the opposition, both of them are determined to love each other. *"My beloved is mine, and I am his."* Nothing can separate the love they have for each other. They know God's good hand in bringing them together. Their match is a match made in heaven. God their Matchmaker makes no mistake.

Although divine providence is at work, there is also a need for human responsibility (*"he feedeth the lilies"*—he gets to work to make sure the relationship works). Both must put into practice the virtue of charity (*agape*): *"Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth"* (1 Cor 13:4–8a).

The Church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and the Lord is her only Saviour (John 17:9–10; 1 Cor 6:19; 8:6). The lilies here refer to His people, and He feeds and clothes them (cf Ps 23:1–2; Matt 6:28–29).

Nothing can separate the love of Christ for His people: *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom 8:35–39).

2:17 *"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."*

She encourages him to be patient and to persevere *"until the day break, and the shadows flee away"*—until all their troubles are overcome and all their enemies defeated. She encourages him to look forward to

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the wedding day, to the day when they will consummate their love for each other. The *“mountains of Bether”* (from the Hebrew *bater* which means cleavage) alluding to her bosom of solace (cf Song 1:13).

The Church on earth suffer many things. But one day the night will end and the shadows will disappear. That will happen on the day of Resurrection when the Lord Jesus Christ returns and puts down all His enemies (Luke 21:27-28; 1 Cor 15:54-55).

Revelation 21:3-4 says, *“And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”*

3:1-2 *“By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. 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.”*

The couple are not yet married and are not living together. She dreamt of the one she loves. It was a bad dream—she had lost her beloved. She searched high and low for him, in the highways and byways but could not find him.

There may be times one may feel this way: Is the engagement too good to be true? Will the marriage ever take place? Doubts can creep in despite the best of intentions and circumstances. If we love our beloved, then we should trust him, and not doubt him. Charity *“beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things”* (1 Cor 13:7).

As regards our faith, we must never doubt the Lord, but to trust Him always. He never changes, *“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever”* (Heb 13:8). *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning”* (Jas 1:17). *“For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us”* (2 Cor 1:20).

Sometimes we seek the Lord but cannot find Him. This is especially so when we have strayed away from Him—we stop reading the Bible, stop praying, stop going to church, stop obeying Him. *“Then*

shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD” (Prov 1:28–29).

The watchman in the city is the pastor in the church (cf Isa 62:6; Ezek 3:17). It is good the sinning believer returns to church and seek counsel from the pastor who can show the way to get right with God. Seek good counsel from Psalm 119:9–16.

3:3–4 *“The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth? 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.”*

She enquires from those who might know his whereabouts. Leaving no stone unturned, she finally found him. Once found, she held on to him and would not let him go. She brought him to a most secure place—her mother’s house and room where he would be kept safe and undisturbed. This whole scene illustrates how much she loves him. She thinks of no one else but him. She will see to it that she is finally married to him.

In a Bible-believing and true church, the Lord is found. *“I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me”* (Prov 8:17 cf Jer 29:13). We need to be found in church (*“mother’s house”* cf Gal 4:26) to have constant communion with God and fellowship with the saints. *“And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching”* (Heb 10:21–25).

The pursuit of holiness is vital in our Christian life. We must ensure that our faith, hope, and love in and for the Lord will endure—we must believe and keep on believing, trusting in the Lord and showing the marks of grace and bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Phil 2:12–13; 3:13–14; Gal 5:22–23). True faith is an enduring faith (Matt 10:22).

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3:5 *“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.”*

This echoes her words in chapter 2:7. Her beloved is exclusively hers, and he too feels the same way. Their patience in sexual restraint pays off. The big day has come. There is an African proverb which says, “Patience is a tree whose roots are bitter, but its fruit is very sweet.” Here is a Chinese one, “With time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes a silk gown.” It is vital for courting couples to keep away from the marital bed before the wedding day. *“Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge”* (Heb 13:4).

God’s children should always keep themselves holy unto the Lord, *“For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy”* (Lev 11:44). In their time on earth before the wedding day above, they should not be friendly to the world or fornicating with the world. *“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God”* (Jas 4:4).

Pastors are to make sure to preach and teach the Word faithfully and truthfully so as to prepare the Church to be a chaste Bride for that great wedding day, following the example of the Apostle Paul, *“For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ”* (2 Cor 11:2).

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THE PROPHET JEREMIAH AND HIS MINISTRY

GIA-HIEN NGUYEN

There are nine men named Jeremiah in the Holy Bible,¹ one of whom is the prophet Jeremiah, whose name is mentioned three times in the New Testament and is spelled Jeremy (Matt 2:17; 27:9) and Jeremias (Matt 16:14).

The name Jeremiah probably means “whom Jehovah has appointed.”² Jeremiah introduced himself in the first three verses of the Book bearing his name. He is “the son of Hilkiyah,³ of the priests that were in Anathoth⁴ in the land of Benjamin” (Jer 1:1).

Jeremiah was born about 657 BC during the reign of the wicked King Manasseh.⁵ Jeremiah was born a priest, following the priesthood of his father Hilkiyah. However, the LORD called Jeremiah to be His prophet “*in the days of Josiah the son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign*” (Jer 1:2), and Jeremiah faithfully served the LORD among his people of Judah under the last kings of Judah—Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (Jer 1:3; 22:24). After the godly king Josiah was killed in battle, despite his reformation, his sons did not follow the godly example of their father,⁶ but did wicked things before the LORD, forsook Him, transgressed the law and turned to idolatry. God graciously used Jeremiah to call them back to Him in repentance to escape His righteous judgment. Jeremiah loved them and prayed for them with much tears (Jer 9:1; 13:17; 14:17), so he was called “a weeping prophet.”⁷ However, they rejected God’s grace for them, did not listen to God’s Word through His servant Jeremiah nor repent, but they even persecuted Jeremiah and put him in prison. Thus, in the end God’s Word of warning and judgment was fulfilled, and they were taken in captivity to Babylon in 586 BC. Jeremiah was released from prison and offered to choose where to live, and he chose to stay with the remnant of the people of Judah, over whom Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah to rule to take care of the farms and orchards. However, after two months, Gedaliah was killed in a

sudden attack by Ishmael the son of Nethaniah during his visit (Jer 41:2-3). Then Johanan, all the captains and all the remnant came to Jeremiah and ask him to pray for God's will and guidance for them (Jer 42:1-3). However, they did not believe nor obey God's will for them to stay in Judah but forced Jeremiah and Baruch to go with them to Egypt (Jer 43:5-6). God continued to use Jeremiah to speak His Word of judgement against the remnant of Judah in Egypt due to their sins, transgressions and idolatry (Jer 44). Jeremiah might have ended his life in Egypt as the Bible is quiet about his death.⁸

The Book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah is not an easy book to read. Nevertheless, this writer trusts in the divine Author of the Holy Scriptures, even the Holy Spirit, who inspired and directed His holy men to write what He wanted them to write according to God's will (2 Pet 1:21).⁹ The writer believes in the authorship and the authenticity of the Book of Jeremiah. He agrees with Charles H Dyer's explanation about the chronological arrangement of the Book.¹⁰

Authorship and Authenticity

The Holy Scriptures confirms that the LORD called the prophet Jeremiah to be His prophet to preach and write His Word (Jer 1:4).

1. The prophet Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah in Anathoth confirmed that his words came from the LORD (Jer 1:1-4), that "*the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD*" (7:1; 11:1; 30:1; 32:1; 40:1), that "*Then came the word of the LORD unto Jeremiah* (29:30; 32:26; 35:12; 43:8), that "*the word of the LORD came unto Jeremiah*" (28:12; 33:1, 19; 39:15), and that "*the word of the LORD that came unto Jeremiah*" (Jer 14:1; 47:1; 49:34), and that "*word that the LORD spake to Jeremiah*" (Jer 46:13), and so forth.
2. When the scroll Jeremiah dictated to Baruch to write and read to the leaders of Judah was cut and burned by Jehoiakim (Jer 36:23), God commanded Jeremiah to speak to Baruch to write another scroll with all the words of the previous scroll as well as with additional words (Jer 36:32), confirming the Lord's preservation of His Word (Ps 12:6-7).
3. The second Book of Chronicles confirmed the fulfilment of God's Word by the mouth of Jeremiah (2 Chron 36:21).

4. The prophet Daniel confirmed “*the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet*” (Dan 9:2).
5. Matthew quoted Jeremiah 31:15 for the fulfilment of God’s Word concerning a voice heard from Rama (Matt 2:17–18).
6. Matthew, Mark and Luke quoted Jeremiah 7:11 for the fulfilment of God’s Word when Lord Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem and said, “*It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves*” (Matt 21:13; Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46).
7. Paul quoted Jer 31:33–34 for the LORD’s promise of the new covenant (Rom 11:27; Heb 8:8–13).

Jeremiah was called to be the LORD’S prophet in the 13th year of King Josiah of Judah in 627 BC (Jer 1:1–5), and he continued his prophetic ministry in Judah until the last King Zedekiah and their captivity to Babylon in 586 BC (Jer 39; 52). Jeremiah was forced to go to Egypt and spoke God’s Word to the remnant of Judah in 585 BC (Jer 43–44). Thus, Jeremiah’s ministry was about 41 to 42 years (from 627–585 BC).¹¹

Theological Contribution¹²

The Book of Jeremiah contains the following doctrines:

1. God’s sovereignty and providence: God is sovereign over all things, not only over the universe, world history and all humans, but also over the small things like the falling of a sparrow (Matt 10:29–31). God’s sovereignty¹³ can be seen through the Book of Jeremiah: His foreknowledge and calling before Jeremiah was born, His warning of the righteous judgments upon Judah and the Gentile kingdoms as well as His promise of salvation, the new covenant, the return from exile, and future restoration had been preached through Jeremiah before they were fulfilled and will be fulfilled, and so on. Moreover, God’s providence¹⁴ can be seen in His care and protection for His servant Jeremiah, and so on.
2. Human total depravity¹⁵: The two proof verses exposing human total depravity are, “*Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil*” (Jer 13:23), and “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*” (Jer 17:9).¹⁶ Despite God’s grace and blessings upon Israel and Judah with His law, true worship, God’s

promises and prophets, and so on (Rom 9:4), they did not fear God nor appreciate His special blessings upon them as His chosen people, but forsook Him, rejected His Word, and persecuted His servants. This shows the total depravity of human heart and nature. God's servants should be ready to endure all the contempt, criticism, misjudgement, rejection, opposition, and persecution from the people they may minister to as the prophet Jeremiah endured, especially as their Lord Jesus Christ endured, even unto death (Phil 2:8; 1 Pet 2:21-25).

