

the MIDNIGHT BRIDE

A Devotional Journey with the Persecuted Church through the Song of Solomon

Richard Wurmbrand

Edited with Devotional Questions by The Voice of the Martyrs

Living Sacrifice Book Company Bartlesville, OK

THE MIDNIGHT BRIDE

By Richard Wurmbrand
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By THE SAME AUTHOR

Tortured for Christ

In God's Underground

Christ on the Jewish Road

Reaching Toward the Heights

Victorious Faith

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Introduction

The *Zohar* (meaning "the light" or "the splendor" in Hebrew) is a commentary of Jewish mysticism (called Kabbalah) on the Torah. The *Zohar* says this about the Song of Solomon:

On the day when this song was revealed the Shekinah (God's glory) descended to earth, as it is written, "And the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud." Why? Because "the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 8:11). On that day this hymn was revealed, and Solomon sang this song in the power of the Holy Spirit, wherein is to be found the summary of the whole Law of Moses, the whole work of creation, the mystery of the Patriarchs, the story of the Egyptian exile, and the Exodus therefrom, and the Song of the Sea. It is the quintessence of the Decalogue, of the Sinaitic covenant, of the significance of Israel's wanderings through the desert until their arrival in the Promised Land and the building of the Temple. It contains the crowning of the Holy Name with love and joy, the prophecy of Israel's exile among the nations, of their redemption, of the resurrection of the dead, and all else until that day which is "Sabbath to the Lord." All that was, and shall be, is contained in it; and, indeed, even that which will take place on the "Seventh Day," which will be the "Lord's Sabbath," is indicated in this song.

It is a song in which those who are above and those who are below participate; a song formed in the likeness of the world above, which

¹The first five books of the Old Testament written by Moses and is also called the Pentateuch.

is the supernal Sabbath, a song through which the supernal Holy Name is crowned. Therefore it is holy of holies. Why so? Because all its words are full of love and joy.

In the Babylonian *Talmud* (another sacred book of the Jewish people), the following words spoken by Rabbi Akiba are recorded: "No day in the history of the world is so precious as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the other Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is holiest of all." It is a love poem between Israel and his Savior.

By the same token, Scripture uses the word "holy" to describe the calling of those who choose to place their trust in Christ (Colossians 3:12, 2 Timothy 1:9, 1 Peter 2:4-10). We are all sanctified by faith, by the blood shed for us because that blood was Divine. However, there are lives that are holiest of all — the lives of the persecuted church. They suffer in jail or psychiatric asylums, in chains and hunger, deprived of their loved ones because they faithfully follow in the footsteps of their Master, the Lover of their soul.

The decision about which Jewish books should be included in, and which excluded from, the Old Testament was taken by the Council of Jamnia that met near A.D. 90. The Council debated very heatedly over the inclusion of the Song of Songs as a sacred book. It was accused of being a worldly book, because it spoke with simplicity about love between a man and woman, and sometimes it employed sexual imagery. But in the end the Song's opponents were overruled.

Some Jewish copyists wondered how this biblical book contains no mention of God. This is acceptable but superfluous. God resonates in every verse in this book. God is love. The bride and Bridegroom show burning, loyal feelings toward each other. Therefore, when it says, "love," it says, "God." In this Song, mutual love and the giving of self to the Bridegroom is religion itself. There is no need to dress it up with religious phraseology. Solomon's Song does not

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include the word "God," but it is an eloquent proof of His existence.

If the inclusion of the Song in the Bible was a matter for heated debate, it is no wonder that the underground church in communist countries is also hotly debated. Some prelates and theologians consider it to be a bunch of fanatics without any justification. Some allege that those who are imprisoned for Christ's sake in communist and Islamic countries suffer from masochistic tendencies, claiming they want to suffer, they have a "martyr complex." Others assert that persecuted Christians are not reasonable, refusing to choose the compromise demanded by life and by a dictatorship — compromises that would result in liberty to worship within the limits prescribed by the atheist government.

Not all souls are the same. Some rivers flow quietly between their banks; others overflow. There exist choice souls, whose love of God cannot be confined to the narrow limits of what is considered a normal faith. Their cup runs over. Their love of God burns.

Solomon's Song answers to the desires of such hearts. Only men such as these are found in the underground church.

SPIRITUAL GREED

There is a burning spiritual desire, which skeptics call "spiritual greed" because outwardly it is very similar to fleshly greed.

A beggar once said to an emperor who wished to give him charity, "Give me anything you like, but I will impose a condition."

The emperor was intrigued. He had never met such a beggar. "And what is that condition?" he asked.

"You must fill my bowl up completely."

The emperor laughed. "I can certainly do that," he replied. "I can even fill

your bowl with diamonds!"

He called for diamonds to be poured into the beggar's bowl. As they fell in, they disappeared.

The emperor roared in fury. "I will not be shamed by this beggar, even if my whole kingdom disappears!"

All the precious stones that were poured into the bowl disappeared. Finally, the emperor swallowed his pride and asked the beggar to tell him the secret of the bowl.

"It is made out of human selfishness," he explained. "It covets all things, yet it remains always empty, always hungry, never satisfied."

Luxurious cars, big bank accounts, fine houses, high position and reputation — they are only challenges to the ego, serving only to whet its appetite for more. This is fleshly greed.

Spiritual greed exists, too. Some of the disciples asked Jesus, "Grant unto us that we may sit, one on Your right hand, and the other on Your left, in Your glory" (Mark 10:37). They did not know the consequences of their request.

In spiritual matters, the only real glory is in the renunciation of glorifying self. The jewels of personal glory and self-aggrandizement will be swallowed up by the beggar's bowl, even if they are jewels in the form of spiritual things, including knowledge and service. The bowl is never satisfied.

Solomon's Song belongs to those who have made the greatest renunciation of all: the renunciation of self. For them, only the Beloved counts.

SINGING THE JESUS SONG

The famous pianist Rubinstein was in the company of a large number of music lovers who were discussing the works of Chopin. One of them asked, "How would Chopin have played his own compositions?" Rubinstein sat down

at the piano and began to play. When he finished, tears filled his listeners' eyes as they said, "Now we have heard Chopin himself."

Likewise, when reading commentary about the Song of Solomon, readers should feel they have heard Solomon himself.

A story is told about David as a young boy in King Saul's court. He asked permission to play on a beautiful harp that was sitting unused in the throne room. King Saul said: "It's useless. I have been cheated. I paid a great deal for that harp because it was spoken of highly. But the best harpists have tried it, and it was painful to hear the ugly sounds it produced. It's the worst harp that you could imagine."

David persisted; and because the king loved him greatly, he granted David permission to play it. The music was so beautiful that all the court wept. They had been moved to the depths of their hearts.

"How is it," demanded King Saul, "that so many tried to play this harp, and only you succeeded?"

David replied, "All the others tried to play their own songs, and the harp refused to yield to their wishes. I played to the harp its own song. You saw its joy when I reminded it of the days when it was a young tree in the forest. I told it about sunbeams playing in its branches, about chirping birds and about lovers embracing each other in its shadow. The harp was glad to remember those days.

"I told the story of the evil men who came and cut down the innocent tree. It was a sad day. Its life as a tree had finished. However, I told the harp that death cannot triumph over life. The tree has died as a tree, but its wood has become a harp, which can sing forever the glories of the eternal God. And the harp, which had wept when I told about her death, now rejoiced.

"When the Messiah comes, many will try to play their own songs on His harp. The results will be tragically dissonant. On the Messiah's harp, you must play His own song — the song of His eternal glory with God; the song of His humiliation as a babe in a manger; the song of a life in sorrow, opposition and poverty on Earth; the song of His being whipped and crucified and buried; and finally the song of His resurrection, ascension and enthronement in heaven.

"Then the harp will give a beautiful sound. His congregation will shine like a sun."

In writing this book, I have no song of my own to sing. I sing the Song of Jesus and of His bride as Solomon sang it. To make the song resound more beautifully than ever, I illustrate it with lives of saints and martyrs whose song was not their own but Jesus'. Let us sing for Him with the same burning love and adoration as the angels sang in Bethlehem at Jesus' birth.

A Great Sinner's Song

What's remarkable about "The Song of Songs," or "The Song of Solomon," is that God arranged this holy book of the Bible to be written by one of its worst characters.

There were many positives in King Solomon's reign over Israel. He secured a long period of peace for the nation. However, his personal life was beneath contempt.

He had three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines who lived in palaces and were provided with luxuries (1 Kings 11:3). He indulged in all the pleasures that fleshly life can provide. This cost enormous amounts of money that had to be raised by slave labor. He frequently flogged men to force them into complying with the demands of his debauchery.

In the light of all this, many theologians have expressed doubts of Solomon's salvation. One of the foremost apostles, Paul, was a murderer. Mary Magdalene was a loose woman. John Bunyan was a blasphemer. Many who

prophesied of Jesus in the OldTestament were men who had committed many bad deeds. There are many other similar instances.

We must learn to distinguish the value of a work from the value of the man who is behind it. God sometimes uses very sinful men for very good deeds, and sometimes very pious men do poor work. Think of Richard Wagner. He is described as ungrateful in love and irresponsible in politics. He was conceited and suffered from senile erotomania; he was also a fierce anti-Semite. But this in no way diminishes the value of his music.

So we should not be surprised that the most beautiful song in the Bible was composed by a great sinner.

One of the greatest accusations the press in the former Soviet Union hurled against the underground church was that many of its leaders were former thieves, murderers and even war criminals whose hands were stained with blood. The Soviets intended to discredit those church leaders, but God used them to show His glory: Robbers and murderers became illustrious saints. The children of God can rejoice in this truth.

The following is one of the oldest sermon illustrations used in the Christian church. It also tests one's understanding of the Christian life.

There once lived an ugly, hunchback dwarf. No one ever invited him to a party. No one showed him love or even attention. He became disillusioned with life and decided to climb a mountain and throw himself from its peak into the abyss.

When he ascended the mountain, he met a beautiful girl. He talked to her and discovered that she was climbing the mountain for the same purpose. Her suffering was at the other extreme. She had everyone's attention and love, but the one she loved had forsaken her for another girl, one with riches. She felt life had no meaning for her any longer, so they decided to make the ascent together.

While they climbed, they met a man who introduced himself as a police officer in search of a very dangerous bandit who had robbed and murdered many people. The king had promised a large reward to the person who captured him. The police officer was very confident: "I will catch him because I know he has a feature by which he can be recognized. He has six fingers on his right hand. The police have been looking for him for years. For the last two or three, nothing has been heard from him, but he must pay for a multitude of past crimes."

The three climbed the mountain. Near its peak was a monastery. Its abbot, although he had become a monk only recently, had quickly attained great renown for saintliness. When they entered the monastery, he came to meet them. You could see the glory of God in his face. As the girl bowed to kiss his right hand, she saw he had six fingers. With this, the story ends.

Those who hear this story are perplexed. It can't finish like this! What happened to the dwarf, the girl, the policeman? Was the criminal caught?

The story's beauty is that it *does* finish here. Something beautiful has happened: A criminal hunted because of his many robberies and murders has become a great saint, renowned for his godly life. All the rest is of no further interest. The great miracle has been performed. Christ has been born in the heart of a man of very low character.

The Hebrew language has no superlative. It says "vanity of vanities" for "the most worthless vanity" or "the heaven of heavens" for "the highest heaven." With God everything is possible: The Song of Songs (which means "the superlative song" in Hebrew) was written by a superlative sinner.

Because of this, the heights of Solomon's song are accessible to each one of us, whatever our past has been, and however deep we may have fallen in sin.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Before going into the book, here are a few general considerations concerning Solomon's Song. Origen, who died around A.D. 254, began the Christian allegorical interpretation of this book. Later, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) devised a Mariological interpretation, in which the bride was considered to be prophetic of Mary. From then on, commentaries either chose between these two possibilities or combined them.

The church acted harshly toward those who considered the Song of Solomon to be an ordinary, worldly book. The Song contains not only religious teaching, but also a very simple human message. Any young man who cannot love a girl wholeheartedly — and any girl who cannot love a man passionately — is neither ready to be a marriage partner, nor able to love their friends, their parents or their children properly.

The Song teaches a healthy attitude toward sex. Those who are ashamed of sex ought also to be ashamed of the woman and man who brought them into the world. Most of all, such people ought to be ashamed of their own sexuality. Sex is not wrong, just as our bodily functions are not wrong. Jesus had a body with all the organs and instincts we have, only He was never dominated by sin. God has ordained sexual life. He wills a physical expression of love between the sexes in the context of marriage. The *Zohar* says: "Sexual pleasure with your wife is a religious pleasure, and one which gives joy to God, too. Performed with gladness, the religious duty of conjugal intercourse, in the presence of God's glory [the *Shekinah*], gladdens your wife for the sake of the honor of the heavenly partner."

We should not be offended by all the physical love in the Song of Solomon. The body as well as the soul was created in the image of God. The body will be resurrected as will the soul. Orthodox mystics speak about "the holy flesh,"

because the flesh will have a part in resurrection. Jesus loved not only the souls of men, but also their flesh. Why should He not speak of the bodily charms of His bride? Justin Martyr wrote: "If the flesh were to be useless, why did Christ heal it? Why did He resurrect the dead? When He resurrected Lazarus and the young man in Nain and the young girl, He resurrected them soul and body."

Solomon wrote one thousand five songs (1 Kings 4:32). Only one has remained; it is probably the most beautiful. Film actors often perform before the cameras for six or seven hours a day to produce only two or three minutes of film. We witness to many people about Christ, but few respond to the gospel. We do many works for His kingdom, but we see very little of the results. We do not quit because the results are so small and often unseen. Those few are worth all the effort.

A carpenter witnessed to me about Christ. He died knowing he had brought only my wife and me to faith, but we brought others to Christ. Those brought others, and so on. The result is Hebrew Christian churches in Haifa, Tel-Aviv, and Jerusalem. Their true founder is that carpenter. He witnessed to many people without result, but he brought one to Christ who brought others. Some of them became interested in helping persecuted Christians in communist countries. That is how The Voice of the Martyrs worldwide began.

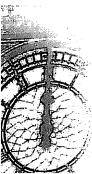
A little known preacher named Mordecai Ham led to Christ a young boy whose name was Billy Graham. Billy Graham brought thousands upon thousands to Christ. Mordecai Ham had witnessed to many people. He may not have had big results, but one of those he won to Christ was exceptional. He was Ham's Song of Songs. I would encourage you to write many songs. One of them will be your Song of Songs.

Finally, we should note that in the Song, the Bridegroom is sometimes called a king and the bride a queen. Sometimes he is a shepherd; sometimes they are workers in the vineyard. Sometimes they are in a palace; sometimes

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in the field. This teaches that people of all social classes are called to participate in spiritual life at the highest level.

--- Richard Wurmbrand



The Processional

She was a young girl of eighteen or nineteen, and she was very beautiful. Her last evening had come. Romanian Christian Lydia Arsenescu was sentenced to death for her faith. The execution always took place promptly at midnight, and for this reason the Christians called the firing squad "the midnight bride."

Wardens had brought gruel in pottery vessels into the cell. It was the evening meal. All the prisoners were hungry, but none cared to eat. All the other women pitied the young and beautiful girl who had to die that night.

Suddenly, her face began to shine. She lifted the pottery dish and said: "I have a boyfriend. I love him greatly, and he loves me. He hoped that one day my body would be in his embrace. But it will not be so. Tonight I will be shot. And after a few years, what was my body will have become clay, just like the clay from which this pot was made. And after a few more years, some other potter will make a vessel out of what was once my body. Who knows what is in this vessel? Perhaps what was once the beaming eye of a lover! My body will decay, but I will not die.

"Jesus said, 'Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.' And I believe these words of Jesus more than the rifles that will be pointed at me tonight. I believe them more than the bullets that will pierce my chest tonight. I believe them more than the open grave that is already waiting for me.

"I am not my body. I am an eternal spirit. Tonight I shall not die. Jesus is a gentleman; He will keep His word. Tonight, by His grace, I will enter through

² John 11:26

gates of pearl into the golden city. I will see and hear angels playing on their harps. I will be with the saints and the finest men of all the centuries; and above all, I will rest on Jesus' bosom, and there I will wait for my boyfriend to come, too."

A few minutes before midnight, they came for her. As she passed through the vaulted corridors of the underground prison, her voice could still be heard, resounding from wall to wall. She was reciting the Nicene Creed. But in her mouth, it had an entirely new significance. When she said, "I believe in one God,...maker of heaven and earth," she meant it. She knew there is a heaven. The proof was that she forsook earth for it. When she said, "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ," the words rang true. She was ready to give up her youth for Him. And then they heard her last words: "I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

After this, a few shots were heard. The poor communists believed they had killed her. They did not know they had sent her into the embraces of the most beautiful Bridegroom of all.



The devotional journey you are about to embark upon is perhaps unlike any other you have ever experienced. It is filled with stories of Christians who have left this world and entered into the arms of their heavenly Bridegroom. Some died before their time, others after having lived a full life, but all with their faces shining in anticipation of Christ's embrace.

First published in 1988 as a commentary of the Song of Solomon and titled *The Sweetest Song*, Richard Wurmbrand drew upon his rich Hebrew heritage to paint a picture of Christ's suffering bride (the persecuted church) and ther earthly journey into the arms of her Bridegroom. Full of colorful imagery

and poetic verses of a man and woman longing to be together, the Song of Solomon tugs at the heart of human desire for the relationship that we were created to have with Jesus Christ.

From the moment we say "I do" to Jesus as our Savior, we enter into a covenant that at times is close and others estranged. As the bride in the Song of Solomon and in the selected stories Richard Wurmbrand shares, you, too, will see yourself in those moments of great intimacy and lovesick separation. You will also note the frequency of the words "mystical" and "union with Christ" throughout this devotional, illustrating the great mystery as echoed in the words of Paul: "For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:30-32). In the words of Richard Wurmbrand:

In the Song of Solomon, as in many other parts of the Bible, the images of relationships such as those between bridegroom and bride are only poetic devices to represent the union of the believing soul and God, of the chosen people and their Master. The author of Solomon's Song is a mystic: He expresses himself in the normal language of mysticism.

At the end of each section is a question or series of questions designed to help you draw closer to your heavenly Bridegroom. You might consider having a notebook or journal handy to keep track of your thoughts and any words whispered to you as you commune with Christ. Some days there will be Scriptures to ponder, other days there will not. But what sets this apart from mainstream devotionals is the requirement of your imagination when asked to draw a spiritual principle or visualize yourself at one of Jesus' gatherings of people with questions how you might respond. You will be challenged to get

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alone with God and just gaze at His beauty. And you will be asked more than just close-ended questions. You will have to answer the simplest and most challenging of all one-word questions — "Why?"

We invite you to join your persecuted brothers and sisters as they take you through the Song of Solomon and tell it to you in their words, drawing you into a closer relationship with Christ, while inspiring you to live a passionate faith — with unreserved abandon — for the One who will one day welcome you into His embrace at the eternal wedding feast.

—The Voice of the Martyrs

Chapter 1



Only His Kiss

The bride says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth — for your love is better than wine" (1:2).

The relationship between God and the faithful soul is really like the relationship between a bridegroom and a bride. The *Zohar* says that when the Law was given at Mount Sinai, God asked every Israelite if he would accept Him and all His commandments. Each replied, "Yes." Again, he was asked, "Will you accept Me and all the penalties attached to My Law?" And once more he answered, "Yes." Then he was kissed on the mouth. Similarly, the bride in Solomon's Song says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." The *Zohar* continues:

No other love is like unto the ecstasy of the moment when spirit cleaves to spirit in a kiss, more especially a kiss on the mouth, which is the well of the spirit and its medium. When mouth meets mouth, spirits unite one with the other and become one — one love.

The Hebrew word for "love" is written A H B H. The Zohar says: "First comes the letter Aleph (our A). Then comes the letter H, which unites itself

with the *Aleph* in love. From these two other letters issue and spirits are interlocked with spirits of love."

If we compare these words with the boring, unimaginative, ritualistic prayers that we often say, we will realize the distance between us and the soul enamored with God — a soul that has a burning love like that of the ideal bride. She knows neither peace nor rest until she finds God Himself. Every other being, every other thing, only increases her desire, her thirst to see Him. She is never satisfied with anyone or anything except Him. She has drunk enough of the water of this world and has remained thirsty. Now she desires Him, saying: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth."

Many believers are attached to their spiritual leader — their pastor. But if the pastor is aware of his responsibilities, he must strive to make the believer more and more independent of him. A psychiatrist, having solved the complexes of his patient, also has a duty to free him from the complexities of dependence that have developed during the treatment.

A pastor must be like a matchmaker who persuades a girl to marry someone else. He must be very careful the girl does not fall in love with him, the matchmaker. Likewise, the pastor must be a guide, enabling the believer to reach the Bridegroom. He must ignite a love for the Bridegroom in the hearts of the believers, so that after hearing one of his sermons, the congregation should not say, "How beautifully he has preached," but "How wonderful Jesus is!" Remaining attached to the pastor and not passing through him to the Savior, about whom he preaches, can be a deadly danger for the believer. Pastors are men and have all the temptations of men. Some of them are weak.

A girl belonging to a Christian movement called Christian Endeavor, which was forbidden in communist Romania, was beaten and tortured in order to force her to make accusations against her pastor. She remained faithful to Christ and refused. However, to her surprise, when she was brought before

a court, that same pastor became a witness for the prosecution against her, causing her to be sentenced. He had yielded to pressure without much resistance, but her love for Christ did not depend on the attitudes and behavior of the pastor who had brought her to salvation. She had been freed from that attachment to him. She remained faithful and never said one bitter word about the pastor who was so treacherous to her.

This kind of soul receives the kisses of Jesus. When you are in His embrace, disappointments with pastors don't count anymore. The soul that burns with love for Christ is not satisfied with His messengers, even His finest messengers. They don't answer the deep need of the soul. Their presence can interfere. The pastor's duty is to reveal to men and women how unhappy they are without Jesus. Then he must tell them how he has found Jesus and how they can find Him, too.

For the bride, the simple fact that she is surrounded by messengers of the Bridegroom proves the sad fact that the Bridegroom is absent. She desires Him, only Him. None of His messengers can adequately represent Him. None of them can take His place. The most gifted preachers can only stutter about Him. She has one desire: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." She longs for Him and yearns that His presence should show itself through a kiss. In biblical times people kissed the hand of the king, which was considered a privilege. Until quite recently, everyone who approached the Pope had to kiss his foot. The faithful Christian soul desires a kiss from Jesus' mouth.

We have to be careful that the kiss is Jesus' kiss. Souls in sorrow seek comfort and accept it readily from wherever it comes. But not for the true Bride of Christ. There is only one object of her love. When Mary Magdalene saw Jesus' empty tomb, she told the man she thought was the gardener, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." (John 20:13). She knows only one can be her "Lord" and does not need to say His name.

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For the Bride, only one person exists. She assumes that others feel the same. She does not profane the Holy Name by pronouncing it too often. The elect of God will understand. The Beloved can't be anyone else but Jesus.

Jesus longs to kiss us. The heavenly Father commands us to "kiss the Son" (Psalm 2:12). Jesus reproved a Pharisee, telling him, "You gave Me no kiss" (Luke 7:45). He could make this reproof to many of us. We gave Him many words. We gave Him our energy and our time. We put our money in the collection boxes of the church. But did we give Him the one, supreme thing He desires — a kiss? The faithful soul's desire is the same as His.

This reciprocal desire has been frequently satisfied. The woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil kissed His feet (Luke 7:36-50). After her, many penitents have done likewise, and many prodigal sons who have returned to the Father have seen Him coming to meet them, embracing them and kissing them repeatedly.

Only those who have ever received such a kiss can know the sweetness of Jesus. Only the person who has humbled himself for his sins or entrusted himself to God in great dangers can say how dear His promises are.



Are you seeking His kisses? And are you offering Him yours? If not, what is holding you back?



Where Can You Get His Kiss?

The bride says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is better than wine" (1:2).

It is not difficult to receive Jesus' kiss. This was no problem for His mother, Mary. Her Savior was her obedient child. She could receive His caresses whenever she desired. Mary Magdalene and even Judas could kiss Him, and there is no doubt that He reciprocated their kisses.

Christ lives with every believer as much as He lived in his mother's home (though as a diamond yet unearthed, enclosed within the ground) because we are created in His image, members of His Body. His mother kissed Jesus' lips, His hair, His hands and His breast. She could kiss His physical body. But Jesus is the only person who has two bodies: a Jewish carpenter who lived 2,000 years ago and is now seated in heaven and the head of the church (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). So we can kiss Him when we kiss our brothers and sisters, and in the same way we can receive His kisses.

Jesus taught also that anyone who feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, takes in strangers, clothes the naked or visits the sick and the prison-

ers does this to Him (Matthew 25:35-40). Jesus asked Saul on the road to Damascus, "Why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). He identifies Himself with the sufferers.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). They will see Him not only in the next world, but also in every brother and sister — yes, in every human being. Those who sentenced Stephen, the first martyr of Christianity, to death "saw his face as the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). They could see the angel in their victim. Let us at least learn from them how to look upon our brethren. Then we will be able to receive as many holy kisses as His mother was able to obtain.

Leonas Sileikis had received Jesus' kiss. When he was in seventh grade, he was summoned to a meeting with the school administration. Leonas' father came to the meeting uninvited. Leonas was asked whether he had read the atheistic books his teacher had given him. He had read all six of them.

"What do you think of these books?" they asked him.

"They're lies and slander," Leonas replied.

After a long discourse against religion, the teacher, Miss Misiuniene, asked Leonas, "Do you renounce your faith?"

"I believe, and I will continue to believe," he answered.

The teacher then explained to the father how religion damages children. "Nowadays, very few people go to church, so one must go along with the majority," she said.

"Only a dead body is carried along with the current," replied Leonas. "A live person can always swim against the stream."

Leonas suffered for his faith, but he knew the kiss of Jesus. The world's adversity did not matter to him.

In communist Romania, one could not study in a university without being a member of the communist youth organization and rendering lip-service to

its God-hating doctrines. Since Lydia, a young believer, was first in all grades of high school, a university education was guaranteed. As an exceptional student, she would also receive funds to further her education. She only had to deliver a speech at the inauguration of the year of study.

The big shots of the Communist Party were there. She praised communism. They applauded her, but she finished with the words: "These things one has to say, if you wish to advance in our society. But I don't believe one word of what I just said. I believe in God and will follow Him."

With this, she had ruined her whole future. Instead of becoming a doctor as she had desired, she became a seamstress. But souls who have received Jesus' kiss cannot compromise. They can praise only Him.



In which areas of your life are you tempted to compromise and go along with the world? Ask Jesus for His kiss of grace, so those around you can see a glimpse of His character.

Day Three

Sanctified Imagination

The bride says, "...the kisses of his mouth" (1:2).

Christians know the plague of erotic fantasies. In prison, sexual obsession is one of the greatest sufferings experienced by saints, especially the younger ones. Many of them could never see their girlfriends or their wives. (For fourteen years, I virtually never saw any women or girls.)

A prisoner would sit on concrete in a common cell with his hands on his knees and would be forbidden to move. There were no books. Speaking, even whispering, to a cellmate was not allowed. Sometimes a prisoner was alone, doing nothing but fantasizing or thinking. For hours erotic images would parade before the Christian's eyes. The more they were suppressed, the more powerful they became.

Sometimes the communist jails would parade girls in miniskirts in front of sexually hungry prisoners. They took prisoners to beaches and showed them girls in bikinis. They told them, "This is what you can have if you deny your faith."

For years Milan Haimovici, a Romanian Hebrew Christian pastor, had

been isolated from the world in prison. One day prison officials brought a prostitute into his solitary cell where he was forced to share his bed with her night after night. The wardens spied through the peephole, watching to see if anything happened. They had cameras ready to photograph him embracing her, so they could disgrace him.

Those you kiss, embrace or become sexually intimate with only in your imagination might not be physically present, but the fantasies are very real — so real that they can drive you mad. The only defense against erotic obsession is to spiritualize it, to see in every erotic image (as Solomon teaches us) an image of our intimate love as brides of Christ for our Bridegroom.

By dreaming about an ardent union of his soul with Jesus, Pastor Milan Haimovici overcame the temptations of the prostitute.

Don't try to fight erotic fantasies head-on. Use the expulsive power of sanctified imagination. You can't stop a little girl playing with dolls, but there comes a time when the girl grows up. She acquires new interests, and these displace from her heart the pleasure of playing with dolls. In the same way, if you let sexual imaginings alone and if every moment you are free of them, you cultivate more and more spiritual imaginings. In time, the spiritual fantasy will expel the mind's erotic obsessions.

A writer named L. Vorobiov tells of a father and daughter eating in a monastery in Russia that the communists had transformed into a restaurant. The daughter said reproachfully, "We drink beer and become gluttons where monks once ate their meals in piety."

The father replied that monks also drank.

She upbraided him for condemning monks for hypocrisy when the communists were no better. Then she told him that she wanted to enter a convent.

"I suggest that you read some pornography," he answered.

"I have," she said. "I am bored by it."

On the way back home, traveling by boat, the father saw the golden cupola of a cathedral advancing toward him. This happened in 1976 in Moscow.

In the past, The Voice of the Martyrs has been threatened by terrorists. One of our offices received a threatening letter from a group called the Red Army Faction. The workers remained unafraid and continued their work, for which the Lord rewarded them. One day they received a letter from a terrorist. It read: "I had an experience with Jesus and hesitate between terrorism and God. I am out of balance, please advise."

He was contacted immediately. Soon they received a second letter: "Since the age of 17, I have been a terrorist. Now I have surrendered my heart to Christ. It was terrible when I realized how huge my sins were. They were higher than the Himalayas. I was also an adorer of Satan. Now I don't want to be the sort of Christian who only prays a little and reads the Bible rarely, but rather a fighter on the front line."

If communists — indoctrinated with atheism — and a terrorist — indoctrinated with hate — can experience spiritual imaginings and a change of heart, how much more can the bride of Christ, versed in Scripture, consciously imagine heavenly things? She can rejoice in them with jubilation and expel much of the harm of erotic fantasies.

I will not gloss over one difficulty. During decades of imprisonment, many Christians have conquered erotic obsessions; however, once freed from prison, they could not so easily master them when they would see real females. It is the same for Christian women when they were released. Instincts, long restrained, took their revenge. Even with the best of brides, the struggle never ends. But they can be victorious if they never give up. They can come to rejoice in the embraces of Christ.

The mouth, which is covered by kisses, only momentarily breaks free to

speak words of love to the Beloved. When one has received the heavenly kiss of unspeakable sweetness, one falls silent. For years one lady told everyone about her experiences with Jesus. Then one day she had a real experience with Him. From that time on, she kept quiet. Sometimes those who receive the heavenly kiss do not know the Bible well and cannot speak in biblical language, but they, too, can know the Bridegroom's embraces.

Saint Therese of Avila wrote: "As those who love each other do not allow themselves to be disturbed, those who have received this kiss despise all the things of the world, according them very small worth. Having seen the vanity of material things they despise them." The person who has received the kiss knows he has received it. Then he desires to be kissed more and more, left undisturbed by anyone or anything, as he partakes in this sweet fellowship with Jesus. The soul that knows such spiritual realities doubts these kisses no more than one doubts a kiss received from an earthly lover.



What dominates your thought life? And do these thoughts draw you closer or farther away from Jesus' embrace? Ask Jesus for His kiss to help you move on to greater thoughts — and greater things — for Him.

Day Four

His Two Natures

The bride says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth — for your love is better than wine" (1:2).

The bride seems to speak about two different people, as she switches from "third person" to "second person": "Let him kiss me...for your love..." (emphasis added). Perhaps the bride is thinking about Jesus with His two combined natures — the human and the divine.

The love of Jesus' human nature is better than wine, better than all the pleasures this world can offer. But the bride wants more. She wishes to see the glorified Son of God in all His splendor while desiring the kisses of His divine nature.

Some Christians' lives and deaths are far more painful than our own. For many years, the African nation of Equatorial Guinea was under the oppression of the dictator Macias Nguema, who was supported by Soviet, Cuban and East German advisers. At the time, refugees fleeing from Equatorial Guinea to neighboring Gabon told of thirty-six Christians who were buried up to their necks in the forest. The next day only two heads were still moving. They were

disfigured from insect bites, and their eyes were eaten. In another incident, a prisoner's feet were hacked off. In another, a girl who refused the sexual advances of her guards was tortured with a burning torch.

Lukewarm Christians cannot endure such things. Those who have received the holy kiss of His divine nature understand the privilege of bearing such a heavy cross while remaining faithful and hopeful. Many have not thought about or even heard of this biblical phrase.

Bonaventure was the first Superior of the Franciscan Order after the death of its founder. Thomas Aquinas once asked him where he got his extensive knowledge. Bonaventure pointed to the crucifix on his desk. "That is the source of all my knowledge," he said. "I study only Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Bonaventure had received the holy kiss of the divine nature of Jesus.



Set aside a portion of time today to read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2. As a follower of Christ, what are you "determined to know" or be or do (verse 2)? Is it what Christ wants for you? Then spend time thinking about the words, "We have the mind of Christ" (verse 16). How would your life change if you embraced this truth?

Day Five

The Savor of His Ointments

The bride says, "Because of the fragrance of your good ointments..." (1:3).

In the Far East, perfumed wood was sometimes used to build mosques. One might compare this to hearing sermons preached in a church where incense is burned or sweet-smelling flowers filled the sanctuary. But I have heard the Word preached or recited in communist prison cells where two hundred prisoners were crammed together in indescribable squalor. Some of us were unable to wash for years. Our clothes were filthy. Water was scarce, and so was soap. In the cell overflowing barrels served as lavatories for two hundred people while feces and urine filled one corner. Many of the prisoners simply suffocated. The windows were shuttered to prevent air flow. Men would lie down on the floor to breathe the draft from the tiny gap under the door.

In that situation some believers dwelt not only in these terrible earthly surroundings, but also in heavenly places. With labored breathing like an asthmatic, they talked about the sweet savor of sacrifices offered to God and of fragrances like those of heaven. They quoted Scriptures about frankincense and myrrh, about roses and lilies.

The Jewish *Talmud* says that every meal where the conversation is about something other than the Word of God is an idolatrous meal. Christians in the Romanian prison of Piteshti tried to think about the Word of God while they ate and then speak to each other about it. However, their torturers retaliated by making them eat their own bodily waste. In Piteshti, eating excrement and drinking urine became part of the daily routine. But while the Christians ate and drank it, they thought of the Bible's words about the savor of God's good ointments. They meditated on the perfumes described in the Word of God, knowing the spiritual life is not dependent on the physical life.

In his book *Dust on the Road*, Nikiforov-Volgin, a Russian priest, shared the following story told to him by a Christian he met in prison:

One day I arrived home and heard somebody cry out. I found my wife, stabbed in the heart by somebody we knew. The murderer fell at my feet, begging my forgiveness. I said to him, "Go, and do not do so anymore." I went to the police and accepted responsibility for the crime. I was sentenced. Then in Krasnoyarsk prison, one prisoner murdered another. For that, too, I accepted the blame. Now I am sentenced to life imprisonment. I could not do other than I did.

Loving God, I look on all men as I look upon angels. My only prayer is, "I am Yours and You are mine — have mercy on me." If you had not been a priest, I would not have told you these things. You asked me why I am here, and you are entitled to the truth.

When this prisoner died, it was as though heaven had opened. His last words were, "Lord, I would like to continue to suffer for others; but Thy will be done." Though surrounded by prison squalor, those who are present at such

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a death sometimes detect a heavenly fragrance. It is the odor of the high places where the bride of Christ lives.



What areas of your life would you consider "squalor" or unpleasant? Perhaps an unwelcome work environment? An indifferent spouse? A difficult child? An unforgiving friend? A resentful family member? Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-16. Spend time today identifying each situation while asking Jesus to unleash His sweet fragrance to those individuals through you. As a physical reminder of His sweet aroma, find a fragrance you love in the form of a candle or perfume or plug-in. Each time you smell its fragrance, envision Jesus' sweet aroma flowing from you in those trying circumstances or places.



What Is in His Name?

The bride says, "Your name is ointment poured forth" (1:3).

In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the girl thought of her lover's name. The two belonged to warring families. He was a Montague, and she a Capulet. Therefore, her family would never consent to their marriage, so she advised him to change his name. "What's in a name?" she asked. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." She was right about roses. A rose is called a "rose" only in the English language. In other languages it has different names. And she was probably right about Romeo as well. She could have loved him even if his name had been Sebastian or Antonio.

Some have never heard the name "Jesus," but they love who He is. They love His self-sacrifice, forgiveness and goodness. They love Divinity coming down to earth and earthly beings uniting with Divinity. They love the poor and oppressed.

But with Jesus His name is important. In Hebrew it is *Yeshua*, which means "salvation." His very name proclaims what He stands for! You say "Jesus," and it is like the pouring-out of ointment. Because of that name, you know there

is salvation for all people. Whoever calls on His name is saved (Romans 10:9-12). Another of His names is "Immanuel," which means "God is with us."

Only the bride can say to the Savior, "Your name is an ointment poured forth." Jesus did not have a good name in the world. He was called a glutton, a winebibber, a Samaritan (which at that time was the same as calling him a heretic). He was called a deceiver, was said to have a devil, and so on. The bride is deaf to this evil talk about Jesus.

Souls who truly believe in Jesus are also widely slandered. In the Soviet press, faithful pastors were called scoundrels, hooligans and villains. They called the distinguished Nobel prizewinner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn a traitor.

Communists also spread the rumor that some Christians were stoolpigeons (informants) of the communist authorities and secret agents of the police. As a result, they were beaten by their fellow prisoners. However, they knew that in the eyes of their Bridegroom, their name is good.



Think about the names of Jesus — Immanuel, Messiah, Savior, Lamb of God, Lord, the Christ, Prince of peace. Which name are you most drawn to? Which name is most difficult for you to embrace and believe? Ask God to open your eyes to the realities of His name.



Holy Love

The bride says, "No wonder the maidens love you!"(1:3).

The bride has no jealousy. This distinguishes holy love from worldly love: wanting many other souls to love Him and desiring Him to pour out His caresses and kisses on them.

In Australia, a Christian lady stopped a young girl in the street and said: "You look so sad! You are crying. I am a Christian. Could I be of help? Could I share your sorrow?"

"Thank you for your kindness," replied the girl, "but no one can help me. The man I love has left me."

"Don't worry," said the Christian. "I have a beautiful Bridegroom. I will give Him to you."

Thinking she was being made fun of, the girl asked, "Why are you mocking my grief?"

Then our sister spoke to her about her heavenly Bridegroom — about Jesus. She explained that He can share His love with many, yet to each one He gives all His love. The girl was brought to Christ.

Those who preach Jesus are not in competition with one another. They are fellow workers. So if a soul that was attached to one flock moves to join another, there is no need for sadness. It simply means that the spiritual atmosphere of the first flock did not suit that particular soul. No Christian teacher can claim he is equally helpful to every individual. It is not absolutely necessary that someone should be a member of a church. Let him go to any church where he can grow spiritually, and accompany him with prayers.



Think about the people you know who need Jesus' kisses and caresses. As you ask Jesus to pour out His love on them, envision each one of them in His embrace.



Day Eight

Draw Me

The bride says, "Draw me away!" (1:4).

The bride prays, "Draw me." She prays like this because she knows she is still very far from the Bridegroom. "Whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:6). She prays like this because she longs to be in union with the Bridegroom.

The Bridegroom cannot draw her only by convincing her. She does not have the moral power to follow her convictions. He must draw her with supernatural grace — by giving her the will to come to Him and the means to fulfill that will. He has said it Himself: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him..." (John 6:44). No one can come to Jesus by his own will.

Looking to the ascended Jesus, my prayer is, "Draw me." What could hinder the fulfillment of this prayer? Our pride. Jesus said, "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). The way of ascension is open for everyone.

If we want to sit with Jesus on His throne (Revelation 3:21), we have to

follow the way He went: "who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name" (Philippians 2:6-9).

God is not only the Lord Jesus' Father, but also our Father; and we can ascend to Him if we follow the way of Jesus — humility. He lived for thirty-four years on earth in misery, poverty and unmeasured sorrows. Let us avoid wealth and self-exalted situations as a burning fire, and our prayer to be drawn by Him will be fulfilled.



Think about Jesus' ministry on earth. What draws you to Him? Now think about your own life. What is drawing you — money, prestige, position, possessions, achievements, or Jesus? Today, as such things compete for your heart, may your prayer be, "Draw me, Lord Jesus."



Running After Him

The daughters of Jerusalem say, "We will run after you" (1:4).

We do not have to walk after the Lord but run. The writer of Hebrews tells believers, "Let us run with endurance" (Hebrews 12:1). The apostle Paul wrote, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it" (1 Corinthians 9:24) and "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty" (1 Corinthians 9:26). Running symbolizes a longing for God and a vigorous faith in Him. Psalm 119:32 says, "I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart."

When the children of Israel worshipped the golden calf, they "sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (Exodus 32:6). While Joseph's brothers sat to eat a meal, they schemed about selling him (Genesis 37:25). It is a great catastrophe when the people of God sit down. They must run — run with all their heart, not listening to whispers or shouts from different sides but violently rejecting any hindrance. We must run with our bodies stretched forward to seize the prize — before our feet arrive at our goal.

We must run with extreme speed. Jesus told us we are light. Light has greater speed than anything else in the natural world. In telling us we are light, Jesus told us to run with the speed of light. Don't forfeit your prize by sitting. Get up and run the race God has set before you.

In the bride's words, "Draw me, we will run after you," we observe the sudden passing from the singular to the plural. The bride is saying: "Jesus should draw me alone; then we — many of us — will run after Him. You, Jesus, take care of me, drawing me with all Your might, that I might influence others." King David also understands this truth, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You" (Psalm 51:12,13).

The faithful soul that runs also wins other people to Christ. By so doing, it takes upon itself a huge responsibility. In the free world, a soul-winner does not readily perceive this. The man he wins for Christ will become a church member, sing in the choir, marry a nice Christian girl and lead a quiet Christian life. But to be a soul-winner in a communist or Islamic country — to be an evangelist in the underground church — is a burden with heavy problems.