3. God's righteousness and righteous judgment: The LORD is righteous (Jer 12:1), so He never condones sins, transgressions and idolatry but has to judge unrepentant sinners. That is why the LORD wants His people not to glory in their wisdom, might and riches, but glory in the knowledge of Him, *"that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD"* (Jer 9:23-24). Sadly, the people of Judah did not know their righteous LORD and His serious righteous judgment, so they did not fear Him nor come back to Him in repentance during Jeremiah's 41-year ministry of calling and warning! In the end, they were judged and taken in captivity to Babylon. The righteous God did not only exercise His righteous judgment against His sinful people (Jer 2-25) but also the Gentile kingdoms (Jer 46-51).
4. God's sovereign grace and new covenant: Despite the totally depraved heart and nature of human beings that only lead them to destruction according to God's righteous judgment, the gracious God has revealed His sovereign grace through His promise of the coming Righteous Branch with His new and everlasting covenant to give totally depraved sinners a new heart on which God's law is written. Moreover, the righteous God¹⁷ graciously gives His own righteousness to His people through the Incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection; His name is called THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jer 23:5-6; 31:31-34; 33:15-16; Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 2:8; Phil 3:8-9).¹⁸
5. God's sovereign preservation of His Word: The proof text of God's promise to preserve all His Word throughout generations forever is Psalm 12:6-7, and the proof text for the illustration of God's

sovereign preservation of His Word is Jeremiah chapter 36. God graciously used Jeremiah to speak His Word to Baruch to write and read His Word to the leaders and people of Judah so that they might repent of their sins and escape God's impending judgments, but King Jehoiakim arrogantly burnt the scroll of God's Word. Then God commanded Jeremiah to speak to Baruch to write another scroll including all the former words in the first scroll and many additional words (Jer 36:32). Indeed, God has faithfully preserved all His Word in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts underlying the King James Bible so that His people can have God's Word in their hands today.¹⁹

6. Restoration of the nation of Israel: According to God's promise to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah, the Branch of righteousness, even the Messiah Jesus in His Second Coming to establish His kingdom of peace on earth, to reign the whole world in righteousness, and to restore the nation of Israel (Jer 33:14-16). God has fulfilled His promise to bring His people of Israel back to their land in 1948 (Isa 11:11-12), but most of the Jews today have not believed and exalted the Lord Jesus as their Messiah, so there is still no peace in their land. However, when the Lord Jesus descends from heaven visibly to deliver His people of Israel from the Antichrist and his army at the great world war Armageddon, all the remnant of Israel will see their Messiah and believe and will be saved, and their nation will be restored with Jerusalem as the capital of the world (Isa 2:3-5; Zech 14:9; Rom 11:25-27 Rev 19:11-20:6).²⁰
7. God's Word is always true and fulfilled: God's Word of prophecies spoken to the people of Judah through His prophet Jeremiah concerning His chastisement and righteous judgments upon His people of Judah such as famine, sword, captivity to Babylon, return from exile, and so on (Jer 2-45) as well as upon the Gentiles kingdoms (Jer 46-51) has been fulfilled according to His Word to Jeremiah from the beginning, "*For I will hasten my word to perform it*" (Jer 1:12). Moreover, all God's prophecies concerning the First Coming of the Messiah Jesus have come to pass, so all God's future prophecies will surely be fulfilled as well.²¹ The Word of the

living and true God, the almighty and faithful Creator, is always true and fulfilled!

The Ministry of Jeremiah

Under King Josiah

Jeremiah started his ministry in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, and that was in 627 BC. Born about 649 BC, "*Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem*" (2 Kgs 22:1) about 640–609 BC.²²

The name Josiah means "whom Jehovah heals,"²³ and God had sovereignly and providentially mentioned the name Josiah and his reformation about three hundred years or more before he was born.²⁴ Josiah was the last godly king of Judah with a very good testimony from God's Word, "*And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him*" (2 Kgs 23:25). The climax of the reformation was in the eighteenth year of King Josiah when the Book of the law was found and read to him (2 Chron 34:8–33). To this point of time, Jeremiah's preaching ministry was about five years, and he surely had a godly impact on the people of Judah, encouraging them to remove and destroy their idols and altars from the land. Jeremiah mentioned King Josiah eighteen times in the Book of Jeremiah,²⁵ and the fact that "*Jeremiah lamented for Josiah*" (2 Chron 35:25) after he was killed in battle against the Egyptian army in 609 BC²⁶ shows how Jeremiah loved, honoured and highly valued Josiah and his reformation.²⁷

Under King Jehoiakim

Jeremiah continued his ministry "*in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah*" (Jer 1:3a). The name Jehoiakim means "whom Jehovah has set up,"²⁸ but he did not have a good testimony from God's Word, "*Jehoiakim was twenty and five years old when he began to reign; and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem... And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD*" (2 Kgs 23:36–37), and "*Now the rest of the acts of Jehoiakim, and his abominations which he did, and that which was found in him*" (2 Chron 36:8). His previous name was Eliakim, but Pharaohnechoh the king of Egypt changed his name to Jehoiakim and made him king of Judah after having taken his brother, the wicked king

Jehoahaz, who reigned in Jerusalem only three months, to Egypt and he died there (2 Kgs 23:31–34). Jeremiah bravely exposed Jehoiakim’s sin of exploiting his people to build his own luxurious house without paying them wages (Jer 22:13–23)²⁹ and of killing Urijah, a prophet of the Lord (Jer 26:20–23). Moreover, Jehoiakim arrogantly dared to cut a scroll of God’s Word in pieces and burned it in the fire—the scroll that Jeremiah spoke to Baruch to write. However, no one, not even Satan can destroy the Word of God. God, the Creator, has seriously promised to preserve His Word throughout the ages for ever, even to the jot and tittle (Ps 12:6–7; Matt 5:18). Thus, God commanded Jeremiah to take another scroll and speak His same Word with added words of judgment to Baruch to write (Jer 36:21–32). God is not mocked (Gal 6:7). In the end, Nebuchadnezzar came and bound Jehoiakim in fetters and carried him to Babylon (2 Chron 36:6), and he was buried like an ass without honour and lamentation (Jer 22:18–19; 36:30).

Under King Jehoiachin

Jehoiachin was Jehoiakim’s son and Josiah’s grandson (2 Kgs 24:8–16). Jehoiachin means “whom Jehovah has established”,³⁰ called also Jeconiah (1 Chron 3:17) and Coniah (Jer 22:24). He began to reign when he was eight years old, but he did evil before God, so after reigning three months and ten days, he was taken captive to Babylon, *“Jehoiachin was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem: and he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD. And when the year was expired, king Nebuchadnezzar sent, and brought him to Babylon, with the goodly vessels of the house of the LORD, and made Zedekiah his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem”* (2 Chron 36:9–10). Jeremiah wrote a letter of encouragement to the king and the captives in Babylon to build their houses, plant gardens, take them wives and have children and pray to the LORD for the peace of the cities where they live until the LORD would visit them after seventy years (Jer 29:2–7).

Under King Zedekiah

Jeremiah continued his ministry *“unto the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah king of Judah, unto the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month”* (Jer 1:3b). Zedekiah’s name means *“Jehovah is just or righteous,”*³¹ and he was the last king of the southern

kingdom of Judah. After King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon carried away King Jehoiachin to Babylon, he made Mattaniah, even Josiah's son and Jehoiachin's uncle, king of Judah and changed his name to Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:15-17). Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem, doing that which was evil in the sight of the LORD (2 Kgs 24:18-19) until he and the people of Judah were taken in captivity to Babylon in 586 BC. Zedekiah did not listen to God's Word of rebuke, warning, and call to repentance through His true prophet Jeremiah, but listened to the lying words and vain optimistic promises from false prophets who prophesied falsely even in the LORD'S name (Jer 28:2-4, 11) while they still transgressed God's law, lived in sins and turned to idolatry (Jer 34:18-21). Zedekiah even relied on Egypt to rebel against Babylon (2 Chron 36:13; Ezek 17:13-18). In the end, Zedekiah and the people of Judah could not escape God's righteous chastisement through the hand of Babylon. Jerusalem was besieged for nearly two years, the wall of Jerusalem was breached, and Zedekiah tried to flee with his sons, servants and soldiers, but Zedekiah and his sons were arrested and judged before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. After seeing his sons killed, Zedekiah's eyes were put out, and he was chained and carried away to Babylon in 586 BC (2 Kgs 25:5-7; Jer 52:8-11). That is the end of the southern kingdom of Judah! Thus, Jeremiah served the LORD as His prophet in the land of Judah for about 41 years.