When Paul preached in Rome, he knew that those who responded to his message could be thrown to the wild beasts and devoured in the circus arena. They could be crucified or burned on stakes. Should he preach in such circumstances? Or would it be better for him to remain silent? Is it right to propagate an idea if it will bring men to prison, to torture and to death? How many unbelieving wives, parents and children must have cursed Paul because his preaching brought such sorrow to their families? But when you are drawn by Jesus, you must make others run after Him.

I was in jail with a man whom Traian Dorz, the famous Romanian poet, had brought to Christ. He was sentenced for his faith, and he had left a wife and six children at home. I asked him, "Are you resentful toward Dorz, for

taking you out of your life of tranquility and setting you upon this dangerous path?" He said, "I can't thank him enough."

During World War II, Mrs. Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the President of the United States, carried this prayer in her purse:

Dear Lord,
Lest I continue
My complacent way,
Help me to remember
Somewhere out there
A man died for me today.
As long as this fight continues,
I then must ask and answer—
Am I worth dying for?

Every ruler and every officer who sends soldiers to die — yes, every conscientious citizen — must ask himself or herself the same question.

In the underground church, the pastor gives assignments to his church members that might result in their death. He asks them to organize secret printing presses, to secretly transport Christian literature from place to place. If they are caught, these people will go to prison. Because of those printing presses, many people have died.

The Voice of the Martyrs has sent couriers into communist and Islamic countries to smuggle in Christian books. One of them, Wang-Shin-Mei, was beaten to death in China. Two others, Tom White and Mel Bailey, were caught in Cuba, where they received prison sentences of twenty-four years each but were released after serving seventeen months. Others were wounded while taking Bibles into Mozambique when it was under communist influence.

A soul-winner in the underground church is not allowed to be compla-

cent. He must remember that his brothers and sisters may die for what he has told them to believe and do.

In the free world, Christians must be taught to carry crosses and learn to renounce the self. The soul-winner must know and practice this before he teaches it to others.

Therefore, let the words, "We will run," stay in our minds.



Richard Wurmbrand wrote: "Are we believers who are running? This is easy to find out. The one who runs quickly covers a great distance in a short time. How great a distance have you covered since you came to God?" Spend time with the Lord asking Him to show you how far you have run and to give you the grace to continue the race.



In the King's Chambers

The bride says, "The king has brought me into his chambers" (1:4).

The bride prayed, "Draw me," and the prayer was granted immediately. The king brought her into his chambers.

I have known men who have been in the King's chambers. In jail, I was thrown together with a Christian sentenced to death. He sang songs, which he had composed. He told us:

Death does not scare me. I sing here. I will do the same after I am shot. Only the songs will be different. Here, my hymns somehow center around myself, telling of my longings, how sinful I have been, how I was saved, although the Lord taught us in His prayer to pray without using the word "I." Heavenly songs are different. The angels sing that God is thrice holy, and that the earth is filled with His glory. They rejoice over it, and they have nothing to ask. About themselves they say nothing, neither good nor bad. At Christ's birth they sang,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men on whom His favor rests." There was no petition for personal needs.

My Christian cellmate went to his execution singing one of the new songs that he had learned in the chambers of Jesus. In his spirit, he had been in heavenly Jerusalem, the city far away, before his physical death. We are all meant to visit the chambers of Jesus and to learn these new songs.



What are "the chambers of Jesus" in your own life? And what new songs is He teaching you to sing? Set aside time today to journal about those trials that are confining and stifling. Then write out the words of truth that Jesus wants you to sing back to Him.



Day Eleven

Be Glad

The daughters of Jerusalem say, "We will be glad and rejoice in you" (1:4).

The grace given to the bride influences others. When one single soul is in right fellowship with God, the whole church will be blessed and will have joy and gladness.

It might seem the words "be glad and rejoice" are repetitious, but there is a progression here from inner joy to outward gladness. Gladness can be faked. It must be united to a joy in the heart, making it genuine.

When Christians have to bear crosses, they make roses blossom in them. The life and death of the Lutheran pastor Josef Juras (Jozef Juráš) of Czechoslovakia (which today is separated into the Czech Republic and Slovakia) will illustrate what I mean. Having refused to become a communist collaborator and having studied in the United States for half a year at the invitation of the National Lutheran Council, the communists charged him with treason and sentenced him to thirteen years imprisonment in 1962. They inserted sharp objects under his fingernails and toenails and pierced his body with needles.

He was released in 1968 during the presidential amnesty and died in 1975. A fellow prisoner wrote of him, "His personality glowed in a special way."

Many people display gladness even though their stony hearts have been incapable of knowing true joy. God continually insists that joy and gladness go together. There should be neither laughter without the heart's participation, nor a joy in the heart too miserly to show itself outwardly and thus gladden others. The archangel Gabriel said to Zacharias the priest, "You will have joy and gladness" (Luke 1:14). The prodigal son's father said to his other son, "It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead, and is alive again" (Luke 15:32). Jesus tells us to "rejoice...and leap for joy" (Luke 6:23). So gladness should be accompanied by outward signs of rejoicing.



What is the attitude of your heart today? Joyful? Sad? Angry? Indifferent? Ask God for the grace to fill your heart with joy regardless of your circumstances. Pray your joy is contagious, encouraging others and drawing them closer to Jesus.



Loving Unto Death

The daughters of Jerusalem say, "We will remember your love more than wine."

The bride says, "Rightly do they love you" (1:4).

The wine represents the king's gifts as distinguished from His person. That He unites with us is of more value than all the things He gives us. They love Him so much — even unto death.

On December 4, 1601, Bishop Seraphim of Phanarion, Greece, was martyred. He was falsely accused of plotting and rebelling against the Turks. They shouted at him: "Rebel and subverter of our authority! Behold, you have come into our hands and will receive that which is your due — unless, perchance, you should wish to abandon your faith and become a Muslim. Then we will forgive you and honor you greatly, for by this we will know that you had repented and become as one with us."

Bishop Seraphim was an upright man who loved Jesus. He desired martyrdom for Christ and did not become in the least fainthearted. With a clear and serene countenance, he responded: I will never agree in any circumstances to forsake my faith, so that I might be spared death. I will never forsake my most sweet Jesus, my God and my Creator.

Now, because I suffer unjustly, I have the more hope on that account that I shall receive from my Master even greater honor. I would never deny my faith; nor shall I ever be separated from my sweetest Master and God, Jesus Christ. Though I shall die ten thousand deaths for His holy name, I would count it all joy and gladness. O, Ruler! Be it slaughter or mutilation, do whatsoever is within your power.

The ruler, named Hamouza Bey, ordered him to be flogged, his nose cut into small pieces. This upright man loved Jesus. He endured all these torments as if they were happening to someone else, thanking God and blessing Him.

The next morning he appeared before Hamouza Bey, and his attitude was the same. He said, "I will never abandon my Lord Jesus, my Creator who shaped me, only to believe in a mortal man — an illiterate — an enemy and blasphemer of my Christ!"

They tore him to pieces. But even his merciless executioners marveled to see that he endured it all with thanksgiving and that his face was bright and joyous as if he were at a feast. In the end he was impaled.

The devil works through these anti-Christian dictators. We are reminded of the words he addressed to the Lord: "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4:9).

A Kenyan periodical reported that the Anglican Bishop of Uganda, Janani Luwum, was shot in front of President Amin because he refused to kneel and beg for mercy.

The same demonic spirit is at work in communist countries. Decades ago, Fidel Castro attended the execution of a Christian by firing squad. As his hands were tied behind his back, Castro urged him, "Kneel, and beg for your life."

The Christian shouted back, "I kneel for no man!" A sharp-shooter put a bullet through one knee, then the other. Castro exulted: "See! We have made you kneel!" The executioner finished the man off slowly by shooting through the non-vital parts of the believer's body to prolong the agony. This incident is described in John Martino's book *I Was Castro's Prisoner*.

Such Christians are each a personification of those who "rightly" love the Bridegroom. His love is better than His gifts, and they love Him unto death.



Do I love Jesus more than His gifts or anything the world has to offer me?

Day Thirteen

Dark But Lovely

The bride says, "I am dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem" (1:5).

An important edit to the translation is needed here. We read, "I am dark but lovely." This gives the impression that dark skin is unattractive and Solomon's bride was an exception. There is no trace of this idea in the Hebrew original. There is no hint of racism in this verse.

Darkness is the absence of light, and it is in this sense that the Bible uses the term. Every man is dark because he is guilty of sins but beautiful in God's eyes the very moment he puts his trust in Jesus, who forgives him and will change his soul. We are dark because of our own weakness but beautiful and strong through God's grace, which is ours in abundance (2 Corinthians 12:9,10). The church is dark in the eyes of the world because the world is blind, unable to perceive the beauty of God's Kingdom within us, but she is beautiful before God.

A prisoner wrote from jail: "I bow my head in humility before our mother, the church. I thank God for the education she gave me. The church of

Christ has many sufferings but also an overflow of joy. In the Siberian cold, we warmed the icy winter's embraces with the Word of God."

Let us thank God that we belong to this church, which has such saints as members, even if we think we are unworthy. We are dark and beautiful.

Every believer is tempted at some time to think, "You, who are so dark, how can you speak about the Lord?" Every preacher at some time thinks, "How can I, who am so wicked, even climb into the pulpit?" Our courage evaporates when we consider the state we are in.

But look at the apostle Peter. He had denied Christ with oaths and curses and later stood in the Jerusalem marketplace and rebuked the people, "You denied the Holy One and the Just" (Acts 3:14). He who had committed this very sin rebuked others for the same sin. He could do this because he knew he was not only dark, but also beautiful; not only sinful, but also forgiven and beloved by God. The darkness in Peter did not make him despair. He knew he was wicked, but he also knew that when he preached, it was not him speaking but Christ, who lived in him.

The bride compares her darkness to that of the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon (1:5). Kedar was a district of Arabia inhabited by Bedouins. They made their tents from black goat hair. The curtains at Solomon's palace were also said to be black. Black curtains keep out the light from a room. This image means that great care was necessary to ensure that the many sins committed by the bride should not come to light. The apostle Peter wrote that "love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

The night is dark, but it allows the earth to rest. Dark bread is very nutritious. A pastor who by his own deeds is in darkness but is beautiful by the grace he receives from God can feed a hungry flock. I trust Jesus' taste more than my own! I see myself as dark, He sees me as beautiful. He sees Himself mirrored in us. He sees us as we shall be.



Read Colossians 2. How is your heart? Is it burdened with mistakes you have made, people you have hurt, words you regret saying? Is it full of pride for your efforts to make yourself look righteous in the eyes of others? Journal about them, confessing them to Jesus. Then envision them being nailed to the cross with Christ.



Day Fourteen

Don't Be Critical

The bride admonishes: "Do not look upon me, because I am dark, because the sun has tanned me. My mother's sons were angry with me" (1:6).

She had described herself as "dark," or "black" (shachor). But now, pondering the fact that she is also beautiful, she no longer calls herself "dark" (shacharchoreth) but "tanned." Men should not regard her in that way. They should learn to see her beautiful side.

The believer should regard no one as "dark," being careful not to slander even the weakest brother. The apostle Peter says, "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28). The bride is tanned, but listen to her defense: "The sun has tanned me. My mother's sons were angry with me." If my brother has sinned, the reason may be the many sufferings, temptations and persecutions that he has endured. When the Spirit of God does His work, my brother will confess his sins, like the bride in Solomon's Song.

To explain how she came to be tanned, she reviews her past life. "My

mother's sons" — that is, the members of the church, which is the believer's mother — "were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards" — an occupation that can lead to sunburn. "I have been given great assignments," the bride complains. "I have been appointed a pastor, a teacher, of the brethren." Other believers might envy her situation, but it was in that situation that she was burned by the sun and became tanned.

Christians, do not compete for the honor of being leaders in the church. It is a calling that should make you tremble. James wrote, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (3:1). Christians, don't judge. Coventry Cathedral in England was destroyed by German bombs during World War II. When it was rebuilt, two charred logs from the old building were made into a cross bearing the inscription, "Father, forgive." There was no "them" at the end. The British knew that they too needed to be forgiven.

Terrorists sin, so do Arabs who do not love Zionists. And Zionists have committed sins toward Arabs. Communists sin. Christians in communist countries sin too because they are not being holy and zealous enough to prevent men from becoming communists. The best of pastors sin more than all of these. God gives them a vision, but they neglect many of their duties.

For all of us, our only hope is the Lord's sacrifice on Good Friday. The Easter event, His resurrection, is our only source of peace. So do not misuse your mouth by criticizing and especially by criticizing the bride of Christ.



Have others criticized you in your work for the Lord? Have you criticized others? Ask Jesus to heal your wounds and fill your mouth with words that bless.



The Dangers of Church Leadership

The bride says, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept" (1:6).

Be very cautious before you accept an offer to be a keeper in God's vineyard — a pastor, a Bible study leader, a teacher of the Word, a discipler, or mentor. The believer's preference is for a life hidden with God. Listen to a parable from the Book of Judges:

The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, "Reign over us!" But the olive tree said to them, "Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honor God and men, and go to sway over trees?"

Then the trees said to the fig tree, "You come and reign over us!" But the fig tree said to them, "Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to sway over trees?"

Then the trees said to the vine, "You come and reign over us!" But the vine said to them, "Should I cease my new wine, which cheers both God and men, and go to sway over trees?"

Then all the trees said to the bramble, "You come and reign over us!" And the bramble said to the trees, "If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon!" (Judges 9:8-15).

Only valueless Christians long for important positions in the church of God and rejoice when they are given them. They are misguided because important positions in the church leave no time for maintaining the beauty of your own vineyard. You become so concerned with caring for others that you don't care about yourself. You will be in danger of the same catastrophe that overcame ancient Israel, to whom the apostle Paul wrote: "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" (Romans 2:21,22).

The only person who should become a pastor or a missionary is the one who cannot be anything else, who can say with the prophet Jeremiah, "His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not" (Jeremiah 20:9).

Young converts, don't strive toward leading positions in churches and missions! Don't begin preaching at the earliest opportunity out of a sense of obligation! It is better to keep the beauty of your own vineyard.



How have you been caring for your own spiritual life? In your church life, are you more concerned about advancing in rank or being like Christ?

Where Can He Be Found?

The bride says, "Tell me, O you whom I love, where you feed your flock, where you make it rest at noon" (1:7).

In other Bible versions, the bride gives Jesus a beautiful name, "O you whom my soul loves" (NASB). The church is the beloved of God's soul, and God is the Beloved of our souls.

The bride wants to know the exact place where her Beloved is. She wants to go to the place where He rests, where He feeds His flock, because in her hesitancy she does not want to distract Him from His preoccupations by asking Him to come to her. She will go to Him and will be able to speak with Him while helping Him in His work. She will not abuse His time, but she must know exactly where He is. She does not want to wander around among His companions' flocks. She does not want to find herself among the flocks of the founders of other religions who are not like Him.

Jesus has given us an exact address where we can find Him. On the day of the last judgment, men will hear these words from Him: "I was in prison and you came to Me," or these, "I was...in prison, and you did not visit Me" (Matthew 25:36,43). He will explain, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it...[or] did not do it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it...[or] did not do it to Me" (25:40,45).

G. Dumitrescu, a former prisoner in communist Romania, wrote in his book *The Unmasking*:

Prisoners were so tortured that nobody dared to use a hand for making the sign of the Cross. We did it with our tongues. We had to stay the whole day with hands lifted, even when at toilet. We had to put the dish with food on the floor, kneel near it, and lick the food without using the hands. We were animals. The food burned our lips. We were beaten with sticks on the shinbones but could not rub our feet. The hands had to stay unmoved. Every prisoner was asked to beat his best friend, his brother in faith. If he refused, the brethren were tortured until they agreed to beat him with truncheons on the soles.

The prisoner, Nuti Patrashcanu, had become a sadistic torturer of his friends. Then they tortured him almost to death. Twelve of them sat on his body; he excreted and was made to eat his own excrement.

Patrashcanu later shared a prison cell with me, and God gave me the grace to bring him to Christ. His bride, who was free, was also converted. He later died in jail.

The last words of a Christian named Sherban Gheorge, who was killed in an atrocious manner in Piteshti, still echo in my ears: "The communists' crimes are too horrible. I can't pray for them to God from a distance. I must go to Him to speak on their behalf. Do not avenge my death."

Whoever wishes to meet Jesus must meet Him in places where brothers and sisters of Jesus are hungry, thirsty, naked, unwanted, sick or imprisoned.

Whoever keeps himself distant from these places remains distant from Jesus.



Read Matthew 25:31-46. In what ways can you "visit Jesus" by helping those in prison, in need, in hunger, in sickness? What's holding you back?



Day Seventeen

Jesus' Companions

The bride says, "For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of your companions?" (1:7).

The bride's question as to where the Beloved sleeps arises from a legitimate desire to see His face, but she does not receive a direct answer. On the last evening, Thomas asked the Lord, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). But Jesus had already replied, "And where I go you know, and the way you know" (14:4). He concedes to no man the possibility that he would not know what his duty is, that someone sincerely seeking the King of kings would not be able to distinguish between Him and those who lead other flocks (other religions), that he would not know how to distinguish between the lilies that feed His flock and the simple grass of the others. Jesus believes that men are capable of thinking correctly.

However, the difficulty is not lack of knowledge, but moral weakness. If you love Jesus with a pure heart, you will know where He feeds His flock as

surely as every man who loves drugs or alcohol knows where to find them (Matthew 5:8). "Who is the man that fears the Lord? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses" (Psalm 25:12).

Would you like to know where Jesus feeds His flock? Deny yourself and take up your cross, then you can be sure of following Him. Would you like to know where He rests at noon? Once He rested in the bosom of the Father, now He rests in the heart of every believer who gives Him room. But He is preeminently resting in the hearts of the believers who are suffering and in the hearts of those who have purified themselves from an attachment to created things, so that they may abide entirely in the Creator (John 15:4).

Prison is one of the places where we should look for Him. I remember a Good Friday in a cell in the Romanian jail of Jilava. We were all very hungry. But that day when the bowl of gruel was brought to us, we refused to eat it. We fasted. Good Friday is the only fast day described by the Lord Himself: "But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matthew 9:15). Days of fasting, with deep repentance for our past sins and ardent prayers for the persecuted, are the greatest gifts anyone can give to members of the underground church and the missions that help them.

As a punishment for refusing the food on Good Friday, we were made to stand at attention Easter morning. That provided a captive audience for a sermon! If anyone had desired to be with Jesus on that day, he should have traveled in spirit to be in fellowship with us. Jesus was in jail with His disciples on that day. How many Christians of the free world visit communist countries and other nations where Christians are persecuted but never ask permission to visit a jail and encourage their brothers and sisters in pain?

In Solomon's Song, Jesus did not come out and say where He feeds His flock. He wants us to think for ourselves. But on the Day of Judgment, we will be reproached or approved for our decision to be among, or not among, this world's sufferers.



Are you seeking Jesus? Where have you been looking for Him? As you begin your day, think through the various places you will be and the people you will be with; and envision Jesus standing next to you in each of those places.



By the Footsteps of the Flock

The Bridegroom replies: "If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds' tents" (1:8).

The Bridegroom replies to the bride's question and calls her "the fairest among women." Nothing is more beautiful in God's sight than a believing soul. The blood of Jesus covers its weaknesses.

The Bridegroom shows a simple way to find Him. If she wishes with all her heart to be where He is, the bride must "follow in the footsteps of the flock." In this world there are those who bear the visible sign of being Jesus' sheep. Go after them. Imitate their example. Do as they do. They are in fellowship with Jesus. If you follow in their footsteps, you will come into fellowship with Him, too.

When the first pygmy in Central Africa came to believe in Jesus, another pygmy named Kiwebulaya could not understand what his friend was talking about, so he decided to follow him to find out the secret of his changed life. One day he saw him leave the village. He secretly followed him into the jungle.

He watched his friend kneel in the grass, fold his hands and speak with his new invisible friend Jesus.

Now Kiwebulaya knew what he had to do. After his friend had finished praying and departed, he went to the same place, knelt in the depressions that his friend left in the grass, folded his hands as he had done and said, "Jesus, You who made my friend happy, make me happy, too."

A voice replied: "Come to Me, you pygmy, who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Kiwebulaya said, "I would come to You, Jesus, but I don't know how." He received a reply again: "I will be with you always." When he rose from praying, Kiwebulaya's face shone with happiness just as his friend's face had shone. He had come to where Jesus was by following in the footsteps of one of His sheep.

However, be very careful that those you follow are really Jesus' sheep. To use another analogy, some hunters have useless dogs. They run after the real hunting dogs. If they were focused and persistent, they would arrive at the kill with the others. But instead, they stop at every bush and every curiosity. The hunting dogs we should follow are the real ones that go through fire and water.

The Bible says, "Walk in the way of goodness, and keep to the paths of righteousness" (Proverbs 2:20). Paul says, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The writer of Hebrews says, "Do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:12). The best way to grow in faith is to follow the most worthy believers of church history, not those who have the latest, fanciful doctrines. In art galleries one can see many young painters copying the masterpieces of past painters. Young believers must copy the outstanding saints of the past.