The Call of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was called and ordained by the LORD Himself. The LORD'S Word came to Jeremiah and called him to be His prophet (Jer 1:4, 13). The LORD said, *"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations"* (Jer 1:5). Here, the LORD, the covenant name Jehovah, the I AM THAT I AM (Exod 3:14), who is always sovereign, almighty, all-knowing, holy, righteous, merciful, longsuffering and faithful to keep His Word and covenant with His covenant people although they were unfaithful. The LORD had His plan for Jeremiah before he was born, and He also has His plan for each of His children before they were born, according to His election of grace, so all thanks, praise and glory should be to Him alone (John 15:16; Rom 11:5; Eph 5:20). Here, it is the LORD, who forms a human

being in the belly of his or her mother's womb, so God's people ought not to support abortion, as it is a sin of murder.

The Lord Jesus called and ordained His apostles, *"And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach"* (Mark 3:14). Paul gave his testimony of the Lord's call, *"Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity"* (1 Tim 2:7). A true servant of the Lord must be called and ordained, not by himself nor by men, but by the Lord Himself.

Jeremiah said to the LORD, *"Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child"* (Jer 1:6). Jeremiah was in his early twenties,³² but he humbly regarded himself as a child, who does not how to speak before the leaders with their power and authority, so he needs to be taught, instructed, guided, and protected! The LORD resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). To be used by the LORD, a believer ought to be humble like the Lord Jesus, *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise"* (John 5:19 cf 5:30), and *"And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"* (Phil 2:8). John the Baptist humbly said, *"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven... He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:27, 30). Paul was a humble apostle, saying, *"For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God"* (1 Cor 15:9-10), and then *"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints"* (Eph 3:8), and then *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief"* (1 Tim 1:15). Thus, they were mightily used by the LORD.

Jeremiah was commanded to preach all the exact Word of God *"But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak"* (Jer 1:7). The Lord Jesus also commands His disciples to do the same, *"Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you"* without addition nor subtraction (Matt 28:20). A messenger of God must faithfully only speak God's Word.³³

Jeremiah was commanded to fear God alone, and not men, because the LORD was with him. *"Be not afraid of their faces: for I am*

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with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD” (Jer 1:8). The Lord Jesus also teaches His disciples to fear God alone, and not men, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

The LORD put His Words in Jeremiah’s mouth. *“Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jer 1:9). The LORD spoke to Moses, “Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say” (Exod 4:12). The Lord Jesus also promises that the Holy Spirit will teach His disciples what to speak, “For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say” (Luke 12:12). The Lord’s servants ought to diligently study God’s Word and let the Holy Spirit and God’s Word dwell richly in their hearts and minds, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15), and “... be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18) and “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:16).*

The Lord set Jeremiah to be His prophet. *“See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant” (Jer 1:10). Jeremiah would foretell God’s Word of judgement, “to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down” as well as to give God’s promise of comfort, “to build, and to plant.” The holy LORD hates sins, the righteous LORD condemns sins, and the gracious and merciful LORD always calls sinners to return to Him in repentance and submission so that they may be saved, comforted and built up. When reading God’s Word, the Holy Bible, true believers always find His Word of rebuke against sins and ungodliness as well as His Word of comfort, encouragement, and edification to repentant sinners, obedient children, and faithful servants. The Lord Jesus is the Prophet of prophets and the Preacher of preachers. The Lord rebuked the hypocrisy and ungodliness of the Pharisees and the scribes (Matt 23), but He also gave His Word of comfort and encouragement to repentant sinners (Matt 11:28-30; John 8:11). True prophets and preachers must be like the Lord Jesus. Sadly, many nowadays love to invite and hear the preachers who only preach the messages of comfort and*

encouragement without repentance, obedience, submission, or self-denial, *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables”* (2 Tim 4:3-4).

The Lord confirmed that His Word would be fulfilled. *“For I will hasten my word to perform it”* (Jer 1:12). Surely God will perform all His words, *“Therefore say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; There shall none of my words be prolonged any more, but the word which I have spoken shall be done, saith the Lord GOD”* (Ezek 12:28). All God’s words of promises and comfort as well as His words of warnings have been fulfilled, are being fulfilled and will be fulfilled. True believers must trust in God’s Word (Ps 119:42) and tremble at His Word (Isa 66:2).

The Prophet Jeremiah

The LORD showed Jeremiah two visions. One is a rod of an almond tree (in Hebrew “awake tree”), a reminder of God’s watchfulness to fulfil His word, *“Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the LORD unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it”* (Jer 1:11-12).³⁴

The other vision is a seething pot, the face of which is toward the north, even the attack from the Babylonians, whom God used to chastise His people due to their sins, transgressions, idolatry and ungodliness, *“And the word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, What seest thou? And I said, I see a seething pot; and the face thereof is toward the north. Then the LORD said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. For, lo, I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, saith the LORD; and they shall come, and they shall set every one his throne at the entering of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all the walls thereof round about, and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness, who have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands”* (Jer 1:13-16).

The LORD commanded Jeremiah to be ready for the ministry of a prophet: (1) Be ready to do the Lord’s command, *“Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise”* (Jer 1:17).³⁵ (2) Be prepared to speak all what the

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Lord commanded him, *“speak unto them all that I command thee”* (1:17). (3) Be not afraid of men, *“be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them”* (1:17), only fear God, and not men.³⁶ (4) Be made as a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls (1:18). The young prophet Jeremiah was strengthened by God’s grace and power to be strong, determined, faithful, patient, brave, steadfast, and unmovable like a defenced city, an iron pillar, and brasen walls.³⁷ (5) Be against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land (1:18). It is not easy for the young man Jeremiah to stand alone and to speak God’s Word of warning and rebuke against the whole ungodly nation, including the kings and the priests with their power and authority! (6) Be ready to be persecuted, *“they shall fight against thee”* (1:19). Jeremiah would be hated, rejected, beaten, and imprisoned. The Lord Jesus lived a good, holy and perfect life, but He was despised, envied, hated and persecuted. His true servants and children throughout the ages have also suffered the same, *“Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also”* (John 15:20). True believers should not be surprised when facing opposition and persecutions from the ungodly. (7) Be triumphant because of the LORD’S presence, protection and deliverance, *“they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the LORD, to deliver thee”* (Jer 1:19). The Lord always promises to be with His servants such as with Moses (Exod 3:12), with Joshua (Josh 1:5), with Gideon (Judg 6:16), with His disciples, *“I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world”* (Matt 28:20), and so forth. It is vital for true believers to have the almighty, all-knowing, sovereign, wise, good, gracious, loving and merciful Lord to be with them.³⁸

Notes

¹ Walter A Elwell and Barry J Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 1113 (hereafter cited as *BEB*).

² Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), 369 (hereafter cited as *GHCLLOT*).

³ There are seven men named Hilkiah (2 Kgs 22:8; Jer 1:1; 2 Kgs 18:8; 1 Chron 26:11; Jer 29:3; 1 Chron 6:30; Neh 8:4). The name Hilkiah means “the portion of Jehovah.” *GHCLLOT*, 285.

⁴ Anathoth is of a Levitical town in the tribe of Benjamin, where Jeremiah the prophet was born, Josh. 21:18; Isa. 10:30; Jer. 1:1 [now called Anâta]. Anathoth means “answers to prayers.” *GHCLLOT*, 645.

⁵ *BEB*, 1110.

⁶ “The tragic death of Josiah at Megiddo marked the end of true quality in the royal line of Judah until the return of Christ to sit “upon the throne of David ... to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever” (Isa. 9:7).” John C Whitcomb and John J Davis, *Israel: From Conquest to Exile: A Commentary on Joshua–2 Kings* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 2012), 479–481.

⁷ Ryken rightly states, “Even the emotions of Jeremiah, which have earned him the moniker “the weeping prophet,” not only manifest his melancholy but also demonstrate God’s own sorrow over having to so severely judge his chosen people (e.g., Jer 4:19; 13:15–17).” Leland Ryken et al, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 436.

⁸ “There is a Christian tradition that Jeremiah was stoned to death by the Jews at Tahpanhes. An Alexandrian tradition reported that his bones had been brought to that city by Alexander the Great. On the other hand, there is the Jewish statement that, on the conquest of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar, he, with Baruch, made his escape to Babylon and died there in peace.” See Merrill F Unger, “Jeremiah,” ed R K Harrison, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 669.

⁹ “Thus, the Holy Spirit chose His saints, then took control of them, reminded them of what the Lord spoke to them, moved them, and guided them to write exactly what He wanted them to write so that the final product is the very Word of God free from errors although their personalities and styles might reflect in their writing.” See Hien G Nguyen, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation” (master’s thesis, Far Eastern Bible College, 2003), 18.

¹⁰ “If Jeremiah did not arrange his book chronologically, how did he arrange it? The best answer seems to be that he used a broad logical arrangement of his material to convey an overall message to the people. That is, as Jeremiah compiled his subsequent collections of his prophecies, he rearranged them in a logical pattern. The arrangement developed his theme of God’s judgment. Chapters 2–45 focused on God’s judgment on Judah and chapters 46–51 focused on God’s judgment on the Gentile nations.” Charles H Dyer, “Jeremiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed J F Walvoord and R B Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1:1128.

¹¹ For more details, see *BEB*, 1115–1116. Also see the chart “The Dating of Jeremiah’s Prophecies” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1:1126.

¹² “The theology of the book of Jeremiah may be summarized as follows: God’s judgment would fall on Judah because she had broken His covenant. The people worshiped other gods, and the religious and civil leaders were hopelessly corrupt. Sword, plague, and famine would devastate the land and many would be carried into exile. However, God would also judge the arrogant nations and eventually restore His people to their land. He would establish a new covenant with the reunited Northern and Southern kingdoms and replace the ineffective kings and priests of Jeremiah’s day with an ideal Davidic ruler (Messiah) and a purified priesthood.” See Roy B Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 342.