When the communists took over Angola, they began to threaten and persecute the Christians. Those who were true believers remained unafraid. One Sunday morning the communist soldiers entered the evangelical church in the town of Chiasso. They drove cattle into the church, slaughtered them and mounted the animals' heads on the pulpit and the communion table. A sign on the pulpit announced, "These are the gods you now worship."

The believers were given a choice: Die, or deny Christ. The pastor, Aurelio Chicanha, and one hundred fifty church members remained steadfast and were murdered. The mission compound was turned into a military base. Similar killings and appropriations of churches happened in Chissamba, Dondi, Bungue and Elemde.

These believers were real sheep whose example we can follow. Not all of us are called to die a martyr's death, but all of us are called to have the same spirit of self-sacrifice and love to the very end as these martyrs had.

A former fellow prisoner, Ion Stanescu, a Romanian Orthodox deacon, died from tortures suffered in prison. He once told me about Colonel Albon, the director of the slave labor camp where Stanescu was imprisoned. Albon was informed that someone had dared to preach in Stanescu's cell. He entered carrying a cane and demanded to know the culprit. When no one answered, he said: "Well then, everyone will be flogged. Unbutton!"

He started at one end of the cell and heard the usual yelling and tears. When he came to Stanescu, he said: "Not ready yet? Strip this minute!" Stanescu replied: "Neither I nor the others will be beaten any more. There is a God in heaven, and He will judge you."

With that, the Stanescu's fate appeared to be sealed. Surely he would be beaten to death! But at that moment, a guard entered the cell and said: "Colonel, you are wanted urgently in the office. Some generals have come from the Ministry." Albon left, saying to Stanescu, "We will see each other again soon."

The generals arrested the colonel. (Communists hate and jail each other for no apparent reason.) An hour later Albon was back in the cell, this time as

a prisoner. Many of the inmates jumped to lynch him. But Stanescu defended his defeated enemy with his own body, taking many blows as he protected the torturer from the beaten prisoners.

We have to follow in the footsteps of such men, loving our enemies but also resisting their evil deeds.

It is easy to walk "by the footsteps of the flock" because sheep can wear ruts into trails. But again, let us be careful to walk only by the path of Jesus' sheep. Not all sheep have virtues to be imitated. Some can be very cruel. Any farmer will tell you about sheep that let their lambs die of starvation by withholding milk. Sometimes they even smash the lambs' heads against a wall. Also, certain sheep of different breeds hate one another. Those of the Hampshire breed cannot tolerate those of the Suffolk breed. Avoid Christian sheep of this kind.



Phillip Keller writes in A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23: "He [Christ] invites us to put our confidence in Him. For He it is who best knows how we can be satisfied. He knows the human heart, the human personality, the human soul with its amazing capacity for God can never be satisfied with a substitute. Only the Spirit and life of Christ...will satisfy..." Whose flock are you following, and where are you being led? Do you believe that only Christ can satisfy your every need? What's holding you back? Journal your fears, concerns, misgivings.



Day Nineteen

Where to Feed the Little Goats

The Bridegroom says, "Feed your little goats beside the shepherds' tents" (1:8).

The meaning of these words is clarified by this Jewish proverb: "If you wish to smell pleasant, stand near those who sell perfumes." The nearer a faithful soul is to his pastor, the more he will make his valuable teachings his own and the clearer he will see the face of Jesus.

Saint Basil the Great said: "When you are sick, you don't go to any physician but the best. Neither should you listen to sermons at random. Seek the pastor who prepares conscientiously the best food for your souls." Church leaders must be careful that only believers of spiritual maturity and great abilities preach. The Bridegroom's words are also a challenge to pastors. The believer will have to feed his little goats beside the shepherds' tents.

We can use Gheorge Calciu, a Romanian underground priest, as an example. He was Orthodox and had warm brotherly relationships with persecuted Protestants. At one time I was in prison with him.

Arrested at the age of twenty-one, he spent sixteen years in jail for be-

longing to a patriotic organization. He suffered the worst torture. He was forced to eat his own excrement and drink his own urine. One could escape these atrocities by claiming to have been re-educated in communist ideology and proving it by torturing one's friends.

Calciu cracked under the pressure, but he received grace from God and was converted. After he was released during a general amnesty, he was forbidden to study theology to become a priest; therefore, he did so secretly. He became an Orthodox priest and a heroic one. All his fear was gone. From great depths of sin, he rebounded to the heights of holiness.

In 1978, he announced that he would preach a series of seven Wednesday sermons, which confronted Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's treatment of Christians. Seminary students and other young people flocked to hear him preach. After his third sermon, communists locked the door of the church to prevent students from hearing him. Officials then locked the gate to the seminary, so the students jumped over the walls to hear him. He was warned that priests in communist countries must be on the side of the atheists in power, but still he protested the demolition of Orthodox churches in Bucharest and in the provincial towns.

He continued his stand despite threats of detention in an asylum. He was arrested again and sent back to prison. This time, officials treated him much worse. Still, he refused to relent, so the government decided to have two cellmates kill him, but they refused. (Editor's Note: He was later exiled to the United States, where he died in 2006.)

Calciu valued courage, the rare gift of God, like a precious stone. From his story we can see a man who had sinned can become a good pastor, near whose tents brides of Christ can feed their little goats.





Write about the people God has placed in your life who have pointed you to the person of Christ. What did they teach you or demonstrate to you about Jesus? What would your relationship with Christ look like if they would not have been a part of your life? Take a moment to thank the Lord for them and then tell them how much you appreciate their leadership. Then ask God for opportunities to disciple others in the faith.



Day Twenty

Pharaoh's Chariots

The Bridegroom says to the bride, "I have compared you, my love, to my filly among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9).

Whith these words the Bridegroom rebukes believers who ignore the advice to follow in the footsteps of the flock. On first reading the comparison is hard to understand. How could He compare His beloved, "the most beautiful among women," to horses?

Solomon's Song is an ancient book, written in a time when people thought about animals differently than we do today. Julius Caesar erected a marble effigy of his horse in a temple. The emperor Nero nominated his horse to be a senator. The emperor Caligula made his horse a consul and invited the animal to dinner and waited on him.

In the Bible we find these words, "For the Lord of hosts will visit His flock, the house of Judah, and will make them as His royal horse in the battle" (Zechariah 10:3). The patriarch Jacob pays his son a compliment by saying, "Issachar is a strong donkey" (Genesis 49:14). Jesus calls His believers "sheep."

There is nothing insulting in comparing a human being to an animal.

Ancient Egypt was famous for its horses, which were the finest in the world, so the Bridegroom compared His beloved girl to a horse. But these words also contain a rebuke. Huge possibilities of spiritual victories lie ahead. He wishes to lead us in His chariot of trials. Seated there, we can conquer all fears, temptations and sins. But instead of accepting His invitation, we allow ourselves to be harnessed to the chariot of Pharaoh. We do not sit with Him in the chariot. We have to pull it, and Pharaoh sits alone in it. Why should we sweat in his service? Why should we draw his cart? Why should we be harnessed to the chariot of sin? Why be yoked uncomfortably with unbelievers? Why does a believing soul need to stoop to dirty politics — even dirty ecclesiastical politics? You might only be a horse pulling the chariot of some unbelieving president or prime minister who cares nothing for you. What good are dishonest transactions and ugly amusements to you? Don't let yourself be harnessed to Pharaoh's chariot. Ride with the noblemen in Jesus' chariot of triumph.

Being harnessed to Pharaoh's chariot is not pleasant. Drawings from ancient bas-reliefs in the Nile region show that the ancient Egyptians understood neither the anatomy of the horse, nor the correct way to harness it. They attached the reins to the horse's throat, almost suffocating it. Instead of allowing its neck to be extended in the normal way, they held the head in line with its chest, sometimes pulled back even further. Just as the ancient Egyptians did not know the horse's anatomy, neither do the Pharaohs know the intimate structure of a believer's soul. They harness these souls in a way that torments them.

Sadly, the Bridegroom must so rebuke His bride. Some Christians support the terrorist Palestine Liberation Organization. Some Jewish Christians in Israel support the anti-Arab measures of their government. Some Christians support Marxist (communist) guerrilla movements in the Third World. Other Christians defend the communist persecutors of the church. Many believers

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are involved in unjust transactions, extramarital relationships and worldly pleasures. It is sad that brides of Christ should be harnessed to Pharaoh's chariots!



Am I harnessed to Pharaoh's chariot — sin? Or am I sitting with Jesus in His chariot?



Day Twenty-one

How to Rebuke

The Bridegroom says, "I have compared you, my love, to my filly among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9).

Even as He rebukes, the Bridegroom uses words of gentleness. The bride who causes the Bridegroom sadness is addressed, "O my love." Let us also learn to sweeten our reproofs with good words. Praise must go hand in hand with rebuke.

In his Epistles, Paul sometimes rebukes believers with great harshness, but his rebukes were accepted because they never arrived unaccompanied. They came with gentle words, expressing appreciation of the good qualities in the believers. Before rebuking them, he wrote to the Romans, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). To the Philippians, he wrote, "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you" (Philippians 1:3). To the Thessalonians, he wrote, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers" (1 Thessalonians 1:2). This is how one removes the bitterness of rebuke.

Antonina was the abbess of the women's convent in the town of Kizliar in the Caucasus. In 1917, during the early days of Russia's revolution when the plundering of monasteries was a common occurrence, a mob of Bolshevik bandits broke into her convent. They looted and destroyed it, shooting several nuns who resisted them. The abbess Antonina fled to the convent of Vladikavkas, but posters were hung offering a reward of 3,000 rubles to anyone reporting her whereabouts. The communists could not trace her, though they suspected she was hiding in another convent.

Time passed when one day a young girl arrived at Antonina's convent. With many tears, the girl begged Antonina, the abbess of Vladikavkas, to take her in, saying her father and mother had been killed and their estate burglarized. She played the part so well that she succeeded in winning the confidence of the abbess who, out of sympathy, not only took in the girl and was kind to her, but also confided in her Antonina's secret.

Soon after, the girl disappeared. She was an agent of the secret police, looking for Antonina. That night the militia surrounded the convent. No one could escape. They broke into the convent, demanding they give up. When the two cell attendants went upstairs to tell Antonina what was happening, she said: "Well, what can I do? If it pleases the Lord that they find me, let it be so. But if it is not His will, He will close people's eyes. They, seeing me, will not see me. Come, we will go out in front of them."

The nuns put a sheepskin coat on her, and the three women went down the stairs and simply walked out of the convent gate before the eyes of the Red Army soldiers. They had not gone far when they heard the commander shouting: "Who just went out of the gate? Who was let out?"

"We saw nobody," answered the soldiers.

"What do you mean?" retorted the angry commander. "Someone just left in a white sheepskin coat, accompanied by two nuns."

Several years later before her martyr death, Antonina met the girl who had informed on her. She did not start with words of rebuke but said to her: "I valued very much the tears you shed when asking to be received as a nun in the convent. It is very difficult to fake tears. They must have come from a heart whose depths have a spark of genuine love for Christ. You have been misused. You were young. You did not know what you were doing. But God did not just see you denounce me. He heard your prayers, which were not all falsehood. There may have been an occasional note of sincerity. God will pity your soul. Only repent."

There was so much friendliness, spiritual beauty and complete lack of resentment in the words of Abbess Antonina that the girl's heart was pierced. She became a real believer in Christ. Let us also learn to rebuke like this.



Are your words of rebuke gentle or harsh? If the latter, do you believe the Holy Spirit is in charge of changing that person, or do you feel it is your responsibility? Confess such a controlling spirit, and picture those individuals you have rebuked in the care of our Shepherd, Jesus. Go to those individuals you may have rebuked harshly and ask for forgiveness. Such an act of humility can unleash eternal results.

Day Twenty-two

Holy Nonsense

The Bridegroom says, "Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with chains of gold" (1:10).

The words "of jewels" and "of gold" have been added by the translators to make sense of the Hebrew text. They are not in the original. The authors of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, also tried to make sense of the text and wrote, "How beautiful are your cheeks as the turtledove's." But doves have no cheeks! The Targum, an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, renders it, "Your cheeks are comely with bridles." What does all this mean?

We are prejudiced. We think that everything in the Bible must make sense. If we don't find a meaning, we invent one. But not all the Bible consists of logical, reasonable, purposeful thoughts. It contains a wide gamut of feelings or impulsivities, of reactions to events. Not all the Bible makes sense, and life and the human mind also have their nonsensical features. Those who fail to give nonsense a place are unable to mirror the whole of reality in religious writings. Depths of emotion cause lovers to talk a great deal of nonsense. There is

much in Romeo and Juliet's conversations!

The simplest possible explanation is that Solomon wished to compliment his bride, saying, "Your cheeks are lovely." They were so lovely that instead of comparing them to something, he just kissed them. Then he wanted to convey something more. He used the word *batorim*, which can mean "turtledoves" or possibly "bridles." Instead of explaining himself further, he bestowed further kisses.

Then Solomon wrote, "Your neck with chains." What would he have added? "Of gold?" Or did he, perhaps, imagine his bride with iron chains on her neck, bound to the poles or stakes on which she was to be sacrificed by her captors? Or did he see her chained like those unfortunate women who were driven from Africa to America in slavery, with iron chains around their necks? In any event, he did not continue. Her neck was too lovely for him to think of it being so abused. He preferred to kiss it.

To many in the free world, Christians being persecuted for refusing to deny Christ does not make sense. Misunderstanding Scripture and early church history, they wonder why these believers don't obey the government, deny Christ, and save themselves the suffering.

For example, in China, a wedding took place at an execution ground. Zhou Wen-Yong and Chen Tie-Zhun worked together in the underground church and were sentenced to death. They were in love. At the place of execution, Zhou asked Chen, "Will you be my wife?" She consented. He declared: "So we are married before God! Let the communist bullet be the seal of our wedding. We will feast our marriage in paradise." Many may have criticized their decision not to give the communist government what it wanted in exchange for freedom to marry each other.

No life is complete without its nonsensical side. Let us sanctify it.

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Are you trying to force an explanation in a very inexplicable situation? Journal about it to God, leaving it in His care, knowing He will make it into a very beautiful chain of gold.



Day Twenty-three

God's Jewels

The daughters of Jerusalem say, "We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver" (1:11).

od is a lover of beauty. He made His heavenly city of pure gold, its gates of pearls, its foundations of costly stones. The churches and cathedrals believers have built to gather for worship are also beautiful. The individual believer's soul must have beauty, which can be obtained through faith.

Gold objects are normally given studs of costly stones or platinum, which increase their value. Here, the daughters of Jerusalem give them studs of silver, which decrease it. We have spiritual truth — which is gold — in the shape of simple human words; otherwise, we could not understand it. He made the Eternal Word, His Son, to have the body of an obedient servant, so that He — the holy God in the flesh — could live among us. He places studs — made of the silver of humility — in the gold chains of the truth. Our words, our efforts, our service, are studs of silver in the gold of His eternal plan and purposes.

The most celebrated Christians — those with diamond studs in their gold

chains — aren't always the best Christians. One well-known American evangelist wrote about how to be happy. It started with "Love and be loved," forgetting that Jesus said, "You will be hated by all for My name's sake" (Matthew 10:22). The evangelist went on: "Guard your health." How is this possible for those belonging to the sixty percent of the world that is undernourished?

But there are other Christians whose chains of gold have modest studs, perhaps of even less value than silver ones. Their names are not well known in the world, but they have proved to be heroes in times of great tribulation.

A Christian in Manchuria protested the Chinese communists' indiscriminate killings. He was dragged into a people's court and accused of crimes against the people. The judge ordered those watching to march past him, beating him with clubs until he died. But the people refused, declaring, "He is a good man."

The judge changed tactics, promising the man freedom if he would renounce Jesus. "Which do you choose," he demanded, "Jesus Christ — or communism?"

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!" the Christian shouted back.

They took him to the riverbank for execution. On the way he sang "Jesus loves me" and the twenty-third Psalm set to Chinese music. He was shot in the back. But instead of falling forward on his face to grovel in the dust as victims usually do, he fell backwards, as if falling into the arms of Jesus. Reportedly, the entire community was stirred by his testimony.

The name of this martyr is unknown in the free world. He had lived in humility, and that is how he died. God so ordered it that the beauty of his soul should not become the object of human praise, but he is highly valued by God.

The human soul cannot ornament itself. God is the one who ornaments and perfects her for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).



Are you seeking to be the object of human praise or God's pleasure? If human praise, what fears or concerns are driving you to pursue it? Once you have it, will you be able to keep it? Read Zephaniah 3:17. Envision Jesus singing over you, fighting for you, and standing with you.



Day Twenty-four

Spikenard

The bride says, "While the king is at his table, my spikenard sends forth its fragrance" (1:12).

When the King enters the soul, the bride, like Mary of old, anoints the feet of the Bridegroom with a pure nard of gratitude and adoration, filling the world with the nard's perfume.

Nard, or spikenard, is made from a very small and despised plant. The fragrance from this plant comes from its root being trodden on or otherwise bruised. In the church, the spiritual nard spreads its perfume only when it is bruised under the burden of the cross.

The bride's spikenard sends forth its aroma as long as the King sits at His table. However, when we refuse to submit ourselves to the cross of Christ and remove ourselves from His presence, the nard's fragrance disappears and the believer can no longer bring the good aroma of God to the world.

A Russian Orthodox priest named Dudko was in jail for eleven years for preaching the Word. His enemies nearly succeeded in killing him in a staged car accident. He continued preaching without fear. He was rearrested. This time he cracked and publicly denied his convictions on television.

A Russian Christian named Orlov was imprisoned for his faith. He was fed salted herrings to make him very thirsty, but his captors allowed him a drink only eight hours later. He was also not allowed to go to the lavatory whenever he needed. I spent fourteen years in communist prisons, so I know how terrible this torture is. Orlov remained steadfast. Yet not only Orlov, but also Dudko served Christ! His sermons and the books he wrote before he broke have remained; and they continue to spread the perfume of Christ.



Are you allowing your sufferings and trials to stir up Christ's aroma and bring His life to those around you?

Day Twenty-five

A Bundle of Myrrh

The bride says, "A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, that lies all night between my breasts" (1:13).

Every word in this verse is full of significance. The Savior is called "my beloved."

Some have asked if Christianity is compatible with one political ideology or another. Christianity is compatible with nothing! For Juliet, nothing else counted except Romeo. She never talked about anything else. He was the beloved, the only one. So, too, Jesus should be our only Beloved.

It is remarkable that the bride says, "A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me." No matter what Jesus might be for others, the bride says what He is for her. The apostle Thomas calls Him "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28, emphasis added). No matter what He might be for others, for me He is Lord and God.

On one occasion the disciples told Jesus what men were saying about Him: that He was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets (Matthew 16:14). Then Simon Peter said: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

The bride calls Jesus "a bundle of myrrh" — a bundle rather than a single stalk, because she found in Him a multitude of qualities. In Hebrew, there is no word for "face" in the singular. You can only say *panim*, which means "faces." When the Bible says, "Seek the face of God," it does so only in our translations. How easily believers of different Christian confessions would come to peace with one another if they would only realize that each believer has seen just one of the many faces of God, and that his brother has seen a different face! That is how they arrived at different convictions. The convictions do not exclude one another. Jesus is a bundle of myrrh, and perhaps the different confessions have each seen a different stalk.

In communist countries Christians of many confessions suffer persecution. In Romania, Calciu of the Orthodox Church, Pitatu of the Brethren assembly, Traian Dorz of the Lord's Army, Shamu of the Pentecostal Church, Dragomir of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and Godo of the Catholic Church all suffered in prisons and psychiatric asylums. They did not quarrel with one another there. They knew that Jesus is for them a bundle of myrrh.

The bundle, which the bride keeps between her breasts, is of myrrh, a plant with a bitter taste. Even if He brings her through fears and difficulties, she makes a place for Him between her breasts. In the Far East, women used to carry little bags of perfume there. The bride has replaced this bag with the sufferings He allows her to experience. They are dear to her and are the fragrance she likes best.



Spend time journaling who Jesus is to you. Go to the Psalms for inspiration. Make it a list or a poem, a letter or a love song. Think about what He has done in and through your life. Think about the truths expressed in His Word. Then envision the bundle of His presence being nestled in your heart and pouring forth to those God has placed in your life.

Day Twenty-six

Between Her Breasts

The bride says, "That lies all night between my breasts" (1:13).

The bride considers that the best place for the bundle of myrrh is between her breasts.

Well-educated men do not usually speak or write easily about women's breasts. Some people have been offended because the Song of Solomon uses erotic imagery. Because of its erotic vocabulary, the Song of Solomon has been greatly misused. Rabbi Akiba, who died around A.D. 135, cursed those who sang this song in taverns because he believed it was the most holy of Scripture. It must have been common, or he would not have needed to pronounce the curse. The Syrian theologian, Theodore of Mopsuestia of Cilicia (A.D. 350-428), considered the Song of Solomon a worldly, obscene poem without dignity, allegedly written by King Solomon to defend his marriage to an Egyptian. However, the Fifth Ecumenical Synod of A.D. 553 condemned Theodore and all his writings. Later the humanist theologian Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563) was forced to leave Geneva because he had called Solomon's

Song a worldly work. However, the church has always insisted that it is a holy book and has explained it allegorically.