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¹³ “What is “sovereignty”? According to Chambers’ Dictionary, “sovereign” means “supreme: possessing supreme power or dominion: superior to all others: utmost: most efficacious”. “God has such supreme power or dominion over all. A monarch may be sovereign, but he does not have absolute sovereignty. Only God is absolutely sovereign since He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Deut 10:17, Prov 8:15-16, 1 Tim 6:15). To know His sovereignty, we need to know His nature.” Jeffrey Khoo, *The Doctrine of Providence*, Lecture Notes (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College, 2022), 7.

¹⁴ “The word ‘providence’ comes from the word ‘provide’ which is from the Latin *pro* meaning ‘before, in front of, for, forward’ and *vide* meaning ‘to see’. Chamber’s Dictionary defines it as ‘timely preparation: (theol.) the foresight and care of God over all His creatures: God, considered in this relation: something occurring in which God’s care is clearly shown.’ Thus, providence is the foresight of God in planning and providing for the needs of His creation and creatures—He’ll see to it, He’ll take care of it, He sees that it happens.” Jeffrey Khoo, *The Doctrine of Providence*, 4.

¹⁵ “A term in common use esp. in Calvinism to express the extreme wretchedness of man’s condition as the result of the Fall. It emphasizes the belief that this result was not a mere loss or deprivation of a supernatural endowment possessed by unfallen man, but a radical corruption or depravation of his whole nature, so that apart from Christ he can do nothing whatever pleasing to God. Even his reason has been radically vitiated, so that, acc. to Calvinism, all natural knowledge of God (such as obtains in the system of St Thomas Aquinas) is held to be impossible.” F L Cross and Elizabeth A Livingstone, eds, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1645.

¹⁶ Tow has a good summary, “Not only is the mind condemned till it is “born again,” equally severe is the condemnation of the heart, when it is called “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9). To be brief, let me cite Romans 3:10-18, which should serve as a mirror in which we may see, at full length, the image of our nature. In this passage, the Apostle inveighs not against particular individuals, but, against all the posterity of Adam, he accuses the perpetual corruption of our nature. Nor does he describe their corrupt habits, but rather their depraved nature. For as the body, which already contains within itself the cause and matter of a disease, although it has yet no sensation of pain, cannot be said to enjoy good health, neither can the soul be esteemed healthy, while it is full of such moral maladies. The soul, indeed, being immersed in the gulf of iniquity, is not only the subject of vices, but totally destitute of everything that is good.” Timothy Tow, *An Abridgment of Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1997), 100.

¹⁷ Cairn gives a good definition, “The term is used to describe the following: 1. The inherent rectitude of the divine nature (John 17:25; see Holiness of God). 2. God’s attitude toward every violation of His holy law (Rev. 16:5). 3. The imputed righteousness of Christ to believers (Rom. 3:21, 22; see Imputation). The first two portray aspects of God’s justice in Himself and in relation to sinners. The third describes the exercise of His grace, on the ground of Christ’s redemption, to satisfy the standards of His justice, in providing a free and perfect righteousness for His believing people (Rom. 3:24-26).” Alan Cairn, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 386.

¹⁸ Spurgeon rightly states, “The best known passage in Jeremiah is the new covenant text in 31:31–34. Not only is it the largest OT text quoted in the NT (Heb 8:8–12; 10:16–17), but arguably better than any other passage it links God’s ancient promises to Eve (Gn 3:15), Abraham (Gn 12:1–3), and David (2 Sm 7:16–19) with NT assurances that God in Christ grants believers new hearts, salvation, and fellowship with him.” C H Spurgeon, *The Spurgeon Study Bible: Notes* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 981.

¹⁹ Timothy Tow rightly observed, “The second instance is recorded in Jeremiah Chapter 36. God told Jeremiah to write in a book words that He had spoken to him against Israel and Judah and all nations. Then Jeremiah called Baruch, his secretary, to write in a book Jeremiah’s words from the Lord and read them to King Jehoiakim and all in the LORD’s house. When the king heard it, he cut up the book with a pen knife and burnt it. But God’s Words came to Jeremiah after all the words that were in the first roll had been burnt by King Jehoiakim. Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah “all the former words that were in the first roll,” which Jehoiakim, king of Judah, had burned in the fire; and there were added besides unto them many like words. God’s Words cannot be broken (John 10:35) but only be preserved.” Timothy Tow, “Three Heaven and Earth Moving Statements from God’s Mouth Settle the Question Whether His Words Are Preserved,” in *Forever Infallible and Inerrant* ed. Jeffrey Khoo (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 2011), 34.

²⁰ Tow and Khoo rightly state, “Jesus will then begin His millennial reign on earth. He will sit on the throne of David and govern the whole world from Jerusalem, the political and religious capital of the world. The earth will be rejuvenated. The land will be peaceful and productive, and the life-span of man will increase (Isa 65:20).” Timothy Tow and Jeffrey Khoo, *Theology for Every Christian* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College, 2007), 432.

²¹ Tow and Khoo have a good observation, “There are over 300 prophecies in the Bible concerning Christ’s First Coming, and all have been fulfilled to the jot and tittle. History attests to the fact that Jesus did come, and Scripture affirms that He was born of a virgin, lived a perfect, sinless life, and as a Lamb without spot and blemish, died a sacrificial death on the cross, shed His precious blood to redeem mankind from sin. He was buried, but on the third day, rose again from the grave, appeared to His disciples over a period of 40 days, and then ascended to heaven and is now sitting at the right hand of God, waiting for His Father’s timing to send Him back to earth, this time to judge it. The Bible also contains many prophecies with regard to the Second Coming of Christ. If all the prophecies of Jesus’ first coming have all come to pass, we can be very sure that all prophecies concerning His Second Coming will also come to pass. While you have time, make peace with God, and be reconciled to Him. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Believe on Christ today.” Tow and Khoo, 463.

²² Floyd Nolen Jones. *The Chronology of the Old Testament* (Green Forest: Master Books, 1993, 2007), 279–280.

²³ *GHCLOT*, 326.

²⁴ John Gill rightly observed, “*thus saith the Lord; a child shall he born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; who was not born until 300 years after this, according to the Jewish writers: but it is generally reckoned to be more, even 350 or 360 years; this is a clear proof of the prescience, predetermination, and providence of God with respect to future events, contingent ones, such as depend upon the will*

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of men; for what more so than giving a name to a child?" John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 2:732.

²⁵ Jeremiah 1:2,3; 3:6; 22:11,18; 25:1,3; 26:1; 27:1; 35:1; 36:1,2,9; 37:1; 45:1; 46:2.

²⁶ Jones, 280.

²⁷ Whitcomb and Davis have a good observation, "Great was the national mourning for Josiah. The great reformation was obviously over, for his sons offered no prospect of walking in their fathers footsteps. Someday, wrote the prophet Zechariah a century later, Israel will mourn for the Messiah they crucified, even "as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon" (12:11), a remarkable evidence of the intensity and universality of Judah's mourning for Josiah. Jeremiah lamented for Josiah too (2 Chron. 35:25; these lamentations are not found in the Book of Lamentations which is concerned with the fall of Jerusalem); and to protect the uniqueness of Josiah's reputation, Jeremiah commanded the nation not to mourn over the death of Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:18). Truly, Josiah was a great and godly king; but it would take more than a Josiah to reverse the nation's downward trend: "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind would not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth" (Jer. 15:1)." Whitcomb and Davis, 478.

²⁸ *GHCLLOT*, 338.

²⁹ Whitcomb and Davis have a good observation, "For some reason, Pharaoh Necho felt that Eliakim, a brother of Jehoahaz, would be a more dependable vassal. To improve Eliakim's image with the traditionalists in Judah, Necho changed his name to Jehoiakim. But this was hardly sufficient to offset the vast unpopularity the new king must have incurred when he taxed the people heavily to pay tribute to the Egyptians (2 Kings 23:35). To make matters worse, while the people groaned under these burdens Jehoiakim built for himself a luxurious palace 'ceiled with cedar and painted with vermillion' (Jer. 22:14) and then refused to pay the workers (Jer. 22:13)." Whitcomb and Davis, 479-481.

³⁰ *GHCLLOT*, 338.

³¹ Some other men also named Zedekiah: Son of Chenaanah (1 Kgs 22:11; 2 Chron. 18:10), (2) A son of Jeconiah and grandson of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (1 Chron. 3:16), (3) The son of Maaseiah, and a false prophet among the captives in Babylon (Jer. 29:21), (4) The son of Hananiah, and one of the officials of Judah (Jer. 36:12). Unger, 1382-83.

³² A child here in Hebrew *na'ar*, a masculine noun referring to a boy, a young man, a servant. It is used of a young person, a boy (Gen 19:4); one old enough to serve in battle or as a personal private force (Gen 14:24; 1 Sam 21:2[3]; 30:13, 17); or as a helper in the army (1 Sam 14:1). It is used regularly to refer to a young male servant (Gen 18:7; 22:3); or an attendant to the king (Esth 2:2). Warren Baker and Eugene E Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 742. Elwell and Beitzel have a good explanation, "He refers to himself as "a child" when called, but this word is not the same as used in Jeremiah 30:6 and 31:8, and cannot be limited to preadolescence. He was probably referring to his inexperience rather than his age. Jeremiah was born about 657 BC. during the reign of wicked King Manasseh, while the great Ashurbanipal, who had shaken the world by sacking the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes in 663 BC, ruled a world empire from Assyria." *BEB*, 1110.

³³ Spurgeon rightly states, “‘Speak whatever I tell you.’ This is the Christian’s principal work. The world needs believers who do not come to utter their own thoughts but to deliver their Master’s message.” Spurgeon, 982.