We should not be offended at the mention of women's breasts. I can see no reason why the Creator of women's breasts should not inspire a biblical author to write about them! The breasts are the prominent part of a woman's body. Jesus finds His rest between a believer's most prominent virtues. He expects all His disciples to be prominent in some way. He asks them, "What do you do more than others?" (Matthew 5:47). He also said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father" (John 14:12). Millions said of Jesus, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" (John 7:46). It should be possible to say the same of us. We must be prominent through fearless self-sacrifice, offering our own lives even for the salvation of our worst enemies. We must risk our lives even for the wicked.

At the end of the Song of Solomon, we will read about a little sister with no breasts. They ask themselves, "What shall we do for our sister?" (8:8). Pastors must be preoccupied with souls that do not become prominent through a gift. God speaks with satisfaction of the virgin of Israel, saying of her, "Your breasts were formed" (Ezekiel 16:7). In spiritual terms this means, "You have become remarkable through exceptional deeds." Exceptional deeds are a pleasant resting place for God in a human soul.

Throughout church history, the persecuted church became very prominent. In Rome, many were thrust into the roaring crowd of bloodthirsty onlookers for refusing to deny Christ. For this, they were devoured by wild beasts.

The words "all night" in verse 13 do not exist in the Hebrew. The correct text is "He shall lie between my breasts" — period. Read it again. It could not say "all night." Where He is, there is no night.

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Read the apostle Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:6,7, where he urged Timothy to "stir up" God's gift. What gifts has God given you? And do you need to ask Him to stir them up or renew your perspective of them? How do you view your gifts? Are you embarrassed of them? Do they seem unimportant or too conspicuous? Confess your fears and ask God for the grace to employ them in His service.



Day Twenty-seven

A Cluster of Camphire

The bride says, "My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blooms in the vineyards of En Gedi" (1:14).

amphire is a kind of perfume reminiscent of the perfume from the grapes of En Gedi. It is interesting that the name of the plant "kopher" is also the Hebrew word for "atonement." The Jews used to give the name "cluster" to men who possessed all the virtues and excellences.

The Jewish teachers in ancient times divided the first word in the expression, *Eshkol kopher*, "a cluster of camphire," so arriving at *Ish kol kopher*, "a man who covers all," or "atones for all" — a fitting name for the Messiah. The most costly perfume that Jesus spreads about Him is the fragrance of atonement for all sins through His sacrifice.

Contemplating the Savior, the author of the Song of Solomon remembers the vineyards of the En Gedi region. In Hebrew, *En gedi* means "the source of the goats." The region was so called because many wild goats lived in it. It was the region to which Solomon's father, King David, fled from his rival Saul, who pursued him to En Gedi but fell into David's hands. It would have been

easy for David to have taken revenge, but he forgave his adversary. When Solomon reached maturity, a sentiment of piety led him to visit various historic sites of his father's miraculous rise from the position of a shepherd to that of a glorious king of Israel.

From the Judean deserts to this land, a difficult serpentine route descends through rocks and stones, eventually arriving at a little river that makes its way to the Dead Sea amidst rich vegetation and beautiful vineyards. David the fugitive would have refreshed himself with these grapes. Recalling his visit there, Solomon puts in the mouth of the bride a comparison between the Savior and a grape of En Gedi. He also refreshes and gladdens the heart and gives new life to the oppressed and persecuted of this world.

Jesus warned His disciples, "They will also persecute you" (John 15:20). In this respect we all share King David's fate and need the comfort of the Savior. Fifteen Roman emperors strove to eradicate the Christian faith from the world, using torture to intimidate believers. Tender maidens and children received atrocious treatment.

Agnes and Priscilla, both 13 years old, were torn by metal hooks, roasted on grills and crowned with red-hot helmets. In the persecution under Diocletian, 17,000 Christians were slain in a single month. In Egypt alone, 144,000 were put to death and another 700,000 sent into exile. The total death toll reached 11,000,000, which means 30,000 a day.

However, the magnitude of the slaughter did not cause the surviving Christians to panic. Like the persecuted David, they had the comfort of the vineyards of En Gedi. Amidst the torment, they retained their joy and their calm, so that Augustine wrote, "Every one of them seemed to be two people — one, somebody who suffers greatly, and also somebody who speaks words of gladness, of wisdom and of praising the Lord." This is why, in the words of the early church leader Tertullian, the blood of the martyrs became the seed

of the church. It caused the church to grow.

In the sixteenth century, hundreds of Christians in Japan died for their faith. Some were roasted over slow fires or cut to pieces, their flesh torn with pincers. The necks of some were sawed through little by little in the course of a week, until they finally died. Others were buried alive or frozen to death. But all these, too, enjoyed the grapes of the mystical vineyards of En Gedi.

While she was being buried alive, a Japanese Christian named Tecla held a three-year-old girl in her arms and encouraged her to meet death with the hope of paradise. A boy of nine opened his collar to offer his neck to the guillotine. Woken from sleep by the executioner's henchmen, a boy of five proudly dressed in his finest clothes and was carried in the executioner's arms to the place of death where he also offered his head to the beheading block.

No Christian is alone during tribulation. No one is left without comfort. Just before Betty and John Stam were captured to face martyrdom at the hands of communist soldiers in China's Anwhei province, John Stam wrote to his father: "We're now in dangerous territory, but we're not afraid. The enclosed poem exactly expresses our feelings." E. H. Hamilton wrote the poem after he was inspired by the courage of Jack Vinson, the first Southern Presbyterian martyr in China:

Afraid? Of What?
To feel the spirit's glad release?
To pass from pain to perfect peace,
The strife and strain of life to cease?
Afraid — of that?
Afraid? Of What?
Afraid to see the Savior's face
To hear His welcome, and to trace
The glory gleam from wounds of grace?

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Afraid — of that?
Afraid? Of What?
A flash, a crash, a pierced heart;
Darkness, light, O, Heaven's art!
A wound of His a counterpart!
Afraid — of that?
Afraid? Of What?
To do by death what life could not —
Baptize with blood a stony plot,
Till souls shall blossom from the spot?
Afraid — of that?



What are you afraid of? How it is keeping you from being used by God? Journal about your fears. Envision standing before God as He sits on His throne with all your fears under His feet.



Day Twenty-eight

Doves' Eyes

The Bridegroom says, "Behold, you are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair! You have dove's eyes" (1:15).

How strange is our relationship with our Bridegroom. Usually brides think of themselves as beautiful. Not the bride of Jesus. She says of herself: "I am dark.... But my own vineyard I have not kept." In our union it is the Bridegroom who convinces us that we are beautiful. He tells us: "Behold, you are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair."

If He considers my soul to be beautiful, why should I worry about Him ever rejecting me? We are beloved by Him for our beauty. Holiness is always beautiful. Because of it, we are beloved, even when we are greatly tempted, even if for a time we fall. Even if all men forsake us, we will be loved by Him to the very end. He says, "Behold, you are fair." The bride is inclined to brood upon her darkness. He wishes us to know ourselves as He sees us — as beautiful. Humility is good only if it is a balanced humility. To overcome any doubt in us, He repeats Himself: "You are fair...! You are fair!"

Jesus also reminds us that we have doves' eyes. Doves are chaste and faith-

ful to their mates. He said, "If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22). The eyes should not even look toward evil. Sin should not attract them. They should not betray any lust or see the speck in someone else's eyes (Matthew 5:28, 7:3-5). They should be open to the glory of God and to heavenly beauties. Jesus is attracted to our doves' eyes. He said to His disciples: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (John 14:21). The bride has doves' eyes, and He longs to reveal Himself to us.

Khrapov of the underground Soviet Baptist Church resumed his evangelistic work after twenty years' confinement. A second eight-year term of imprisonment followed and then another. He died in jail as an unbroken child of God, having spent a total of thirty-four years suffering for Christ. For a time he had led the underground Baptist Church while in hiding. Then he wrote a book with the amazing title, *The Happiness of a Sacrificed Life*.

He had doves' eyes. He had no bitter words toward his torturers or traitors. He looked on life with good eyes. There are so many beautiful things to think about, and his book speaks about them. Christ loves such souls greatly.

Not only the eyes, but also the whole nature of the faithful soul is that of a dove. A dove will not sit on the green branch, will not drink fresh water, will not seek shade and will not seek the company of other birds until it finds its companion. So also is the bride of Christ, so long as she is separated from her Bridegroom.



Do you believe that Jesus sees you as one who is fair? Find a quiet place, and listen to your Bridegroom saying these words to you, "Beloved, you are fair! You are fair!"

When you hear Him saying these words to you, how are you changed?

Day Twenty-nine

On the Green Bed or in the House

The bride says, "Behold, you are handsome, my beloved! Yes, pleasant! Also our bed is green. The beams of our houses are cedar" (1:16,17).

Inebriated with happiness because of the loving words spoken to her, the bride says: "You are handsome, my beloved! Yes, pleasant!" He is handsome and pleasant.

She then invites Him, saying, "Our bed is green." The faithful soul wishes to give Jesus her love in the midst of nature, among the blooming of lilies and the chirping of birds, upon the green grass — a witness to the care of God toward His creatures. She calls the bed, "our bed," and He will call the house, "our house." Between the bride and Jesus, there is a community of goods — everything that is hers is His; everything that is His is hers.

The people of Israel knew Solomon's Song, but when Jesus once commanded them to sit on the grass, they did not remember the Scripture. They ate on the grass. Their hunger was satisfied, but they did not give Him their love. At picnics today on the green grass, there's plenty to eat and drink, and we, too, fail to give Him our love.

The Bridegroom gives an alternative to the green bed. The house of cedar wood is durable and does not rot. The rafters are of fir, a fine wood used in palaces. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites those who belong to Him to enter into the closet, a "secret place," where in quiet we enjoy God's love (Matthew 6:6).

Christians can enjoy communion with Him not only in nice homes, but also in prison cells. A prisoner from communist Russia wrote:

When I entered jail, in mockery I was given gigantic shoes and clothes twice my size. The sleeves reached my knees. I looked like a clown or scarecrow. When I entered the barracks, the criminals, incited by the camp commander, greeted me with laughter and ridicule.

A prisoner bowed in fake piety. "I greet you, holy Father; you are the ambassador of Christ Himself. Do you represent the interests of heaven?"

The mocking words gave me courage. Forgetting how I looked, I told them I indeed represented heaven, for which the atheists imprisoned me. While preaching to those despising sinners, the sermon affected me, too. I wanted to embrace them for having reminded me of my high calling.

Many fear suffering. In the past I, too, feared. But the presence of the Lord in jail has given me so many happy experiences that I would not have changed them for years of easy living in freedom.

This man has known the discreet embraces of Jesus not in a house of cedar wood, but in a communist prison cell.



Even in the most difficult places of your life, Jesus wants you to know His embraces. Identify those places and ask Jesus to make you aware of His embrace.



Chapter 2



The Flowers

The bride says, "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" (2:1).

The bride compares herself to the rose of Sharon and a lily of the valley. The rose is distinguished from all other flowers by the fact that it blooms in different climates and different soils. So those who belong to Jesus are present in many countries and climates, in liberty and persecution, in poverty and abundance, in sickness and health.

Roses exist in a great many colors — white, pink, purple, violet, black. The souls who reflect Jesus are also very different and belong to different church denominations. However, only blue roses, having the color representing the heavens, do not exist. So we do not have to be excessively sad that we are not yet fully heavenly! Let us strive onward, without despairing over our weakness.

The Hebrew word translated "lily" is *havatzelet*. This is a particular flower that botanists call *colchicum autumnale* or *filius ante patrem* ("the son before the father") because it has the distinctive characteristic of blossoming before its

leaves appear. The *havatzelet* symbolizes people whose character is the opposite of those Jesus meant when He cursed the fig tree, which had rich foliage but no fruit (Matthew 21:19). They are hypocrites, promoting the self and giving the appearance of religion but without love and joy. Jesus is *filius ante patrem*. With Him, and with those who belong to Him, the fruits come first and the leaves afterwards.

Havatzalet is a flower found in Israel at every step — a flower without much outward beauty, a fitting symbol for the One who came into this world having divested Himself of His divinity, living as a humble servant. The saints of God are also like <code>havatzelet</code> — humble like Jesus, without added ornamentation.

The Voice of the Martyrs works in China. Decades ago, some of VOM's co-workers there accepted only used clothing and minimal salaries. "Otherwise, we might become attached to things," they explained. One of them spent many years in jail working ten hours a day barefoot in an iron mine, because she had written music based on the Gospel of Luke. After she was released from jail, I heard a tape of her first song. It was like hearing an angel's song. She gathered three hundred ladies together every Sunday. In that region, a leader of the underground church sometimes covered eight hundred miles by bicycle to visit all the groups. (This still happens today.) But these Christians did not want their names to be made known, and they refused every small amenity of life. They accepted only the simplest things.

Pliny says of the lily that it has "a weak neck, or body, which is not sufficient to bear the weight of the head." In the same way, the church is slender and weak. Christ is too big for her. He has to bend like the head of the lily because of this.

I had a beautiful encounter with Jesus, who bent down to meet me in the deep valleys of suffering. When I was in solitary confinement in a communist

prison, without a Bible, I prayed the Lord would speak to me directly. Then I heard His voice asking me, "What is your name?" I had always known my name was Richard, but I could not say this to Jesus, because I knew about another man who had this name.

Saint Richard was a Christian who lived in times of persecution. He was sentenced to death for his faith. When he was on the gallows, the hangman had some difficulty fixing the noose of the rope. Richard bowed. "I am a farmer and skilled in these matters," he said gently. "Please allow me to help you." The hangman responded courteously and allowed Richard to attend to it. After fixing the noose, he thanked the executioner for his kindness, assured him that he bore him no grudge, and so died.

I did not have the courage to tell Jesus I bore the name of such a saint, because I was so unlike him.

We all bear beautiful names, names as Mary, Paul or John, of which we are not worthy because we are not immaculate, zealous or loving like those who bore those names before us. So I bowed before Jesus and said: "I have no name. I long to bear Yours." To renounce the self and allow Christ to be your personality is the secret of a victorious life.

Jesus neither puts such questions to you, nor does He stir you up to see their seriousness, except in deep valleys. It is only in deep valleys that He unites Himself with you to take your place, so that you might become a lily, even as He is.



Do you believe you are among the roses and lilies? Christ longs to speak to you and help you see the beauty of His character in the valleys of suffering that you may be experiencing.

Day Thirty-one

The Lily-Shaped Soul

The Bridegroom says, "Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters" (2:2).

od and His people pay each other the most beautiful compliments. Israel tells his Creator: "Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11).

In this verse, Jesus tells His bride that in His eyes she is a beautiful flower. He does not compare her to the rose that has thorns, but only to the lily, which has none. Most souls are like thorns, without value or use. They prick, like the thorns in Jesus' crown. In the end, they will be burned. Amid the thorns there are roses.

The Bridegroom has among the girls one who is His own beloved. The flowers remained faithful to Him when He was crucified on Golgotha near a garden, sending their perfume to the cross to refresh Him. Now the lily-shaped soul of His bride is His delight and joy.

Oleg Miliutin, a Russian Orthodox, was committed to psychiatric insti-

tutions six times for openly declaring his Christian faith. He was gagged and beaten and put in a straight jacket, yet he did not yield. He was a lily among the thorns whose faithfulness delighted Jesus.

Jesus teaches us to look closely at the lilies of the field and learn from them. He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28,29). Those who have the happiness of finding God-appointed teachers grow beautifully. Scripture says that Jesus has given some to be our pastors, others evangelists and others teachers who will help us grow in all respects (Ephesians 4:11,12). In Him, the whole church grows to become a holy temple of God.

Christians who suffer for their faith in communist prisons are examples of how we ought to live and are good teachers for us. A Christian named V. Petkus was tried in a communist court in Soviet Lithuania. Petkus refused to take any part in the trial. Guards had to drag him by force into the courtroom. He would not accept an attorney and would not speak a single word in his own defense (neither did I when I stood trial). The charge that was manufactured against him was a base one. Like Joseph in the Old Testament who, though innocent, was sent to jail under the accusation of attempted rape, so Petkus was charged with homosexuality for gathering young men in his home to teach them the faith.

We have not become like the lilies when we protest the slightest harsh word against us. On the other hand, Petkus was happy because Jesus loved him, knew him and appreciated him. He did not say one single word to disprove the lies evil men had said about him.

Communists have invented numerous charges against believers. Sister Arbutenko was charged with ritual murder; Solzhenitsyn, with incest; the Bulgarian Pentecostal pastors Ladin and Haralan Popov, with counter-revolu-

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tionary spying activities and the arrest of communists under the old regime. The Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty had allegedly speculated in foreign currency. I was also accused of similar crimes. A group of Russian Baptists received jail sentences because communists claimed they had plotted to spread disease among the population by baptizing people in the same river, giving communion with the same cup, and giving each other a holy kiss.

Although fools may have believed such accusations spread by evil men, the lily-shaped saints did not defend themselves. Their purity spoke for itself. Those who knew Brother Petkus told the court: "We know him to be a good Christian and an honest man. We have nothing else to declare. We believe like him and have done the same things. If they are considered wrong, we too should be prisoners like him." They answered no questions. Outside, many young people sang for hours in the street. Petkus was sentenced to ten years of prison, plus five years of deprivation.

May we have lily-shaped souls: faithful to the One who was crucified, dead, buried and rose again!



When facing the thorns of trials and opposition for Christ's sake, how is your witness? Do you react or respond? Do you give in or stand out? Do you take liberties or give life?



Day Thirty-two

Under His Shadow

The bride says: "Like an apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste" (2:3).

Then it is very hot, one finds great comfort in sitting in the shadow of a tree. Likewise, we desire to sit down under His shadow. The angel Gabriel told Mary, "The power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). She, too, must have sat in this shadow with great delight. In the Book of Acts, Luke wrote how Peter's shadow healed those it passed (Acts 5:15). Similarly, we are happy to sit in the shadow of Jesus, especially in the shadow of Golgotha, where He obtained for us the forgiveness of our sins by dying for us.

It is said that Saint Jerome always studied and wrote in the shadow of a large cross. Once he was asked why he did so. He replied: "This tree of life gives me a shadow which shades me from all evil; it gives me fruit to strengthen me in everything which is good. I desire to spend my whole life in its shadow, and I long that its fruit should always nourish my soul."

The important thing is not pushing oneself to the fore. When overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, Mary remained in the shadows. Most martyrs for Christ have remained in the shadows. They are anonymous. Their names will never be known on earth.

The October 17, 1978 edition of *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, the (West) German newspaper, reported that communists in Ethiopia sewed up the eyes of Christian prisoners or gouged them out. It might well be expected that in such extremities of terror, every Christian activity would cease. In the free world, the slightest setback is sometimes enough to discourage us from church activity. How much more then would the flesh recoil before the prospect of pain or death under torture? However, just the reverse happened in Ethiopia: Christians whose names were unknown to anyone in the free world — who remained in the shadows so that Jesus might shine — busied themselves with Bible distribution as never before. They spread the Scriptures, knowing they might be dipped in burning oil for doing so.

Let us also sit down in the shadow of the apple tree where we will see that its fruit, which represents the Word of God, is sweet to our taste. As Psalm 119:103 says, "How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"



Envision yourself sitting peacefully on lush grass under a tree brimming with ripened apples while a storm is stirring up in the field around you. When facing affliction, do you remain in the shadow of Christ's cross or flee in fear? Ask Christ for the grace to remain, so you can partake in the sweetness of His presence.



Day Thirty-three

The Banqueting House

The bride says, "He brought me to the banqueting house..." (2:4).

The church is a banqueting house. God brings us into this happy place that we would not otherwise have come. The soul that was satisfied to sit quietly in His shadow is now brought to greater joys. In His banqueting house, we will know what it means to become inebriated with His love. He has prepared for us not merely meals, but banquets with meat, milk and wines available without payment.

The great mystics and saints can be our guides toward this banqueting house. Their examples teach us that when the Holy Spirit enters into a heart igniting the fire of love, that fire gives birth to an insatiable thirst. The believer says, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God" (Psalm 42:1). As the deer's thirst is even greater when pursuing, so is the believer's thirst for God under temptation. The thirsty deer plunges its whole body into the water and drinks its fill; likewise, we must eat and drink our fill in God's banqueting house. Saint John of the Cross wrote:

May we forget about ourselves. When we are intoxicated by His presence, we will feel that we can do miracles, that we can pass through fire and water, and that we can remain unafraid when thousands of swords are drawn against us. By His grace, we won't fear anymore — neither life nor death, joy nor sorrow. We will be drunk with faith.

This is called "jubilation." Sometimes you smile, sometimes you weep, and sometimes you sing. Rational people who have no idea what the Holy Spirit does with those who belong to Him ask, "How can you be so mad?" Our reply is, "God has permitted us to drink in His banqueting house!" But rational people cannot understand such a thing. The soul that has been in God's banqueting house knows unspeakable joy. He rejoices even for the pain he must endure. Whatever is done to him, however well or ill he fares, he is always peaceful and joyous. Rivers of living water flow from his heart. Saint John of the Cross sang:

I drank from my well-beloved and when I walked out, I knew nothing more of this whole field; and I had lost the flock which I had followed before.

My soul has put itself,
with all its resources,
into His service.
Now I have no flock anymore;
I have no duties anymore
Because my whole duty consists in loving.