³⁴ Spurgeon has a good observation, “Before Jeremiah becomes a speaker for God, he must be a seer. The original name for a prophet was ‘seer,’ one who could see with spiritual insight. Those who try to speak for God must be seers before they can be speakers. Next the true speaker for God must see what God sets before him. In this case the Lord had set before Jeremiah’s eye ‘a branch of an almond tree.’ Jeremiah did not merely say, “I see a branch” but “I see a branch of an almond tree.” He distinguished at once the kind of branch that was revealed to him in the vision, for he was a man who had those powers of discernment and discrimination that are most necessary in the Lord’s servants. Those who see what they can see and take care to see it well are the people who will receive further instruction.” Spurgeon, 982.

³⁵ Joel Beeke rightly observes, “Hard times were ahead, but Jeremiah must get on with the task. gird up thy loins. To secure with a belt the long flowing clothes that would hinder freedom of movement over rough terrain, a metaphor for spiritual preparation (Luke 12:35; 1 Peter 1:13). Like an impregnable city, Jeremiah would withstand every assault against him because the Lord was with Him.” Joel R Beeke, Michael P V Barrett, and Gerald M Bilkes, eds, *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1037.

³⁶ Calvin rightly observes in Jeremiah 1:17, “We hence see what this means, Fear not, lest I should make thee to fear; that is, “Be of a good courage and of a ready mind, lest thou be justly exposed to shame; and fear them not, lest thou shouldest really fear them, and lest they should even tear thee to pieces and tread thee under their feet: for in case thou fearest them, thou wilt be unworthy of being supported by the strength of my Spirit.” John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Verse Commentary* (1509–1564) in *SwordSearcher 9* DVD-ROM (Broken Arrow, OK: StudyLamp Software, 2023), sv “Jeremiah 1:17.”

³⁷ Gregory gives a good explanation of Jeremiah 1:17–19, “God’s warning was intended to encourage Jeremiah, not to dishearten him. City walls were constructed of stone; iron and bronze were much stronger than any walls of the time. A literal iron column or a bronze wall would have been impossible for the siege warfare of the time to break down or to penetrate. God’s message to Jeremiah was that no matter how hard his adversaries might fight against him, the Lord would see to it that they did not overcome him. The Lord would be with Jeremiah.” Gregory Lint, ed, Jeremiah–Lamentations, *The Complete Biblical Library: Study Bible* (World Library Press, 2000), sv “Jeremiah 1:17–19.”

³⁸ Poole has a good observation, “They shall fight against thee; make united attempts upon thee. See Judg. 20:11. They shall not prevail; they shall not be able, by all their devices, to shorten thy days, chap. 15:20; 20:10, 11. For I am with thee: here is the reason given of his safety, God will be his guard. See ver. 8; 2 Tim. 4:17, 18.” Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 2:493.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF HEAVEN-BOUND AND HELL-BOUND PEOPLE FROM THE SERMONS OF DR JOHN SUNG

Crisa Jane Guanzon Zagado

People may have different choices as to which places they would go to for their holidays. They may choose spots that are convenient and comfortable for them and prepare themselves by getting to know the language and cultural practices just to fit in. Would they do the same if they were to go to an eternal place? It may be yes, it may be no. The answer lies in how people regard or live their life in this temporal place. Anyway, one thing is for sure: There is only one place a person can go to after death. It is either heaven or hell. Matthew 25:46 clearly states, *“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”*

The Choice They Make

There are two kinds of people: (1) Those who deliberately reject Jesus Christ as Saviour; they are blind, deaf, they have a dead-end. They will be shut out.¹ (2) Those who repent (Acts 3:19) and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ alone (John 3:16, Acts 16:31); they are born again (John 3:5-7).

Hell-bound people love the riches of the world. They want to eat, drink and be merry and live long on earth. It is like the rich man in Luke 16:19. Indeed these are people who prefer riches and a great name. They are always thinking of material gain and all the lust of the flesh.² The man who does not see God as one who could bring him to heaven never sees his sins. It is difficult for him to repent. This kind of a man is the happy-go-lucky man who delights in the pleasures of earth. The end of such a man who may be a “Christian” is surely hell. While on earth, he is only busy preparing himself for an eternity in hell, not heaven.³ The rich man in hell might be repentant but he cannot change his condition. If one is well known and rich on earth without Christ, he

would end up being the biggest loser in the life hereafter.⁴ It is a warning not only for the unbelievers but also for professing believers.

On the other hand, a heaven-bound person looks forward to the riches of heaven and to the new world to come. He is like Lazarus who prefers to be a nobody in this world so as to be a somebody with God. He would rather carry his cross and follow Jesus than to have all the silver and gold of this world. What is most amazing is that a heaven-bound person would not think of doing evil deeds for he believes in the reality of heaven as well as of hell.⁵ The heaven-bound person after realising his sins would readily repent and do the things that are right in the sight of God. This can be seen in Zacchaeus who was rich because he cheated, but he was ready to give back what he had stolen.⁶

A heaven-bound person has more love for God than anyone else. This is seen in Abraham who was willing to offer his only son Isaac to the Lord. He has total and unfailing obedience and was constrained by his love for his Lord.⁷ Our choice would prove our character.

The Life They Live

The unbelievers who continue in their sins are like having the sickness of a leper. It gives them personal suffering as well as others around them. Such was the experience of Naaman, but the Lord was gracious to send a girl to lead him to experience the goodness of the Lord. That girl became a blessing to him. She informed him that there was a man of God who could help him in his sickness. Heaven-bound people should be a witness in any way.⁸ Sadly, unbelievers think that saving grace can be bought by money. Naaman went with silver and gold. A proud attitude cannot obtain God's saving grace.⁹ Praise the Lord he humbled himself before the God of Israel and was saved. He no longer worshipped other gods (I Kgs 5:17-18).

As a believer, we should live with love in the Lord Jesus Christ, not because we were the first to love Him, but because He loved us first. As such, heaven-bound people should love God above all. Mary reflected that kind of love by prioritising the Lord Jesus Christ and His words. Yet Martha loved Jesus too in a different way when she thought it could be the best. But our Lord and Saviour wants us to give more time to Him than anything else, to give time to Him by knowing Him all the more

and to experience His love for us. One key here is to love God not just by knowing but also by living out what He has commanded us.¹⁰

People who are heaven bound are blessed or happy people despite the extreme experiences they go through for the sake of the Lord. Knowing all the beatitudes in Matthew 5 would give much comfort to all believers. All these hardships are crosses to bear for each child of God who looks forward to the crown of life in heaven. Believers are also prayerful people because a Christian who knows not how to pray is no Christian at all. Prayer is our weapon to fight Satan. It is a challenge to pray without losing heart, for such prayer is most powerful.¹¹

Furthermore, heaven-bound people are happy people for we are saved through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through it, we can see God any time.¹² It follows peace. This requires a heart that is not troubled at all, believing that God is preparing a place for us in heaven. But while here on earth, the Lord has granted us a Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Suffering is inevitable. Yet paradise is real and will last forever.¹³

It is a great privilege for heaven-bound people to have the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, the heart will not acknowledge sin, there will be no understanding of the Bible, there will be no prayer, there will be no faith. Without His presence, there is no love (Rom 5:5), no courage (Mark 13:11), no power (Acts 1:8), no fruit (Gal 5:22), no life (Gal 5:25), no unity (Eph 4:3), no holiness (1 Pet 1:2), no spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:7-11), no assurance of salvation (Eph 1:13-14).¹⁴ The Holy Spirit will help the believer remove old sinful thoughts.¹⁵ Moreover, the Holy Spirit causes the preaching and teaching of God's Word to bear fruit, to move people to repent and confess their sins. This is the great work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The heaven-bound believer would manifest gratefulness unto the Lord like Mary manifested it. She was not mindful of the price of the perfume but the precious work of Jesus in her life, for to spend so much for the Lord is worthwhile.¹⁷ This encourages us believers to always be willing to sacrifice for the Lord because of love and thankfulness.

The Vocation They Embark On

Heaven-bound people are committed to obeying God's Word no matter what. Philip is one of the examples. He was willing to deny himself and be away from his family without doubting that God has called him to preach the gospel. A believer knows he must obey the

Great Commission of the Lord.¹⁸ John Sung for instance was convicted of this, saying, “Because God is with me, my mouth is His mouth. My feet, ears, eyes, heart are also His. With these I can only do His will.”¹⁹ Heaven-bound people desire to be evangelists for the Lord. Noah and his family did that. People might despise them for their faith but they were willing to sacrifice for the Lord to finish the work He had entrusted them to do. A good principle to imprint in our hearts is to never look at the present but the future. One day the whole world will be burnt up but to witness for Christ, to preach to bear fruit, remains forever.²⁰

The hell-bound believer will pretend that he believes but in reality he does not. Why do they profess? Two of the reasons are money and fame. This was how Simon the sorcerer thought. He had been living in hypocrisy. He should have known God’s grace; yet he abused it.²¹

The Hobbies They Delight In

The hell-bound believer is most likely living a hypocritical “holier than thou” life. For them, traditions and practices are superior to the Word of God. These are the Pharisees. They are stressing the outside and they are full of conceit. So they judge Jesus Christ with pride. They are gossipers behind His back. They are dumb and deaf to the things of God. Why? It is because they would rather have the words of man than of God.²² This is deliberately a work of the devil. John Sung described such hell-bound people as full of adultery, thievery, murder, jealousy, slandering, lying, and conceited devils.²³ They live a very carnal life.

On the other hand, heaven-bound people are prayerful. It is their hobby. Indeed prayer increases our faith. It signifies an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s children must only trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. When they do this, fear will be cast away.²⁴ Another thing they like to do is that believers tend to read their Bible, to have a devoted life for God’s glory and willingness to give to the Lord unconditionally.²⁵

The Behaviour They Show

Hell-bound believers are false accusers because they follow the chief accuser, Satan. They only see what is wrong with others but are blind to their own sins.²⁶ When these people are confronted by the Word of God, they do not repent. Many indeed take the Word for granted. They are still hard-hearted, light-resistant. Others may repent,

yet there are still stumbling stones, hidden sins beneath. So when tribulation comes, they cannot stand, but stumble and fall. Some would be busy with their concerns like their businesses. They have no time for the Word of God, no time to witness and no courage to testify.