What or who intoxicates you? The Holy Spirit or some passing, earthly pleasure? Tell Jesus about any reluctance or eagerness to be a part of His banquet. He has invited you to sit at His table. Envision the eternal fruits that He has placed before you to nourish you and bring you lasting joy.



Day Thirty-four

The Banner of Love

The bride says, "His banner over me was love" (2:4).

A s conquerors hoist their flag over conquered cities, Jesus hoists His flag over the souls He has conquered. It is a unique flag, a flag of love. It is a persistent, unvarying love. He longs to see this love expressed in the way we behave toward one another.

The famous Egyptian hermit Saint Macarius once asked God what degree of holiness he had attained after several years of fasting, prayer, solitude and sacrifice. During his sleep, an angel appeared to him and told him that he was still far from having reached the degree of holiness that had been attained by two women and he should learn from them.

Macarius went into town and found the women. They were not nuns, just ordinary housewives. "What is the secret of your holiness?" he asked them. They wondered at the question. They were very busy caring for their husbands and several children. They had little time to pray. Because of the amount of work they had to do, they often missed church. They were illiterate and could not read Scripture. They were simple-minded and could not meditate much.

They described themselves as "poor wives amidst constant worldly cares."

Macarius continued to make inquiries about them and discovered they were married to two brothers. They lived together under the same roof, not once quarrelling or permitting harsh words to pass between them. From this, Saint Macarius learned that living together in love, passing through all frictions without ever saying a harsh word or throwing a harsh look, can be more graceworthy in the eyes of God than a great deal of fasting and prayer. The banner over us is love.

In Romania's Jilava prison, several prisoners were placed in a cell naked without beds, without blankets and without a barrel to serve as a lavatory. They were never allowed to leave their cell to fulfill their bodily needs. Imagine passing the night, completely naked, in such a stinking cell.

One of the prisoners was sick with pulmonary tuberculosis. Late one night, he could not bear to stand on his feet any longer. He fell and would have frozen to death on the cold concrete had not the Christian Mircea Vulcanescu stretched himself out on the concrete so the sick man could seat himself on his body and have the protection of his body's warmth.

Vulcanescu remained stretched out naked on the concrete while the sick man slept for a few hours. He too fell asleep. When they awoke, Vulcanescu was almost frozen. The other prisoners had spent the entire night moving around without sitting on the concrete. Vulcanescu contracted pulmonary tuberculosis and died, but he demonstrated the Savior's banner of love.

In Florence, Italy, the Red Brigade leader Furbelone planned a bank robbery — what the Brigade (a Marxist-Leninist group) terms an "expropriation." Two revolutionaries disguised as policemen stood at the entrance to the building, while two others entered to force the teller to give up the money. A car with a false license number waited in front of the bank to ensure the escape. Disguised as a beggar, Furbelone sat on the steps of the Santa Maria

Church opposite the bank where he was to give the signals controlling the operation.

Just as he was about to signal the start of the robbery, a little girl who was on her way to school with her mother ascended the steps for a short prayer. Seeing the beggar, she took her lunch out of her bag, broke off a part for herself, and gave him the remainder.

Irritated by this interruption in his plans, Furbelone intended to push the girl aside. But all at once he was struck by the thought: *This is a human being who looks upon me with love, who considers me honest and worthy of esteem.* Instead of giving the signal to start the robbery, the notorious terrorist took the sandwich from the smiling girl and entered the church with her. His criminal life was over.

A man does not lack possessions if he gives to the poor. This little girl obtained the double blessing of bringing a soul to Christ and stopping a serious crime.



Proverbs 10:12 says, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins." Imagine God's ornate banner covering you and every sin you have committed. Now picture every difficult person you know and their sins under the same banner. How does this change your view of them? As you are changed, pray God's unconditional love also changes them.



Day Thirty-five

Comfort Me

The bride says, "Sustain me with cakes of raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am lovesick" (2:5).

The bride is lovesick. Her love is passionate. The bride asks to be stayed with cakes of raisins called flagons. The bride also asks to be strengthened with apples, but she will soon discover that the sickness of love cannot be cured with pressed grapes or apples. It can only be cured by the presence of the Most Beloved. Our thirst for Jesus is not quenched but merely soothed by His gifts that are a foretaste of the happiness we will possess in His presence in heaven.

The bride must be strengthened to bear the embraces of the Bridegroom. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias to tell him that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, John the Baptist, he also said that John would go before the Savior "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). So we can see that we must be empowered to bear spiritual love. Showers of blessing are not easily borne.

In Maputo, Mozambique, many Christians were jailed. Some were natives,

others were from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Portugal and the United States. The torturer Karonga tormented the prisoners by ordering his soldiers to tie the prisoners' hands tightly behind their back with string. Their arms were wrenched up to the height of their chest and then tied in such a way that if they moved at all the string would cut into the flesh. For a few minutes, the prisoners sat in agony, and then soldiers poured water into their gaping wounds and rubbed salt into them. The prisoners would roll about on the ground in absolute torment. Other prisoners were forced to sit and watch. No one was allowed to go to their aid.

Prisoners were almost eaten alive by mosquitoes, lice and bedbugs. They had to work as slaves in labor camps with only three or four hours of sleep. Girls were raped. Sometimes prisoners were unable to wash for a month. When they insisted on being allowed to wash, they were taken to a crocodile-infested river where the communists forced some into the water.

In the prisons of Mozambique, brothers and sisters were on the ground with arms and legs outstretched and then beaten, or they were hung from trees by their feet. Many die from exhaustion, tetanus and snake bites. Without strength from God, they could not bear these tortures for His sake. Without strength from on high, they could not bear His embraces either.

Ezekiel said, "The Spirit entered me and set me on my feet" (3:24). Saint Ephrem knew such jubilation that he cried, "God, take your hand away from me for a little, because my heart is too weak to bear such a joy." When Peter saw Jesus work a miracle, he fell at His feet and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). A sinful man has not the power to witness the beautiful magnificence of the Lord. We who know His embraces need power. Those who pass through great suffering for His sake need power, too.



Spend your prayer time today lifting up Christians who are persecuted for Jesus' sake in communist, Islamic and other nations hostile to Christ and His people. Ask God to sustain and empower them. Picture those who are starving in prisons being fed raisin cakes and apples by Jesus.

Day Thirty-six

Don't Envy the Bride

The bride says, "I am lovesick" (2:5).

We become jealous when we hear of someone having a love like the bride's. It is so passionate that it makes her ill. But not everyone has to have such a richness of feeling, which comes with it great responsibilities. God created people each so differently and uniquely. To some, He gave the power of reasoning; to others, the gift of imagination. One might have little judgment but a rich imagination; another, the gift of penetrating intellect but cold emotions. It is wrong to envy what another possesses. We must consecrate such gifts to God and remember that the Lord accepts various attitudes and personalities.

Pastor Son was imprisoned in Korea during the Japanese occupation. A guard wanted to help him and told the prosecutor who was questioning the pastor, "He faithfully performs the rites at the Shinto shrines." (The Japanese had imposed the obligation on the Korean people to bow before the image of the emperor at these shrines. The emperor was considered the god of all the earth.)

If Pastor Son had only kept silent, he would have been freed. "That is not so," he said. "I have never taken part in shrine worship."

The prosecutor was perplexed. "It has been nearly three years since you've seen your family. Don't you want to see them? Will you not give up your obstinate ideas?"

Pastor Son replied, "I can't give up my faith."

"Haven't three years of suffering made any difference to you at all?"

"A Christian faith grows stronger through suffering," replied the pastor. "So it has done me good to be in prison. I do not mind what happens. If I return home, Christ will be with me; and if I stay in prison, He will still be with me."

Pastor Son showed one possible attitude: the attitude of a perfect lover of Jesus. On the other hand, other Christians used their reasoning powers: giving clever answers to escape suffering, if possible.

During World War II, Protestant Christians were greatly persecuted in Romania, which was under Nazi domination. A preacher was brought before the police inspector. "Do you preach love?" he asked.

The pastor replied, "I do."

"Do you also preach that one should love one's enemies?"

"Indeed I do. That is the teaching of Jesus."

Now came the big question: "Then do you also love the soldiers of the Soviet army?"

The preacher knew that if he answered, "Yes," when the Soviet army was fighting against Romania, it would mean certain imprisonment. So he answered: "How can you ask me whether I love the Soviet army? Our country is at war with them."

The police inspector was very pleased. He said, "You are a real patriot."

During the war, Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal and other denominational

services were forbidden in Romania. A Christian was asked by a police inspector, "Do you still gather for worship?"

He replied, "Christian gatherings are forbidden now."

The inspector shook him by the hand and said, "I am happy that you are a law-abiding citizen."

Such Christians had neither clearly stood up for the truth, nor told a lie. They simply used a trick and succeeded. Some used stratagems determined by reason; whereas, the attitudes of some were dictated only by passionate love. In no circumstances would the latter compromise.

Passionate love is not the only possible attitude toward Christ. He also receives those who follow Him by their gift of reasoning.



Are you more inclined to follow your feelings or your intellect? Give them to God, asking Him to use your emotions and mind for His glory.



Day Thirty-seven

His Embrace

The bride says, "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me" (2:6).

A ccording to biblical symbolism, the left side represents God's rigor and the right side His compassion. Therefore, the bride lies down, putting her head upon His left arm, which immobilizes this side of severity. Now His right hand — the caressing hand of love — is free.

Throughout Christian history, believers have had a great variety of experiences with Christ. The Carmelite nun, Anne of Saint Bartholomew (1549-1626), companion of Teresa of Avila, wrote in her biography:

Christ the Lord appeared to me in the shape in which He walked on this earth. He was exceedingly handsome, though He seemed very sad. Approaching me, He put His right hand on my left shoulder with an unspeakable weight, which I could never explain to anybody. Thus He caused His pain and suffering to enter into my heart, and He said to me, "Behold the souls I lose." He challenged me to work for the salvation of souls and showed me all France so impressively

and so clearly that it was as though I were present in every place; and I saw how many millions of souls are lost. This happened in a single moment, and if it had lasted any longer I feel my life would have ended.

Christ put His hand on her to make her share His pain; whereas, with the bride in the Song, He used His right hand only to embrace her.

Being thus reassured, the bride can fall asleep with his left hand under her head. Her soul is in sweet communion with Jesus while angels watch around them.

We bear the burden of knowing our brethren around the world are suffering for His sake. We also bear the burden of lost souls all around us. Take comfort knowing God's hand of strength is upholding you and our persecuted family, while comforting with the other hand.



Spend time identifying those you long to see come into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Ask God to soften and prepare their hearts to receive the gospel. Then take some time praying for persecuted Christians around the world, envisioning the Lord holding them up while bringing their persecutors into a relationship with Him.



Day Thirty-eight

An Army of Gazelles

The bride's last words before falling asleep are, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field..." (2:7).

The oath is made by the gazelles or does because they are symbolic of the Beloved and because they are timid creatures that must not be troubled when their time of love comes.

The King James Version uses the word "roes." The Hebrew word for "roes" is *sabaot*. One of God's names is *Jehovah Sabaot*, which means "The Lord of Hosts." So *Sabaot* means both "roes" and "hosts," which is very strange. It shows that God's army is an army apart. Roes are shy, timid creatures that attack nothing. Their beauty has conquered the hearts of many nature lovers, poets and painters. God's army is like an army of roes.

But what of the many military exploits of the Jewish army under Moses, Joshua and David? Consider the Salvation Army. It uses military language. Its magazine is called *The War Cry*. The Army is composed of corps instead of churches. Instead of preachers, it has officers. In its early days, its vocabulary

was entirely military. It boasted that it had "assaulted" places of sin, had "taken prisoners," and so on. The Salvation Army fights in order to bring people to peace with God. William Booth, a Hebrew Christian, founded the Salvation Army. His followers called him "General," which made him a laughingstock. His motto was, "Go straight for souls, and go for the worst." Today he would have said, "Go for communist torturers and murderers."

He went about with men he called "godly dare-devils," a mob of uneducated but converted men chosen from saloons, brothels and gambling houses. The owners of such places counterattacked. Salvation Army preachers were drenched with the contents of chamber pots. Booth did not care. He ordered his Army to charge into saloons and drag drunkards out for conversion.

Today, the Salvation Army ministers worldwide. The ministry preaches in more than a hundred languages, operates hundreds of schools and has even influenced social legislation in many countries.

The army of Israel is also meant to be an army of peace, but this is a phenomenon so unique that there are no words to describe its battles. It has to speak of its works of peace in the language of men of war.

So when we read in the Bible of "the sword of the Lord," of armed angels, of a carnage prepared by God Himself, we must understand that the exploits of God's roes — unarmed, shy, loving creatures, who would rather die than attack anyone — are spoken of in military terms only because humans have no other appropriate language.



What battles are you facing? Do you believe God wants to fight for you? Ask God to reveal His beauty to those around you as He fights for you.

Day Thirty-nine

The Sleep of Faith

The bride says, "Do not stir up nor awaken love..." (2:7).

Taken literally, these words are a demand not to disturb the nuptial joy of the young pair during the seven days of the wedding feast. It is unkind to awaken someone from sleep for no important reason. It is even worse to trouble a believing soul that sleeps quietly in faith in the protective arms of Jesus. That soul is in communion with the Lord, and whoever prods him will get his punishment.

What a wonderful sleep this is! Scripture teaches that the soul who sleeps, believing in the One who considers the sinner to be just, his faith is counted as righteousness (Hebrews 10:38,39). God delights in this quiet, loving sleep of faith. There is no activity that He prefers to it. No one is allowed to disturb the ecstasy of love. The soul must not be stirred up or awakened.

To stir up and to awaken are two different things. The one who awakens only calls the sleeper, who then has to conquer sleep himself. The one who stirs him up makes a better job of it. He forces him out of sleep. Both are forbidden when someone sleeps in the arms of Jesus.

Many things trouble the quiet sleep of Christian faith. In communist countries, Christianity is troubled by the communist puppets among the clergy. Binh, the Catholic bishop of Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City) and a communist puppet, published the following statement in the communist newspaper L'Humanité: "Previously, Catholics have had strong prejudices against revolutionaries. The propaganda of the former regime presented the communists as the destroyers of all religions. Now we have seen the reality. Our church is the victim of no persecution." But he surely knew about the mass graves filled with the bodies of thousands of people killed by the Viet Cong in Hue and Quang Tri. He knew his parishioners were forced to denounce one another or else face imprisonment.

Bishop Binh knew what had happened to his own Catholics. The convents in Thu Duc were closed. Clergymen were arrested. Monks in Mossard and Trappists in Phuoc-Son and Phuoc-ly were jailed. They all fell asleep quietly in their prison cells, trusting in Jesus, and keeping their faith in Him. The bishop was wrong to trouble their quiet sleep.

After visiting China, the Jesuit priest H. Stephenson described the communist Chinese as "exemplary anonymous Christians whose examples should be emulated by Western Christians. They value people above things." It did not disturb this Jesuit that those he called "anonymous Christians" have jailed or killed the Jesuits in China and many other innocent Catholics and evangelicals. The bishop Kung Pin and the Protestant pastor Wang Ming-Dao were in jail for many years.

Similar betrayals have happened in the Soviet Baptist underground church. Protestant pastor V. Rumatshik wrote:

Unfortunately, we also have some believers who work together with the communist authorities. This gives them the possibility of traveling abroad in order to lead foreign Christians astray in the matter of religious liberty. These preachers render the atheists a great service by hiding from the public the real situation. They make the world believe that we have much freedom without chains and oppressions. These men behave so, because they love this world; and they receive their reward on earth.

The prisoners spend their years in the quiet embrace of Jesus, sleeping faithfully on His bosom. They ought not be troubled, or roused, by such lies uttered by men of the clergy. May we not sleep but seek to know the truth about our persecuted family and share it with those around us!



Ask God for opportunities to share the truth about our persecuted family worldwide, stirring up prayer and action on their behalf.

Day Forty

Do Not Awaken Love

The bride says, "Do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases" (2:7, emphasis added).

The demand addressed to the daughters of Jerusalem also has another meaning. We must not artificially awaken the love that is in us. We must wait until it is given to us by God. God's heart must encounter our hearts. Even another person's false faith should not be forcibly corrected. That would do them more harm than leaving them temporarily in their erroneous beliefs. Allow God in His time to do His work, all the while being patient, asking God to open a door to share truth (Colossians 4:3, 2Timothy 2:24-26).

Stirring up love, using brutal means to bring someone to the true faith and exercising coercion, produce great catastrophes. There are enough evils in this world. We do not need another artificial, unnatural, faked love.

Consider this story showing how communists (brainwashed with atheism) came to Christ. Five Russian communists were in a prison cell, sentenced to death by their own comrades. While awaiting execution, one of them paced up and down the cell singing, "Safe in the arms of Jesus." He only sang those few words. The others asked him what he meant, but he did not know. He only knew that his mother had sung a song that began with those words. His mother died when he was young. What had remained fixed in his memory was that there is a place where one is safe. This place is called "in the arms of Jesus."

Another communist in the cell said, "I once saw an icon of Jesus with His arms stretched out on a cross." Now they knew two things: that Jesus died on a cross and in His arms is safety. A third said: "In Russia, even now, we call the first day of the week *Voskresenie* (meaning "resurrection"). Is the One who was resurrected the same One who stretched out His arms on the cross? Is this what gives us safety, even in death?"

From these fragments of knowledge the communists reconstructed the essence of the gospel. They went to their deaths singing, "Safe in the arms of Jesus."

In no time at all, one had been drawn by Christ; and all the others followed him. You may not know very much about Jesus but share the little you do know with others and allow God to draw him. There could be great consequences in God's time.

People who fill churches not because they love the Savior, but because they are under some kind of physical or psychological compulsion were awakened before it was time. When persecution comes, it becomes obvious that these souls did not have a real love for God. Our love toward Christ must be an authentic, bridal love. Let Him rouse your heart in the right time. Be honest about your sins, your needs, and do not strive to rid your heart of them in your own strength. Go to Him.



Is there something in your life that you want Christ to change? A bitter spirit? A fearful heart? An explosive temper? An addiction? Have you been trying to change in your own way and in your own time? Read the apostle Paul's words in Philippians 1:6,7. Journal about this area you long to see changed. Thank God that He will complete the work He began in you and ask Him to empower you to be a "partaker of grace" as you wait for His change in His time.



Leaping Upon the Mountains

The bride says: "The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, he stands behind our wall; he is looking through the windows, gazing through the lattice" (2:8,9).

He does not know discouragement. He bears for us the curse, the burden of death on the cross. He fights the powers of darkness. He leaps over our bad deeds as if they had never existed.

Some people doubt that our salvation can be very near, because not all the biblical prophecies about the last times have yet been fulfilled. But when Jesus returns, He will not worry about our calculations. He leaps upon the mountains.

Only a wall separates us from Him. This knowledge was a great comfort to prisoners in a communist camp who were compelled to stand facing a wall for weeks.

Midrash Rabba, a rabbinical commentary on the Song of Solomon, says

that what is meant here is the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, a wall from which the glory of God never departs. But we recall Job's words: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth" (Job 19:25). Our flesh, our body, is the wall that separates the bride from the Bridegroom: He is behind this wall. After death, we will be face to face with Him.

Knowing this, Blandina, a slave girl from Lyon, went to her death in the second century before the wild animals "radiant with joy as if she had been invited to a wedding feast." Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote: "Let me be the fodder of the beasts, by which I might find God. Let me imitate the example of my God." Also Origen, another celebrated teacher of the church, said in a sermon: "I do not doubt that in this assembly there are men known to God alone, who are already martyrs for Him by the testimony of their conscience; because they are ready even now, if asked, to shed their blood for the name of Jesus Christ."

For the time being, He looks through the windows. He examines one side of our character, then another side, to know what stage of spiritual maturity we have reached. We, too, must be attentive to what is going on in our souls.



David wrote, "Search me, O God, and know my heart..." (Psalm 139:23). Ask God to gaze through the lattice of your soul and show you any sin or issues that need to be resolved. Then take action by confessing them to God and asking another's forgiveness (if necessary), knowing God is all-powerful, able to help you scale any obstacle that stands between you and doing what is right for His glory.



The Winter Is Past

The Bridegroom says: "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grapes give a good smell. Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away! O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (2:10-14).

The most beautiful part of Solomon's Song begins here. What follows are words appropriate for those convicted of sin — a great source of comfort for the saints when they have passed through a period of depression. They are also fitting words for the time of a believer's death. The bride hears the voice of her Beloved. She does not see Him, but she recognizes His voice and is overcome by an unspoken joy.

In the beginning of verse 10, the bride says, "My beloved spoke, and said to me." (This is the precise translation of the Hebrew.) We often find this expression used elsewhere about the Lord. He is said to have answered when

no one has asked Him anything. He responds to the unspoken anxieties of the heart. We should practice not only vocal, but also mental prayer. Let our unspoken thoughts and affections rise up to Him (Romans 8:26)!