Heaven-bound believers must be people who delight to listen to God's Word. When convicted, they change and bear much fruit for the Lord.²⁷ Know that the greatest sin in the world is fruitlessness. No repentance means no fruit.²⁸

Heaven-bound believers must live a life of true repentance. There was a woman named Rahab whose faith and courage must be followed by every generation of believers. She had a faith that did not shrink despite the risk she was facing. God used her providentially to keep the two spies safe. At the same time, it was a blessing to her to know and experience the God of Israel. This best describes what a person has when he has Jesus—he has life. No Jesus, no life.²⁹

A heaven-bound person is not a seeker of unrighteous money or treasure on earth. He seeks his treasure in heaven. If a believer knows where he will end, he will know his purpose in life.³⁰ Then he knows what to do. One of these is to rely on the working of the Holy Spirit. It is true that if one is willing to be led by the Holy Spirit, he will surely find the marvellous and fruitful way.³¹ It is not difficult to live a life of obedience if one is willing to leave his comfort zone to follow God's leading. We cannot deny that there will be failures, disappointments and doubts along the way. God may chastise us to pull us up to continue moving forward. Believers who are bound to heaven are not quitters. They do not stop halfway. They go straight forward and glorify God.³²

For the hell-bound, they are described as fearful to confess and repent of their sins. They are unbelieving because they deny God, His Word, the judgment to come and the existence of heaven and hell. They are full of self-exaltation and pure conceit. They are murderers, whoremongers, idolaters and liars. These are the attitudes of the Devil.³³

The Things They Look Forward To

A believer who is bound to heaven looks forward to heaven but the unbeliever looks towards the world.³⁴ All of us came from the dark side. But once a person acknowledges his sins, he looks to Jesus with a pure

heart. This was how Zaccheus lived his life after living in a dark world. He decided to look to the Lord Jesus Christ. People might question our calling of salvation and despise it. A believer would not see the face and opinions of men. Zacchaeus paid no attention to the peoples' mockery and hatred.³⁵ With this, he found true happiness when he saw and received Jesus Christ into his life.

Moreover, believers should not be easily discouraged by how the Lord is designing their lives. Sometimes we are a bit confident that we are doing the right thing. Yet the circumstances will give us doubt if it is so. Truly, as we go out witnessing at present, we might meet with little response, little success, but we just believe that one day we will see God's glory. With this, we look ahead by labouring on for the Lord. If we have this kind of perception, then we know we are on the winning side even though we might have battles within.³⁶

The believer who looks forward expects new hope. Despite the difficulties permitted by the Lord, there is hope in His mercy. God is just and He has the right to get angry. Yet, God's chastisement is love. Another thing that a believer must hold on to is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. A believer will draw hope in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ because heaven is real.³⁷ O that wonderful promise believers must claim, *"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also"* (John 14:1-3).

Notes

¹ Timothy Tow, trans, *40 John Sung Revival Sermons* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, nd), Book II, "Be Born Again", 2-3.

² Ibid, Book I, "Heaven and Hell", 2.

³ Ibid, Book V, "A Christian in Hell", 1-4.

⁴ Ibid, 5-8.

⁵ Ibid, Book I, "Heaven and Hell", 3.

⁶ Ibid, Book I, "How Zacchaeus Got Saved?", 12.

⁷ Ibid, Book III, "The Story of the Hero-Model of the Old Testament", 7-9.

⁸ Ibid, Book V, "The Story of the Leper", 12-13.

⁹ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁰ Ibid, Book IV, "Three Steps in Loving the Lord", 19-23.

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- ¹¹ Ibid, Book VI, "The Secret of Prayer", 16-17.
- ¹² Ibid, Book IV, "Four Questions Before a Christian", 21.
- ¹³ Ibid, Book VI, "The Ten-Complete Peace of the Cross", 24-25.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, Book VII, "The Work of the Holy Spirit", 1-4.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, Book VII, "On Being Filled with the Holy Spirit I", 8.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, Book VII, "On Being Filled with the Holy Spirit II", 19-20.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, Book VII, "A Beautiful Gesture", 2.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, Book I, "In Quest of the True Peace", 20.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, Book IV, "My Testimony", 9-10.
- ²⁰ Ibid, Book II, "Noah and the Building of the Ark", 18-20.
- ²¹ Ibid, Book VI, "The Abundant Saving Grace Despised", 8.
- ²² Ibid, Book I, "Purifying the Heart Within", 25-27.
- ²³ Ibid, 29-30.
- ²⁴ Ibid, Book II, "On Faith", 12.
- ²⁵ Ibid, Book III, "On Building the House of God", 11-13.
- ²⁶ Ibid, Book I, "Burden of Sin Lifted", 15.
- ²⁷ Ibid, Book V, "The Field under Sowing", 23-25.
- ²⁸ Ibid, Book V, "Out and Out Repentance", 28-29.
- ²⁹ Ibid, Book VI, "A Harlot Found Salvation", 2.
- ³⁰ Ibid, Book I, "Heaven and Hell", 3.
- ³¹ Ibid, Book II, "The Unfathomable Grace of God", 23-24.
- ³² Ibid, Book III, "The Story of the Hero-Model of the Old Testament", 1-3.
- ³³ Ibid, Book III, "A New Hope", 22-29.
- ³⁴ Ibid, Book I, "Heaven and Hell", 3.
- ³⁵ Ibid, Book I, "How Zacchaeus Got Saved", 9.
- ³⁶ Ibid, Book III, "On Building the House of God", 16-19.
- ³⁷ Ibid, Book III, "A New Hope", 20-21.

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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Samuel Goh

What about the problem of evil? Is it a problem at all? I think we all live long enough to experience enough evil to take evil for granted. It is only in heaven where evil is absent. Even though we take evil for granted, evil constitutes a problem for people.

We have all sorts of sufferings, varying degrees of hurt and various types of hurt: extreme poverty for those in much poorer countries, broken marriages in most societies, health issues, loss of a parent since young, parental neglect, being abused, getting betrayed.

Some evil was inflicted upon you by other people you do not know. Some evil was inflicted upon you by people you trust. Some evil was inflicted by disasters or diseases. There are premature deaths. There are fatal accidents.

No matter how wealthy you are, you are not exempted from these things. Kobe Bryant was wealthy enough to commute by helicopter. He died in a helicopter crash on a routine trip. Two young sons in a Christian family died in a car because a tree fell on them as they stopped at the red light. A Christian old man drove two hours to attend a church prayer meeting. On the way to church he fell asleep at the wheel and died in a head-on collision with a heavy vehicle. Regardless of whether you are rich or poor, Christian or not, you experience evil.

In 2004, a tsunami that took over 200,000 lives and wrecked thousands of homes led people to question the existence of God. "Where was God when the tsunami came?" was a trending theme then. This is the problem of evil.

Question of Evil

What are the kinds of evil out there? (1) There is natural evil which is impersonal, external, physical, temporal. It can be caused by diseases, disasters and catastrophes. (2) There is also moral evil which is

personal, internal, inside of us, spiritual as well, which is wickedness, sin and transgression. (3) There is also supernatural evil as experienced by Job who was a target of the devil. Others experienced demonic attacks, likely for dabbling in the occult. (4) Finally, there is the evil of eternal punishment in the lake of fire. The lake of fire is an evil not because it is immoral. It is evil because it is bad for you.

I had always thought that the question of evil is only a thought experiment for philosophers and Christian scholars in a classroom setting. I never knew it had such a far-reaching and deep-seated impact that even some close relatives of mine I suspect are having the problem of evil. Because evil exists, they reject God, they reject Christianity. It is usually not about the suffering of others that evil becomes a problem for them. It is when they became victims of evil that evil becomes a problem for them.

Evil can be so deep and traumatising that you no longer trust anyone. You became defensive and wear a mask (figuratively) everywhere you go. You want to avoid being hurt again. Then when it comes to the things of God, you are not able to trust God. The promises of God are like fairy tales. God promises to take care of you, yet you suffered. Others may react in another way. They start to live in debauchery. It is as according to Job's wife's, "*Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die*" (Job 2:9). Nothing matters anymore. Just eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die (cf 1 Cor 15:32). "God doesn't care. So, I don't care," you may say.

In the past, philosophers came up with some propositions to undermine God because evil exists. So they came up with the following: (1) If God exists, then God is all powerful, and all good. (2) If God is all powerful, yet evil exists, then God is not all good (omnibenevolent) because God has the power, and He did not prevent evil, (3) If God is all good, yet evil exists, then God is not all powerful because He cannot prevent evil. (4) If God is all good, all powerful, yet evil exists, then God does not exist.

They presuppose that God and evil cannot coexist or that there is a logical contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil. This is the problem of evil for philosophers. Some of us may think in this way too. If God is really good, why did He allow me to suffer?

Is it really a problem? The existence of God and the existence of evil is not a real contradiction. What would then be a real contradiction? It is the proposition that God is good, and God is evil at the same time. God is God and God is not God at the same time. These are real contradictions. For example, I am a father and a son at the same time, but I am not a father and a son at the same time in the same relationship. Philip is the father of Samuel. If Philip is the father of Samuel, Samuel is the son of Philip and cannot be the father of Philip. I cannot be a father and a son at the same time in the same relationship. So, the man-made logic that evil cannot exist if God exists is imposing a limitation on how God should work. But who is man to determine how God should or should not work?

“Where was God when the tsunami came?” I thought it was the wrong question to ask. The right question to ask was, “Where were you before the tsunami came?” At first, I thought that that was a good rebuttal. In a sense it is true that we are unfaithful before the tsunami came. We are not qualified to question God. But that question has a negative implication that if you live righteously, God is indebted to you to protect you from any evil.

Biblical Presuppositions

There are certain biblical presuppositions to maintain: (1) Creator-creature distinction: God ordained or decreed all things. God is sovereign and has the right to do whatever He wants. In Job 2:10, Job said, *“shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”* He also said in Job 1:21, *“Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”*

(2) God has the right to determine who gets what. He is sovereign to give good things and bad things to anyone He wishes. God is not a debtor. He owes no one anything. His relation to all His creatures is really by pure grace and mercy. *“He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust”* (Matt 5:45). Psalm 115:3 says, *“But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.”* Isaiah 45:9–10 declares this truth using absurdity, *“Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What*

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makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands? Woe unto him that saith unto his father, What begetteth thou? or to the woman, What hast thou brought forth?" So, if we strive with God thinking that He has no right to do whatever He wants even at our disposal, then we are insane.

This is a good starting point. We need to know our place before God. I do not deny the hurt you suffered, the abuse you tolerated, the scars you have in your hearts. I do not take those away from you. But healing and comfort begins with an accurate view of who God is and who we are. Only then, we will realise that it is all of grace.

God controls evil. Isaiah 45:5-7 declares, *"I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things."* Proverbs 16:4, *"The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil."* Deuteronomy 32:39, *"See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand."*

Consider the testimony of king Nebuchadnezzar after he recovered from his insanity, *"I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?"* (Dan 4:34-35). Psalm 76:10 says, *"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."*

Even though God is sovereign, God controls evil, you must not think of God as a tyrant, as a big bully for He controls evil for good. To what extent does He control? He controls everything, every part of evil, the impact, the extent of evil, the damages it causes, everything is within His control.

Though He controls evil, we must maintain that God is not the author of sin. This is extremely important. To attribute sin to God means God ceases to be God. Psalm 5:4 says, *"For thou art not a God that*

hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee.” 1 John 1:5b declares, “that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

(3) There is absolutely no evil with God, we must maintain this. Then now the question is how does evil come about? God created everything good. At the end of six-day creation, He pronounced everything good. Although there is a mystery, it is from self-corruption. Lucifer corrupted himself. God did not create the devil. God created Lucifer. Lucifer corrupted himself, became the devil and tempted Adam and Eve. Adam fell along with all humanity.

How then do we explain moral evil? It is something like a parasite. It cannot exist in isolation. It must exist in relation to something. It is like a hole or a pit. Can a hole or a ditch exist in isolation? It cannot, it is just a void. But a hole exists in relation to a ground or a platform. So, evil is like this. At the same time, it is a monster because you do not just fill it up. You must overcome it, you must resist it. This shows God did not create evil that is independent to wreak havoc.

Even though God decrees moral evil, He is not liable for moral evil. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph said, *“But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”* We see Joseph telling his brothers that although they had an evil intent to get rid of him, and hence they were guilty and culpable, God meant it for good. God decreed it, but the source of sin is in the creature. God did not participate in sin. In the forms of criminal liability, God did not instigate. He did not aid and abet. He did not perpetrate. Thus, how can you accuse God of sinning? Imagine a criminal on trial blames God for all the crimes he had committed arguing that if God never ordained it, he would not have done it. The judge or jury will say that the criminal is insane. And if criminals can be excused by blaming God, then every criminal will either receive a lighter sentence or be scot-free. Then there will be no reasonable justice for society to be liveable.

Not Bare Permission

John Calvin said that human beings accomplish nothing except by God’s secret commands and cannot deliberately accomplish anything except what He had already decreed with Himself and determined by His secret direction. Although God is utterly opposed to sin and, in as

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much as it displeases Him, condemns whatever is unrighteous in human beings, it is nonetheless not by His bare permission but by His command and secret decree that all the acts of human beings are governed. According to Richard Muller, Calvin did not say the secret decree directly causes human acts but that it governs human acts, and rules out bare permission. Divine permission does not imply an absence of will. Rather, it speaks of a governance, ordination or establishment of the condition within which the human actor operates. Romans 8:28 says, "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*" Because God is in control of evil, He uses evil to accomplish His good purpose.

In the story of Joseph spanning across 13 chapters, (1) we see that God is not the author of evil, (2) the source of moral evil is in the sinner himself, that is why Joseph's brothers were guilty, (3) God is greater than evil and He is in control of evil, (4) God uses evil to accomplish His purposes which may be unknown to us in the present. Some of these purposes are for the salvation of others, for the repentance of his brothers, for the sanctification of Joseph (cf Ps 119:71).

Judas betrayed Jesus. Judas meant it for evil. God meant it for good. The Jews protested to crucify Jesus. The Jews meant it for evil. God meant it for good. There is so much evil, then where is good? In the cross, God demonstrated that He is good. Jesus died for sinful men. The just for the unjust. It is only through Jesus that we can be saved.

To the philosophical problem of evil, God is all powerful. Even with the existence of evil, God demonstrates that His power is above and beyond evil because He controls evil. God is also all good. The existence of evil does not mean that God is bad, but God uses it to show how good He is.

Evil is definitely unpleasant and uneasy to bear. If you turn the table and ask: What about goodness? You will realise that we seldom praise God and give thanks to Him for the goodness we enjoyed. Besides doxology, an application of goodness is to repent, "*Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*" (Rom 2:4). Think of the much God has tolerated to let us live. He could have struck us dead the moment we sinned. God is patient with us, not willing that

any should perish but that all should come to repentance. He wants us to return to Him.

If you are an unbeliever, your only hope is in Jesus. The problem of evil will lead you to endless despair and see life as meaningless. Perhaps, you may even contemplate suicide which is actually very common. I appeal to you to place your hope and trust in God because He controls evil and purposes evil for good. He also demonstrated that He is good in the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the just for the unjust. And Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. Being alive again He can confer the benefits secured by His death to you if you will trust in Him.

Application for Believers

Those who suffered tremendously, nothing I say will help you. Whatever new and pleasant experiences you have will not take away your hurt. Only the Holy Spirit can show you that Christ is worthy of your trust, of your hurt, of your forgiving or releasing others.

For the comfort of believers, someone said, "as long as Jesus is on the throne, every day is a good day." R C Sproul said, "When I think I'm unfairly hated, I try to remember that I'm unfairly loved."

Now, how to reduce our contribution to the problem of evil?

As Individual Christians

We should own whatever evil we have contributed. It could be that we have contributed significantly that others want us dead. The obvious is do no evil and obey God's commandments. It will greatly reduce your contribution to the problem of evil. Duterte, the former president of the Philippines, said that God is stupid because He created perfect beings but failed to preserve their perfection. But his background was that he was sexually abused as a child by a Catholic priest. We see how a bad testimony can have a long and profound impact on a person's hatred for God. Kong Hee used church money for his Crossover project. Although he won the appeal based on definition, people still paint in broad strokes that Christianity is bad, that Christian leaders are cheats. But if we obey God's commandments, we become credible Christians and will greatly reduce our contribution to the problem of evil.

In Personal Conflict

Jeremiah 17:9 says, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”* Since the heart is deceitful above all things and is desperately wicked, we need to examine ourselves. Instead of giving ourselves the benefit of a doubt, we need to give ourselves a dose of suspicion. I learned this from Rev Quek that in a conflict between God and man, God is always right, God is always blameless. In a conflict between man and man, it is seldom the case that one party is blameless. Even though we are seldom faultless in a conflict, let us learn from Paul’s example, *“And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men”* (Acts 24:16); *“While he answered for himself, Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all”* (Acts 25:8); *“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ”* (1 Cor 10:31-11:1).

If it is an issue of administration, we can always seek improvement. If it is an issue of sin, it must be addressed.

Rightly Dividing Problems

It is important to identify the boundary. Failure to do so shows that you are lazy, inexperienced, childish, biased, not interested in objective truth, or intellectually dishonest. By way of illustration: A chicken rice seller who fails to demarcate a drumstick when a customer orders a drumstick. Being lazy, he cuts a quarter and gives him a quarter for the price of a drumstick. If you sell chicken rice like that, I will be your regular customer. Imagine you are a surgeon and your patient has cancer and needs only to cut off part of his finger. Instead of cutting part of his finger, you cut off his whole wrist. Will people still want to get you to perform surgery on them?

Do you see the need to rightly demarcate the problem? What if you are on the receiving end of being generalised? I view generalised conclusions as a bit of truth but a whole lot of lie. Imagine the difficulty to explain the misunderstanding. On top of them, with all

the confirmation bias, how will you ever clear yourself against such a high wall? Matthew 7:12 says, *“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”*

As Married Couples

Both of you will be seen as a Christian couple. If you vent your frustration at each other, shout at each other in front of outsiders, people will perceive that you are deeply dissatisfied with each other. Given this simplistic and generalized context, how will you convince others that you love each other? You are to be a model of Christian marriage.

The problem of evil is not only a problem for unbelievers. It can be a problem for believers too. Your spouse may doubt the goodness of God because of you. Your spouse may ask: Why did God give me such a spouse?

It is often perceived that once you get married, it is game over. After all, you have already secured a spouse, you can relax. Actually the game is not over. It is stage two of the game with a different goal. Your goal now is to maintain and increase the love for each other. This is by pursuing each other and affirming one's love.

Your world should not revolve around her as that is idolatry. But just put in a little effort to think of her, talk to her and treat her well. It is typical for husbands to get angry easily and be in a rage. It is not a light thing for Proverbs to say, *“He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city”* (Prov 16:32). This is why it is important for wives not to escalate the anger of their husbands with unnecessary words or unnecessary repetitions. Spend time together in the word and prayer and let God use His word to transform both of you.