Believers are like innocent and inoffensive doves, loving quiet and serenity. Like doves, they are faithful to their mate, the Bridegroom. This dove is in its right place — in the clefts of the rock, which is Christ. If she is with Him, a cleft of a rock is as good as the King's chamber, a prison cell as good as a comfortable house. Jesus encourages her to have communion with Him: "Let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." How sweet is the voice of the believer in Jesus! A Jewish commentator asked why the wives of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were barren. It was because God loved their prayers, their words and their voices. God allowed them to be barren so they would pray for healing from barrenness. Why do believers undergo troubles? Because to God, their voices are sweet. He desires that they lift their voices in prayer and song to Him.

Some believers have been known to produce tremendous effects with their voices in hard places. A Christian who was released from a Lithuanian prison wrote:

My outward appearance is not attractive. In the slave labor camp, I worked underground. There was an accident that left me a hunchback. Once a boy stopped me on the street and asked, "Uncle, what do you have on your back?" I was sure that mockery would follow, but I still replied, "A hump."

"No!" said the child. "God is love. He gives deformities to nobody. You do not have a hump, but a box below your shoulders: Inside, angel's wings are hidden. One day the box will open; and with those wings you will fly to heaven."

I began to cry with joy; I am crying now, even as I write.

Such was the achievement of one Christian child's voice: He made a hunchback happy. Therefore, the Bridegroom says, "Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet."

Cederholm, a Finnish prisoner in the Soviet Union who was eventually freed because he was a foreigner, says that in Leningrad (now called St. Petersburg) he was put in a cell reserved for men under sentence of death. While there, he found the following words among many other inscriptions written by those who had been awaiting execution: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Archimandrite Anthony, of Alexandro-Nevsky monastery, is to be shot tonight for refusing to burden his conscience with a grievous sin. Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do. Good people, tell my brethren I leave this world with peace in my soul." The inscriptions on the walls alternated with inscribed crosses with names and dates under them. In the corner of the cell was an image of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, drawn in indelible pencil. The image was poignantly drawn by an untrained hand, but all the details were carefully done, and it was signed, "Ecaterina, the servant of God, drew this image, thinking of her little children who are praying to the just God for their Mama."

How beautiful are the voices of those who speak like this!



What are your hard places? Remember: Jesus wants to see you and hear you. Imagine yourself sitting in a cave along the side of a cliff when you hear Jesus calling you by name. You arise and go outside the cave and into the light where He is standing there waiting for you. As you stand there before Jesus, what do you hear Him saying to you?

Day Forty-three

The Sweet Voice

The Bridegroom says, "For your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (2:14).

Saint Augustine wrote, "Whoever praises God in song praises Him twice — in the words and in the music." Much depends on the spirit in which we sing. In the former Soviet Union, there were Christians who had not owned a hymnal for decades. Today in China and North Korea, the same is true. With what exuberant joy they sing when hymnals are smuggled to China for them! We should sing with the same joy.

In communist prisons, naked Christians were thrown crosswise over narrow tables. Their legs dangled over one side and the head and arms over the other side. The legs were tied to the arms with straps. On either side, communists stood with whips and beat the prisoners until they bled. But before they beat them, they told them to sing. The believers could have refused and paid for their refusal with a more savage beating, but why should they not sing such hymns as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded"?

One of those who underwent this ordeal was a Hebrew Christian. He

knew the story of Rabbi Akiba, who sang while being combed with red-hot irons and died a martyr's death. Akiba's disciples asked him, "How can you sing when you are suffering so greatly?" He replied: "All my life I have desired to love God with all my heart and all my soul, but I was always distracted by worldly things. Now for the first time, I can praise God with all my heart."

It was a rare privilege for that Hebrew Christian to sing such a song just before he was flogged. Imagine yourself in such a situation. Visualize the scene, and try to sing these words:

O Sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down, Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thine only crown.
O Sacred Head, what glory, what bliss till now was Thine
Yet though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.

Sometimes Christians were ordered to sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," knowing minutes later they would be tortured. Nevertheless, they sang that God is a trusty shield and weapon, that "He helps us free from every need that has us now o'ertaken." The communists mocked them, "Do you really believe that God will free you from this need?" Catholics prayed, "Hail, Mary, full of grace."

I personally went through the extremes of temptation and doubt when I passed through similar situations. I was forced to sing Psalm 121: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper" (verses 2-5).

We asked ourselves, "What is the point of such words when they don't correspond in any way to the reality in which we are living?" In that situation, I had a revelation that forever pacified my mind, however terrible the circumstances. I thought, *To whom are such promises made?* There was only one possible answer: "To me, and to the 'me' of every believer." But who is this "me"? A "me"

only has existence as an abstraction, just as pure gold or uranium are abstractions. In nature we only find ores. These have to be melted down in a furnace in order to extract one little bit of uranium or gold from huge quantities. The case is similar with the "me" in every believer. In a soul, there are so many elements that do not belong to the "me." They are the influences of the sin nature, of heredity, of a poor education and of all kinds of demonic evil. Only very little of us forms the "me," what Saint Teresa of Avila called "the inner castle."

My real personality, my uniqueness, who God created me to be but is marred by sin, is in the image of God. It is my sanctified being, united with Christ; it is what Peter calls "the hidden person of the heart" (1 Peter 3:4). The promises that nothing will hurt us, that we will be protected from all harm, do not apply to the whole ore. In order for the real me to be restored and live in purity and holiness, the ore has to pass through cleansing fire. I know the inner castle will not be harmed, that the God of Israel watches over it. The only part of me that matters can be at peace. No enemy will ever reach it.

Let us sing in this spirit and then we, too, will hear the Bridegroom say, "Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." The word used in the Hebrew is actually a plural word "countenances." The relaxed, serene face of a Christian at ease, the joyful face of one having a good time, the distorted face of one in pain, the marred face of one who is enduring torture, the radiant face of one in ecstasy — they are all lovely in His sight.



Today select a Psalm to read and then sing it to the Lord. As you encounter "hard places" throughout the day, call upon a verse from that Psalm and sing it in your heart to Jesus.

Day Forty-four

The Little Foxes

The bride is told, "Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes" (2:15).4

It is a common interest to eradicate the foxes that spoil the vines. All who wish to help in this task, and are capable of it, are included in this calling.

What is meant by the foxes? First, they symbolize corruptions. Those things in us that hinder a flourishing godly life must be set aside. Foxes are animals that often turn their heads and look back. They are usually portrayed in that attitude. It is a characteristic in us also, and one that must be reformed. Whosoever puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not worthy of Jesus' kingdom (Luke 9:62). The fox is also a byword for "cunning." A believer should not be devious.

Our battle is not only against major sins, but also against minor ones. Though the sun is so much larger than the earth, it can be reflected in a mirror; yet the tiniest object that comes between the mirror and the sun obscures it.

⁴ Some Bible versions say the chorus or her brothers are speaking here. Another says the bride. The word "us" in the versus tells us more than one person is speaking (first person plural).

Likewise, our little hearts can reflect the great God, but the slightest thing can hide our hearts from Him. Thomas More wrote:

Alas, how light a cause may move
Dissension between hearts that love.
Hearts that the world in vain has tried
In sorrow, but more closely tied
Which stood the storm when waves were rough
Yet in a sunny hour fell off
Like ships that have gone down at sea
When heaven was all tranquility.

We should never underestimate the harm of a small sin. Think what damage a tiny microbe or an invisible virus can do. They can lead to death. So it is with sin. Little flies and ants destroy animal carcasses with astonishing speed. A swarm of ants can devour a horse's corpse as quickly as a lion can. Even if our vineyard reaches great excellence, the full effect of our fruit will not be seen until the life to come. For the time being, we must beware of foxes — even little foxes — that can spoil the fruit.

Let us remember that just as the soul can be devastated by both gross sins and a multitude of neglected minor sins, so the life of holiness is composed of both great heroic deeds and a multitude of small actions and brief words. Not only the big miracles and martyr deaths have significance, but also the small deeds. The lightning and the sunbeam both count, likewise, the roaring waterfalls and the quiet pools of Siloam.

We should avoid small evils and refrain from little sins and minor inconsistencies and weaknesses. We should avoid foolishness and not fall into some small indiscretion or imprudence. We should resist making concessions to our self, to our fleshly nature. We need to beware of those fleeting moments of laziness and indecision and those small acts of cowardice. An important element of the holy life is the rejection of these things.

When the United States first launched the space shuttle, the failure of a tiny piece of plastic, worth mere cents, resulted in a million-dollar delay in America's space program. A brief quarrel with a marriage partner over a trifling matter can destroy a Christian marriage, wreck the children's personalities and bring the gospel into disrepute in the neighborhood. This reminds me of a story.

Two women went to a monastery to worship. One's conscience was burdened with a great sin. The other did not regard herself as a sinner, because she had been guilty of only small things. The abbot listened to their confessions and then sent them both to a field. He ordered the great sinner to bring the largest stone she could find. The one with only small sins was told to bring only little stones. After they had brought the stones to the abbot, he said, "Now put them back, each in the exact place you found it."

The woman who had brought the small stones hesitated. The abbot asked her why. She answered, "It is difficult, because there are so many, and I can't remember where they all came from."

Then the abbot told her: "Remember, your companion has committed just one, big evil deed. But she remembers it, regrets it, and washes it with her tears. She knows the place from which the stone was taken. But you, with your small and unimportant sins, just like the little foxes in Solomon's Song, which spoil the vines, can't remember how or when or to whom you did wrong. And because your sins are small and numerous you may not even be able to repair them. They remain a burden on your soul, just as these little stones remain in your apron."

Hearing these words, the woman bowed her head and acknowledged that she was no purer than her sister. She understood that she, who had committed only small sins, also needed to repent of them and be forgiven in order to purify her soul. Let us take heed of small sins.

Here is another story. Two men were building a wall. When one of them

was placing a brick, he noticed that it was thicker in one place than another. "Throw it away and get another," said his friend, "Otherwise the results will be unsatisfactory."

"Leave me alone," the man retorted. "How can such a little thing, which no one is going to notice, do any harm? You take things too seriously." He continued putting one brick upon another until evening, when they finished their work and went home.

What did they see when they came to work the next day? Because of that one uneven brick, the wall had not been vertical. Because of the way it had been built, it had leaned further and further over. As a consequence, it had collapsed during the night, and the work had to be done all over again. So it is with every small sin or little untruth in our hearts. A very small lie will grow and grow in us until it brings us shame and reproach. Don't regard little sins as unimportant.

Our universe is made up of things so tiny that they cannot be seen even through the most powerful of microscopes. The diameter of the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is about the same measurement as the height of a fourteen-storey house. Imagine a dust particle in it. As the size of the dust particle is to that of the basilica, so (approximately) is the size of an electron compared to that of an atom. And if everything were to be increased in size so that a baseball became the size of the planet earth, then the atoms of the baseball would become the size of grapes. When the electrons and protons function normally, they sustain our lives. When they are tampered with, a town like Nagasaki disappears. It is of greatest importance that the smallest of things function correctly. Beware of little foxes!



What are the little sins — and big sins — that are trampling your relationship with Christ?

Day Forty-five

I Am Not

The bride says, "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16).

The believing soul is continually growing. Its first word is an exclamation of triumph: "My beloved is mine, and I am his." When she has grown, she does not put herself first anymore but modestly says, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (6:3). The order of the words is changed. When she has grown more, she is satisfied in giving herself without asking for anything in return: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me" (7:10).

The Hebrew word for "his" is *lo*, but the same word also means "not" in spoken Hebrew. (There is a difference in the way the word is written, but the oral form came first and is more significant here.) When only spoken, the verse could quite accurately be translated, "My beloved is mine, and I am not." He is everything in the believer's life. No place remains for a "me."

Those rare souls who have attained to the truth that the Beloved is theirs and they "are not" any longer have unique experiences. By those who "are not," I mean those who have come to the height of heights, those in prison who have known not only heavenly raptures, but also raptures to the heaven of heavens

(1 Kings 8:27), those who have come to that place where one looks down to heaven. It is that part of the temple, of which God says, "Here is a place by Me" (Exodus 33:21).

Almost all these believers, like Bishop Hirtsa and Mgr Ghicay, died in prison or shortly after their release. I had the privilege of sharing a prison cell with such a man. He did not say much. From the little he did say, I gathered he had discovered that one can know things better by looking to the God, in whom we have our being, life and movement rather than looking to actual things for meaning. All things are dark. Even physical light is dark. Only He throws a light on them. Therefore, the Psalmist said, "In Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). Others come to know God by seeing His character in His creation (Romans 1:20,21). The mystics know the reality of creation by looking at the Creator.

Such prisoners did not see God face to face. He is veiled, and anyone who sees Him without a veil has not seen the whole reality of Godhead. The veils are part of it. If you see a man without his skin, you do not see him properly because the skin is part of who he is. It veils his inner parts, which should be veiled.

What I have written is an educated guess as to what these prisoners would have experienced, if what they knew could have been expressed in words. When they came back from this rapture, they returned as people who had seen men, events and things as God sees them. They did not say much, and what they did say they said to very few; but their faces and their eyes spoke for them. Ten doctorates and a lifespan of a thousand years on earth would not teach a man what those believers saw in a single moment of such rapture.

When I read of the Peruvian terrorist Rosario Rivera's conversion, I was reminded of my former inmates. Rosario happened to attend an evangelistic

meeting led by the well-known Latin American preacher Luis Palau. Afterwards, she wrote:

He [Luis Palau] put Rosario Rivera, who had come as an eminent member of the Peruvian Communist Party, before her own eyes in all her crude, inner reality. Not even Che Guevara [her chief and model of terrorism] could see what I was like inside, though I had been at his side for four months. But this man described my life and brought to light the things that were deep inside me. I bit my tongue; I did not know what to do. He told me the things I had done, how I had robbed, killed, perverted young people, abused my home, trafficked in drugs, and much more besides. I saw myself stripped naked.

Luis Palau had seen her with God's eyes. But he also saw her as very beloved by God and brought her to salvation. Such is the privilege of those who "are not."

"My beloved is mine, and I am not." What has happened to me when I am no more and only He remains? The aim of my life has then been fulfilled. Basil of Caesarea wrote, "Every spiritual being is, by his nature, a temple of God created to receive in himself the glory of God." When my Beloved is mine, and I "am not," what is visible of me continues. But each of us has two natures: the visible and the invisible. If I have submitted to the divine will, the invisible part of me has united with God.

Pascal wrote, "Man is infinitely more than man." When God makes His dwelling in us, we have more than mere biological, sociological and psychological possibilities within us. The sun and the moon are called "light" in the Bible. In the same way, we are called "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). Our possibilities are immense. Saint Gregory wrote, "When you turn to watch Him, you become what He is." We have the aptitude for it. Let us not waste

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it. It is for this that we were created in God's image. Let us follow the bride's passionate decision to be His. God can do everything, except compel someone to love Him. That decision must come from us.

But take care! There are beautiful compliments addressed to the Israelites, who were God's beloved. After a time, the people turned to sin, and God's opinion of them changed. We cannot simply rely on beautiful, loving words addressed to us by God in the past. We must take care to abide in His love today.



Does my life reflect an "I-am-not" or "I-am-all" mentality? Read John 15:1-17. As you journal today, draw a picture of a vine, showing you as one of the branches abiding in the love of Jesus. Now make a list of all the things in your life that compete for your attention, causing you to detach from the vine (Christ) and operate in your own strength. Seeing this visual illustration, what kind of difference will it make as you encounter situations that have the potential to draw you away from the life source of Christ?



Feeding Among Lilies

The bride says, "He feeds his flock among the lilies" (2:16).

He has compared His bride to lilies. As His flock, we feed with Him among the lilies who are the saints of the past and present. Their example nourishes us.

A Romanian Christian named Lydia Arsenescu was sentenced to death for her faith. She was a young girl of eighteen or nineteen, and she was very beautiful. Her last evening had come. The execution always took place promptly at midnight, and for this reason the Christians called the firing squad "the midnight bride."

Wardens had brought some gruel in pottery vessels into the cell. It was the evening meal. All the prisoners were hungry, but none cared to eat. All the other women pitied the young and beautiful girl who had to die that night.

Suddenly, her face began to shine. She lifted the pottery dish and said: "I have a boyfriend. I love him greatly, and he loves me. He hoped that one day my body would be in his embrace. But it will not be so. Tonight I will be shot. And after a few years, what was my body will have become clay, just like the

clay from which this pot was made. And after a few more years, some other potter will make a vessel out of what was once my body. Who knows what is in this vessel? Perhaps what was once the beaming eye of a lover! My body will decay, but I will not die.

"Jesus said, 'Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.' And I believe these words of Jesus more than the rifles that will be pointed at me tonight. I believe them more than the bullets that will pierce my chest tonight. I believe them more than the open grave that is already waiting for me.

"I am not my body. I am an eternal spirit. Tonight I shall not die. Jesus is a gentleman; He will keep His word. Tonight, by His grace, I will enter through gates of pearl into the golden city. I will see and hear angels playing on their harps. I will be with the saints and the finest men of all the centuries; and above all, I will rest on Jesus' bosom, and there I will wait for my boyfriend to come, too."

They came for her a few minutes before midnight. As she passed through the vaulted corridors of the underground prison, her voice could still be heard, resounding from wall to wall. She was reciting the Nicene Creed — the same one we recite in church. But in her mouth, it had an entirely new significance. When she said, "I believe in one God,...maker of heaven and earth," she really meant it. She knew there really is a heaven. The proof was that she forsook earth for it. When she said, "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ," the words rang true. Jesus really was her Lord. She was ready to give up her youth for Him. And then they heard her last words: "I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." After this, a few shots were heard. The poor communists believed they had killed her. They did not know they had sent her to the embraces of the most beautiful Bridegroom of all.



Jesus feeds us on such examples. He feeds His flock among the lilies. He also has other saints whose mentality is completely different to that of Christians of this century. The church considers as saints believers like Simon the Stylite, who remained on top of a column in the Egyptian desert for thirty years. When he was too weak to remain there, he had a post erected and chained himself to that. Many others followed his example and stood in the burning heat of day and the cold of night. By doing so, they were trying to annihilate the part of them that lusted after sin.

Saint Etheldreda also believed that the flesh is evil and dirty. She refused to clean it and walked about unwashed. So did the man whom church history records as Saint Anthony the Great, who is remembered for his stand with Athanasius in the great fight against the Arian heresy.

We would not enjoy being in the company of such people. But when a reed is bent, the only way to straighten it is to bend it in the opposite direction. In a world where so many die from hunger and others spend their money on useless creams and costly perfumes, it is good that there are individuals who demonstrate — even by extreme attitudes — the vanity of our way of life.

In communist prisons, Christians were prevented from washing for weeks, months and sometimes years. They became full of lice, loathsome to themselves and others. Remembering there were saints who adopted this burden voluntarily was a great help to them and reinforced their faith.

Jesus feeds His sheep among lilies. No other shepherd can do that.



Think about the Christians you have read about in this book. Are there any whose testimonies have encouraged you? How?

Day Forty-seven

Sending Away the Beloved

The bride says to the Bridegroom, "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of Bether" (2:17).

know of a Christian who was in solitary confinement for years and experienced much hunger and pain. Sometimes he was aware of Jesus asking him: "Is it too difficult for you? Shall I ease your lot?" Again and again he replied: "Please, Jesus, see to others. I can bear it. I'm all right."

This is the bride's mentality. She tells Jesus to follow His calling as a king. She can carry the cross allotted to her in the hope that, when the evening comes, He will return to her. She is reluctant to make continual demands upon Him.

When the apostle Peter realized who Jesus was, he said to Him, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Peter was very grateful that Jesus had increased His catch to an exceptionally great multitude of fish. But he also knew that a being like Jesus could do greater things than merely provide a fisherman with a miraculous haul. Like the bride who sends the

Bridegroom away to the mountains of Bether (the word "bether" means "separation"), Peter wanted Him to go away and do His more marvelous work. Peter was prepared to be content with a normal-sized catch.

This thought brings us to the third chapter of the Song of Songs, a chapter so important that Origen, one of the distinguished teachers of the church in the third century, wrote twelve volumes about it. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux delivered eighty-six sermons on the first two chapters alone. The great German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called it "the most divine of all love songs." The German philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried von Herder said of it, "The song is written as though from paradise." It is a book that repays thorough study.



We can feel unworthy that the King of kings attends to such seemingly insignificant details in our lives. Read Matthew 6:25-34. As you think about your last week, thank Jesus for all the needs that He has met.

Chapter 3



Day Forty-eight

Seeking the Bridegroom

The bride says: "By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him. 'I will rise now,' I said, 'And go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love.' I sought him, but I did not find him" (3:1,2).

Theologians will tell you, "It is difficult to find God; wherewith will you find Him?" The bride mistrusts philosophy, even religious philosophy; therefore, she does not seek Him there. For example, Dionysius the Areopagite wrote:

If it should happen that somebody should see God and understand what he sees, then he has not seen God Himself...for He surpasses any intelligence and any essence. He exists only to the degree to which He is totally unknown....

Thus we say that the Universal Cause situated beyond the whole universe is neither matter nor body.

It has no face. It has no shape, no form, no quality, no mass. It is

in no place, it cannot be apprehended by our senses.... Ascending higher, we say now that this Cause has no soul and no intelligence.... It cannot be expressed, nor conceived.

It has no number, no order, no grandeur, no smallness, no equality, no similitude, no dissimilitude. It does not rest unmoved, neither does it move. It is neither power nor light. It does not live and is not life.