As a Family

For parents, Ephesians 6:4 says, *“And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”* Do not stumble your children that they end up hating God. For children, Ephesians 6:1–3 says, *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou*

mayest live long on the earth." Do not give your parents a reason to hate Jesus because of your bad or disrespectful behaviour.

As a Church Community

Do not label others as devil unless you really have a strong case. In ancient church history, it must be argued why a person is a heretic. One must present his arguments to a council. The council then must accept it as valid. And then the accused heretic must be given a chance to recant. Of course, councils are not perfect. There was a church father who was branded as a heretic by a council but was restored in a subsequent council.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, "*And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*"

It is unhelpful to label others. How will it contribute to solving the problem by labelling others? I know, "*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Eph 6:12). We may even be influenced by the devil to do bad things, but labelling others is unwarranted.

We must not respond to imbalance with imbalance because the result will be imbalanced. We must respond to imbalance with balance. Paul says, "*Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?*" (Gal 4:16). If you are in a boy-girl relationship, you will soon experience what swinging to extremes is like. We are reactionary people after all. We just need to guard against our tendency to swing to an extreme.

Here are a few mind-blowing passages: (1) Colossians 3:12-15, "*Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.*" The "*bond of perfectness*" implies that we all should be friends and be bonded together. In heaven we will all be good friends. It is an irony that we can't even be friends now in the church. Will you allow your

Christian opponents to be your friends? It is mind-blowing because God's standard is so high, so pure, so sublime, it crashes me!

(2) Matthew 5:23-24, *"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."* God wants reconciliation in His church or your worship will not be accepted. Think of Psalm 15 and Psalm 24. God's love is conciliatory, you cannot really love one another unless you are willing to forgive and offer reconciliation, 70 times seven, I may add in one day. Our love is patterned after God's love.

Lastly, if you want to fight (Jude 3), fight for something worthy. Make sure that it is on the hill of Jesus Christ and on His Word for which you are prepared to die.

Pr Samuel Goh is a Bachelor of Theology graduate of Far Eastern Bible College and is now a Master of Divinity student at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. The above was a message given at True Life Bible-Presbyterian Church on the Lord's Day, 4 June 2023.



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COLLEGE NEWS

The year 2022 was **FEBC's 60th year (Diamond Jubilee)**. Throughout the six decades, FEBC has seen changes to its personnel, premises, and programmes, but its position in terms of doctrine can never and must never change. FEBC must remain a Reformed, Premillennial, Separatist Bible College by upholding the Verbal Plenary Inspiration (VPI) and Verbal Plenary Preservation (VPP) of the Bible, its consequent infallibility and inerrancy in the original languages, and its sole, supreme and final authority for faith and practice.

Total enrolment in the January–April 2022 semester was 623: 30 fulltime residential students and 593 part-time students from 12 countries (Australia, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Thailand). There were three new students: Andrew Abecedario Adolacion and Florante Campos Cabanas from the Philippines, and Lee Hasom from South Korea.

On Tuesday 3 January 2023, FEBC reopened with a **Day of Prayer**. Faculty, students and staff gathered for a time of worship, Bible meditation, testimony, thanksgiving and intercession. The Rev Haposan Siregar was the Lord's messenger and he spoke from Exodus 32:26, "*Who is on the LORD's side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him.*" He testified that he is grateful to the Lord for being a graduate of FEBC, and for the precious truths he has learned from the College. He called on all to be united with FEBC and to hold fast to the truths taught by her, even the doctrine of the Verbal Plenary Preservation of the Scriptures which he believes to be an important doctrine to uphold for such a time as this.

The lecturers/tutors (and courses) for the January–April 2023 semester were: Rev Dr Jeffrey Khoo (Hebrews), Rev Dr Quek Suan Yew (Joshua, Judges, Ruth; Homiletics; Hebrew Reading II), Rev Dr Prabhudas Koshy (Ecclesiastes), Rev Dr Koa Keng Woo (Bible Geography IV, Cults II), Rev Stephen Khoo (Nehemiah), Rev Tan Kian Sing (Galatians), Rev Dr Jose Lagapa (New Testament Introduction), Rev Clement Chew (2 Corinthians), Miss Carol Lee (Women in Church History), Rev Zhu Jianwei (Life of Christ II [Chinese]), Pr Joshua Yong (Contemporary Theology II, Greek Reading II), Miss Joycelyn Chng (Teaching Methods), Pr Cornelius Koshy (Greek Elementary II), Pr Samuel Joseph (Canon and

Text), Miss Khoo May Lynn (Pianoforte), Mrs Patricia Joseph (English Intensive II), and Mrs Irene Lim (English Intermediate II).

Fourteen **Basic Theology for Everyone** courses were offered to the public on campus and online in the January–April 2023 semester—13 were livestreamed (Canon and Text; New Testament Introduction; Nehemiah; Cults II; Teaching Methods; Ecclesiastes; Contemporary Theology II; Galatians; 2 Corinthians; Women in Church History; Joshua, Judges, Ruth; Hebrews; Life of Christ II in Chinese), and one was video-screened (Systematic Theology IV, Eschatology).

Total enrolment in the January–April 2023 semester was 624: 32 fulltime residential students and 592 part-time students from 17 countries—Australia, Cambodia, China, Congo, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, and USA. There were three new students: Timothy Nguyen (Australia), Song Yuanzhi (China), and Priscilla Tan (Singapore).

A **Daily Vacation Bible College** course “Charismatism Examined” was conducted by the Principal Rev Dr Jeffrey Khoo, 1–6 May 2023.

FEBC’s **48th Graduation Service** was held on 7 May 2023 at Calvary Pandan BPC. The Rev Dr Jose Lagapa was the graduation speaker and he spoke on the topic, “Prophets for Such a Time as This” from Ezekiel 2. From the text, we are reminded that for preachers to be used of God in these perilous times, they must (1) be called by God, (2) be full of the Holy Spirit, (3) be humble in heart, (4) be obedient to the Holy Scriptures, and (5) preach without fear of man. A total of 36 graduated with their respective certificates and degrees. Certificate of Religious Knowledge (CertRK): Alan Tam, Au Young Xiao Wei Joyce, Chairine Chayadi, Cheong Sock Wah Jodie, Chiang Chin Ching, Chin Bo Thong Christopher, John Matthew Inductivo, Lek Jan Jin Lucas, Lee Mei Foong, Lim Fai Fiona, Lim Sah Hong Cindy, Lim Yuan, Lian Yah Mei Jasmine, Tan Su Fei Sophie, Tan Shiwen Ysabel, Ong Lai Hock Jaylen, Poh Puay Yong; Certificate of Biblical Studies (CertBS): Ang Kim Kung Milton, Einstine Macamay Opiso, Poh Zhongxian Adrian, Chan Cheow Lien Audrey, Tan Shixuan Nyssha, Wong Siew Ping Linda; Diploma in Theology (DipTh): Gan Ken En Samuel, Hkun Seng; Bachelor of Theology (BTh): Jonathan Ryan Hendricks, Park Jongeun Joyce; Master of Religious Education (MRE): Lagapa Thessa Ba-a, Deccarlo Balongcas Igot; Master of Divinity (MDiv):

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Chew Hui Wen Hadassah, Lagapa Theya Ba-a, Park Jonghwi Angela, Wong Pei Yu Crayson, Riangwati Gulo; Master of Theology (ThM): Ra Chaewon; Doctor of Religious Education (DRE): Nguyen Gia Hien.



Rev Dr Nguyen Gia Hien and his son Timothy (1st year student)



Jonathan Hendricks (BTh) with his parents

FEBC's **annual retreat** was held as usual at the Resort Lautan Biru in Mersing, Malaysia, 8-10 May 2023 right after the graduation service.

A total of 57 comprising faculty, students and alumni headed to the campsite by the sea, about three hours away from Singapore. At Mersing, time was primarily spent in Bible meditation and Christian fellowship. There were six devotional sessions with messages from the following: The Principal spoke from 2 Timothy 2:2 on the need to pass on the torch of God to the next generation of younger faithful men who will continue on in the good biblical-theological tradition of the school. The Rev Koa Keng Woo, our most elderly lecturer at 94 years old, spoke from Luke 9:57-62 on the need to press on in the service of the Lord without giving up despite all the hardships of ministry. The Rev Prabhudas Koshy spoke from John 21:1-25 on how our life is fruitful only because our God is faithful. By way of application, he said that the Church must be full of gossellers, not gossippers. The Rev Jose Lagapa preached from Proverbs 21:2 and exhorted the hearers to be full of discernment, not only to do what is right but also what is righteous, and how we must not use our own human reasoning but God's wisdom to do God's will and work. The Rev Dr Nguyen Gia Hien spoke from Jeremiah 1:4-10 on how servants of God are to be set apart and sanctified for God's use. As such, we must strive to be holy and humble as we serve the Lord. The final message was given by the Rev Clement Chew who spoke from 1 Samuel 12:20-25 on how we need to serve the Lord truthfully and faithfully.

Samuel Goh, FEBC's IT Support Specialist, has resigned from FEBC wef 1 January 2023 to further his theological studies at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. Samuel graduated from FEBC with a BTh in 2017.

Crayson Wong (BTh 2021, MDiv 2023) has joined the FEBC staff as Clerk (Administrative Executive) with effect from 17 July 2023.

Mrs Irene Lim has decided to retire as FEBC's English Tutor after serving most faithfully since 2010. The College is grateful for her careful and caring teaching of the students all these years. With effect from 17 July 2023, **Mr Aw Beng Teck** is appointed English Tutor and shall teach Intermediate English at FEBC. He holds a BA (English Literature & Linguistics) from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; MA (English Language) from the National University of Singapore; a Certificate of Education from the Institute of Education, Singapore; and a Graduate Diploma in Marketing Communications from the Marketing Institute of Singapore.

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