It is not essence, nor perpetuity, nor time. It has no knowledge, no truth, no wisdom. It is not one, nor unity, nor divinity, nor good; neither spirit nor affiliation nor paternity, in the sense we use this word.

The bride cannot find Him from a bed of ease, lying quietly in comfort. One realizes that her sighing, demanding and the intervening of others do not bring her the Beloved. The soul must become active, practicing spiritual exercises. Therefore, the bride seeks Him diligently, night after night (the Hebrew word in verse one means "nights").

Exposing herself to all kinds of risks, the bride walks on darkened streets, seeking her Beloved. She travels all kinds of roads. She seeks Him in all places. She looks in the face of every passer-by to see if she can glean information from anyone about the One she loves. Provided she does not seek the living among the dead, she has been promised that her seeking will not be in vain: "He who seeks finds" (Luke 11:10). She had deceived herself when she imagined she could live apart from Him (2:17). Now she seeks Him.

However, the Beloved is not a man of public places. Righteous men usually shun such places, because mostly evil can be found there. Jesus lived a mostly private life. When He was twelve years old, His parents lost Him. They looked for Him in the wrong place: in the caravan, where He never is. When

they found Him, He asked them, "Why did you seek Me?" (Luke 2:49). He told them where He always is, where He can readily be found by anyone: at "My Father's business." Jesus also said that He can be found among the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the naked (Matthew 25:34-46). That is where He legitimately may be sought.

One can tell that the bride has seized hold of Christ by a profound change in attitude, such as Lutheran pastor Traube, who found Him in prison as a result of a very painful experience. His beautiful daughter worked in the office of a Soviet Collective. The local Communist Party secretary offered her the choice of becoming his lover or seeing her father arrested and his church closed. After resisting for a while, she yielded. She became pregnant, hanged herself, and left a letter in her pocket explaining why she had done so.

A comrade found the letter and brought it to the guilty communist who destroyed it and forged another in her handwriting. It claimed that her father had raped her and she could not bear the shame. As a result, the father was sentenced and the church was closed.

In jail, sex offenders are attacked by other prisoners. Though falsely accused, Pastor Traube suffered a great deal at the hands of his fellow inmates. He tried to pray, but only in vain. He could not say the words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). He could not forgive the wicked that the communists had done to him. He became ill.

One day, a new prisoner was put in the cell. It was the man responsible for his daughter's death, the closure of his church, and all the torment he had endured. The communist had been jailed for embezzlement. When Traube realized the misery this criminal was experiencing — overburdened by guilt, jailed by his own comrades, lacking any knowledge of the Savior — he drowned his own sufferings in the much deeper ones of the communist. On his deathbed, the pastor finally said the Lord's Prayer. He forgave. He died with a look of

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radiance on his face. He had the soul of a bride who sought the Beloved and at the end had seized hold of Him. He had had a personal meeting with Jesus.



Is your heart seeking Jesus diligently? Where have you been looking for Him? Picture Him being found in your home, workplace and neighborhood and among your friends and family.



The Watchmen of the City

The bride says, "The watchmen who go about the city found me; I said, 'Have you seen the one I love?' Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go, until I had brought him to the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me" (3:3,4).

The watchmen of the city represent church leaders. Some brides fall in love with them and with their ornate services and beautiful sermons and forget to seek the Bridegroom. Jesus is found only when every creature has been left behind.

It can be difficult to distinguish the ambitions of Dathan and Abiram — who in Numbers 16 rebelled against Moses, the God-appointed authority over the people — from the brides who leave the watchmen behind without despising them because of their love for Jesus. But it is not for us to judge others. We trust everyone does the best he can.

In the end, when the bride finds the Beloved outside the city at night, what energy she shows! She takes hold of Him and says to Him — as Jacob once said

to an angel, "I will not let You go until You bless me" (Genesis 32:26). She took hold of Him and would not let Him go. Simply finding Jesus is not enough. You must also embrace Him.

The bride brings Him into the house of her mother, the church. Saint Cyprian said, "Whosoever has God as his Father has the church as his mother." The worth of a church service consists only in the fact that the worshippers, the brides, have come to the service bringing Jesus with them.

There are some bad church leaders. Many Protestant and Catholic Church leaders have remained silent about the closure of tens of thousands of churches under the communists in Russia, China, North Korea and Albania. Even worse, some Catholic and Protestant church leaders praise the persecutors, describing them as nice people. Other church leaders, while probably being worthy individuals, are not truly ready to die for what they believe.

In the Romanian prison of Piteshti, prisoners were forced to deny their faith by blaspheming the Eucharist. They were made to scream sacred melodies with filthy words replacing those of the hymns. They were made to gesture degradingly with their genitals. They were made to eat excrement. This obscene parody of the Eucharist was intended to transform the worship into a demonic drama of evil and hatred, which resulted in minds in chaos. The brainwashers thereby achieved mastery of the prisoners who identified with their new masters and were loyal to them. Then the prisoners were expected to prove that loyalty by inflicting torment on another group of inmates. If one of these "re-educated" prisoners was observed to be lenient, such mercy was interpreted as a breach of his new loyalty, forcing him to endure the agony again.

After unspeakable tortures, some Christians had become communists in prison and were asked by officials to conceal their new loyalty. They invented a so-called fake Christian organization and enlisted teenage followers among the

prisoners. Those teenagers believed they had found "watchmen" who could tell them about the Bridegroom. Imagine the shock in the hearts of those young people when the very teachers who had brought them to Christ produced cudgels and beat them viciously. They were assaulted until they denied Christ, whose adoration their persecutors had previously taught.

The horrors and atrocities at prisons like Piteshti were happening at a time when some church leaders in the East and the West spoke well of communism. Obviously, a bride has to leave such "watchmen" behind if she is to find Christ Himself.

There are also some very trustworthy church leaders. The late Romanian Bishop Hossu, who spent twenty-two years in prison, said: "You cannot know how painful the suffering of a bishop is over the sad destiny of his church and his nation. It can only be compared to the torment of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross when He foresaw all the persecutions that would be unleashed through the centuries by the enemies of the church." Another trustworthy leader who stood firmly for what he believed was the Russian Adventist Shtshelkov, who died in prison at age eighty-four after twenty-four years in jail. Sadly, such leaders are few.

The bride does not need to stop at pastors. We are not limited to hearing the Word only from them. The bride in Solomon's Song finds Jesus when she leaves the watchmen behind. She finds sweetness even in barbed-wire thorns. In Siberian snows, among ferocious prison guards, brides of Christ detect the fragrance of the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valleys in the smells, sights and sounds of the concentration camps. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote:

I never knew the precise moment of the coming of the Word. I felt His presence. I remember He was with me. I sometimes had a presentiment that He would come, but I sensed neither His coming

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nor His going. I do not know where He went after leaving me, nor by what means He came and went.

You will ask me how I know that He was present, if His coming was incomprehensible. I will reply that He is alive and full of energy. Immediately upon entering me, He awoke my sleeping soul. He aroused and softened and taught my heart, which had been as hard as stone. He began uprooting and pulling down, planting and building, watering the dry places and lightening the dark ones.

Christ, known in personal experiences in exceptional circumstances such as these, can be brought to the mother's house, the church, which will be greatly blessed by our encounters with Christ.



Have you replaced the counsel of Christ and His Word with the counsel of Christian leaders? Are you seeking their favor or God's favor? If their favor, why? As you journal, ask God to reveal why you seek the favor of leaders over Him. Then ask Him to renew your fervor to seek His face.



Ascending From the Desert

The bride says, "Who is this coming out of the wilderness [or desert] like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant's fragrant powders? Behold, it is Solomon's couch, with sixty valiant men around it, of the valiant of Israel" (3:6,7).

The bride has passed out of the city into the desert where she has learned a great deal. The desert is not in fact as arid as people believe. Thousands of different plants thrive there. What characterizes them is great adaptability. Without it, in a region with little rain and a summer temperature above 120 degrees, they would be lost. Were she not adaptable to different social structures and political regimes, neither could the bride survive.

The *saguaro* is a cactus of the Arizona desert. Seeking out every drop of moisture, its roots can spread as far as a hundred feet. When it rains, the saguaro takes in reserves of water like a camel in preparation for dry periods that can last for years. It literally grows fat with water. Its girth can increase by half or even more. One saguaro was found to contain more than thirty tons of liquid, an engineering achievement that is quite possibly incomparable with any

existing artificial structure. Similarly, in the spiritual desert, the bride learns to be deeply rooted in the kingdom and to tap into the water of life.

When my granddaughter Amely was seven, she was not much of an eater. She only wanted to eat desserts. Once when I chided her about this, she said to me: "I eat as it says in the Bible! It says there that God wants us to live on desserts only." She showed me the verse: "God led His people forty years through the desert." She was not wholly wrong. Life in the desert is a delicacy, a dessert reserved for God's beloved.

What a marvelous sight it must have been when the people of Israel came from the desert to the country of Canaan, or when they returned to their own country from the Babylonian captivity. It is the same when a soul returns to God from the desert of this world and cleaves to Jesus. Thereby it enters into a state of grace, and the bride is brought to the Bridegroom.

Many persecuted believers have thrived in the desert of prison. Perpetua, a third-century Christian who was imprisoned and martyred for her faith, said of her prison cell: "The dungeon became to me as it were a palace, so that I preferred being there to being elsewhere."

Do not be fearful of dry times in your spiritual life. Tap into the Bridegroom, seeking only His living water and you will thrive.



How would you describe your spiritual life right now? Dry? Overflowing? Read Colossians 2:6,7. Draw a picture showing you as a tree that is well-rooted and well-connected to Christ's life-giving water. How does this visual image change your view of your spiritual life?



Valiant Men and Women

The bride says, "Behold, it is Solomon's couch, with sixty valiant men around it, of the valiant of Israel. They all hold swords, being expert in war. Every man has his sword on his thigh because of fear in the night" (3:7,8).

The church has never lacked valiant men. On August 15, 1714, the Romanian king Constantin Brincoveanu died a martyr's death. During the twenty-five years of his reign, he had been a valiant defender of the Christian world against Islam. On Good Friday in 1714, he and his whole household were arrested by the Turkish sultan's men and taken to Constantinople, where they were put in the notorious Yedikule prison. On his sixtieth birthday, King Brincoveanu was sentenced to death together with his four sons.

Before the executioner raised his axe, the sultan said, "I will pardon you if you tell me where the wealth of your country is and if you will deny the Christian faith and convert to Islam."

King Brincoveanu replied: "I will never abandon the Christian faith. I was born in it, have lived in it, and will die in it. I have filled my country with churches, monasteries and hospitals. I will not worship in your mosques, neither I nor my children."Then he turned to his sons and said: "My beloved, be strong in faith. We have lost all things. Let us not lose our souls as well."

The sultan ordered that the sons should die first. Young Constantin prayed and quietly put his head on the block. As he was beheaded, his father sighed and said, "God, Your will be done."

The next two sons followed. Then Matthew, who was only sixteen, wavered at the sight of the blood and hid himself near his mother. "Follow your brothers," urged King Brincovaneau. "Do not deny Christ."

The youngster put his head on the block and said to the executioner, "Strike."

The king followed them. Kneeling, he prayed with many tears: "God, accept our sacrifice. For the blood of our martyrdom, I desire that the Romanian principates remain Christian. Amen."

In the seventeenth century, in what is now Massachusetts, a law was passed declaring that all Quakers entering the British colony should be whipped, imprisoned and put to forced labor. Every exiled Quaker who returned was to be hanged. The "crime" of the Quakers was their belief in an inner illumination, a direct communion with God without the intermediary of clergy or ritual.

One such Quaker was Mary Dyer. Though she had been whipped and threatened with death, she repeatedly went to the colony from Rhode Island to visit her brethren in jail. Finally, Mary and two others were sentenced to hang. She attended the execution of the other two, then her hands were tied and a black sack was put over her head. But at the last moment, she was reprieved and deported.

She returned to Massachusetts. She was risking public flagellation and having her tongue pierced with a red hot iron. At her trial she declared: "If you do not revoke your unjust laws, the Lord will send other witnesses of the truth

after my death. Compared with liberty and truth, my life does not matter." For this, she died. She was a valiant Christian. A statue honors her in Boston.

Today, Christians like Mary, who risk all to visit believers in communist prisons, are rare. God has valiant men and women, but they are few.

The Romanian writer Paul Goma described some of the special tortures devised by communists for Christians. One prisoner was "baptized" every day. His head was forced in a barrel that served as a communal lavatory while other prisoners were made to sing the baptismal service.

During festivals and especially Lent, blasphemous masses were organized. One prisoner was dressed in a robe smeared with excrement. In place of the cross, a phallus hung around his neck made of a mixture of bread, soap and DDT. All the prisoners were forced to kiss it and pronounce the sacred Orthodox formula, "Christ is resurrected."

What do these indignities have to do with Socialism and the interests of the proletariat? They are nothing more than satanic orgies. Some valiant Christians refused to participate. As a result, they died under torture.

These are the valiant men and women around the Bridegroom's bed. In the Hebrew, it says of them, "They are held by the sword." It will not let them go. They are slaves of the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.



Does the idea of defending Christ bring you fear, despair, anger, intimidation, shame? Read the account of the Apostles' arrest and defense in Acts 5:12-42. After they were beaten, how did they respond (verses 41-42)? Spend time thanking Jesus for the grace He has given His people when they defended Him and faced the consequences for doing so. Trust that same grace will be available to you if, or when, you have an opportunity to defend Christ among co-workers, neighbors, family and friends.

Day Fifty-two

Solomon's Palanquin

The bride says, "Of the wood of Lebanon Solomon the King made himself a palanquin: He made its pillars of silver, its support of gold, its seat of purple, its interior paved with love by the daughters of Jerusalem" (3:9,10).

There are still many things that are wrong in the bride's heart, but she is in Solomon's palanquin⁶, with pillars of silver. In the Bible, the Word of God is described as silver cleansed in the furnace (Psalm 12:6). So the palanquin is based on God's Word. The covering is purple, which means that the bride is covered by the blood of Jesus that was shed for her.

The interior of the palanquin is paved with love shown by the daughters of Zion. Love is belittled in our world as mere sentimentalism or a waste of time. In reality, it works very efficiently. Martha's sister Mary appeared to be doing nothing when she sat at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:39). In fact, she was doing the

⁶A palanquin is a boxlike framework that is carried by poles that rest on men's shoulders.

most important thing of all — loving. While she appeared to be sitting quietly, her love was weaving beautiful ornaments for Solomon's bed, in which she would later rest. It is not our service that Jesus seeks but our love. Jesus values a faith that engenders love.

There is a love that forgives all things. In his book, *It Was Not the Black Cat*, the former Romanian Zionist prisoner T. Lavi describes how Christian prisoners were mockingly called "parrots" and were forced to spend hours shouting brief sentences deriding their creed. They could either repeat, "Jesus is not the Son of God" or utter obscenities about Jesus' mother Mary. Likewise, Jewish prisoners were forced to say ugly things about their religion. Before having to declaim their blasphemous sentences, they had to run around their cells for the entire night and were whipped if they ran too slowly. The Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty was one who endured such treatment. The alternative to uttering blasphemy was being beaten to a pulp.

Many were weak. No one should be taken in by the notion that all who are in prison for their faith are men of heroism, full of virtues and endurance. It is not so. Many Christians who suffered were frail. Many gave in and said words no Christian ought to pronounce, followed by the self-justifications: "After all, I am only a man!" or "What does it matter if I say these things? God does not worry about it!" or "Surely God would rather I live, than die for refusing to say a few words — anyway, the words are nonsense."

Some went to the other extreme. In their consciences they heard not voices of self-justification but accusations that drove them to despair. In China, many who had denied Christ or betrayed secrets of the underground church under torture hanged themselves or jumped out of windows.

The true bride of Christ does not need to go to either extreme. The Word of God gives her comfort and teaches her about forgiveness. Even when her

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fall has been a heavy one, she knows she can rest in the palanquin of Solomon. We who are free and have sinned greatly can do so as well.



Envision such a glorious palanquin. Now picture Jesus inviting you to sit in it. Would you? Why or why not?



Day Fifty-three

The Mother's Merit

The bride says, "Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day of the gladness of his heart" (3:11).

The Oriental Orthodox Church still has a custom, in which the bride-groom's mother puts a crown on his head. Christ has possessed glorious crowns from all eternity — the crown of the eternal Sonship of God, the crown of love, of goodness and of wisdom.

Because of the obedience of Mary, by whom Jesus became man, God was tempted in all things, just like us. He experienced the inner struggles we experience. Because of this, He is our merciful and faithful High Priest (Hebrews 4:15).

Never underestimate the influence of a mother. Tatiana Shtshipkova, a professor in the former Soviet Union, wrote about her and her children's and others' experiences with communist officials:

I refused even to talk to the officials of the secret police. To talk to them is the first step toward collaboration. I was driven from my job

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as teacher of Roman history at the university, because I spoke of my faith. I showed the Bible to students who had never seen one before. My son and his girlfriend were expelled from the Institute also.

My daughter Liuba, a non-believer, was expelled from the communist youth organization because she had not denounced me as a Christian. After this, Liuba became a believer.

A group of policemen behaved in an unseemly way toward us. I slapped one of them. I expect a one-year sentence for this.

Ogorodnikov is sentenced for one year. He has turned from Marxism to a deep Christian faith.

Ermolaev, nineteen years old, is imprisoned because in the subway he expressed his opinion about the Communist Party.

We have no aggressive intentions. We cause no upheavals, we print no leaflets, we do not preach insurrection. We wish to live as Christ taught, which means we want to live and pray together, help each other, witness to our faith and speak of Christ to those who want to listen. Are we dangerous? Surely so. The proof lies with the persecutors.

A mother's love can teach us much about God's love. Onute Vitkauskaite, a Lithuanian Christian prisoner, wrote this letter to her mother on Mother's Day:

There is so much to think about and remember. But let's leave all that in the care of our beloved mother Mary. She taught our mothers love, sacrifice and kindness. May the humiliation and scorn that we suffer be as a prayer of thanksgiving for that! In the labor camp

I have come to discover how terrible is man's life without God, without eternal love.

It can help us all to think frequently of Mary's beautiful example as Jesus' mother, while honoring our own mothers who crowned us with the gift of life.



What are your most treasured memories of your mother? Knowing many in the world have also experienced heartache at the hands of their mothers, give such hurts to Christ, asking Him to use this "crown of discomfort" to bring glory to and healing in Him.

Chapter 4



The Bride With No Veil

The Bridegroom says: "Behold, you are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair! You have dove's eyes behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, going down from Mount Gilead. Our teeth are like a flock of shorn sheep which have come up from the washing, every one of which bears twins, and none is barren among them. Your lips are like a strand of scarlet, and your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like a piece of pomegranate. Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an armory, on which hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies" (4:1-5).

In Solomon's days (and even today in some Muslim countries), girls in the Far East walked with their faces veiled. The bridegroom sees the bride unveiled for the first time only after the wedding ceremony. Then he sees the beauties that were hidden from him until that moment. When our Bridegroom comes, we will be like Him, and He will discover in us unspeakable splendors; and we will give them to Him to bring Him pleasure.

In the case of this bride, the greatest beauties are her "doves' eyes." Like those of God, they are so clean that they cannot even see evil and cannot look upon unrighteousness. The two rows of her teeth represent her faith and meditation, by which the soul feeds upon Jesus. They are white as shorn sheep when they come up from the washing. Her faith is white and pure, not fake.

In a small village school in communist Hungary, there was a group of children who had great faith. A new teacher arrived — a militant atheist whose objective was to root out religion from the hearts of the children.

One day she summoned little Angela — a very pious girl — and asked her, "What do you do if your parents call you?"

"I come immediately."

"What happens if your parents call someone else?"

"They come, too."

"Well," said the teacher, "they all come, and you come, because you really exist. But suppose your parents called your grandparents, who have been dead a long time. Would they come?"

"Surely not!"

"And if they were to call Red Riding Hood or Snow White, would they come?"

"Surely not, because they are just imaginary."

"You see, children," said the teacher triumphantly, "only living beings, which actually exist, can respond to a call. If somebody doesn't come when called, he is not alive. Is that clear?"

"Yes," replied the whole class.

The teacher sent Angela out of the classroom and told her to stand by the door. Then she said to the other children, "Call her!" The children shouted, "Angela! Angela!" Angela immediately entered the room.

"Now, everything is clear," declared the teacher. "You have all been brought up to believe in Jesus. You believe that He exists, that He is alive, and that He

hears you when you speak to Him. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Now, we will try an experiment. Angela entered the classroom when we called her. So, on the count of three, shout, 'Come, Lord Jesus! Come, Lord Jesus!' as loudly as you can. One, two, three —!"

Nobody dared to shout. The teacher laughed. "There you have the proof. You don't even dare to call Him, because you know He would not come. He could not come, because He is just as imaginary as Red Riding Hood or Snow White."

Then something unexpected happened. Angela turned to the children and said: "We will call Jesus! All together, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'"

With hands folded and a deep yearning in their hearts, with total confidence, the children began to chant: "Come, Lord Jesus! Come, Lord Jesus!" They shouted so loudly that it seemed as if the walls would crumble.

According to the children's account, they saw the door open, then a great light shone through. Standing bathed in that light was a beautiful child smiling at them.

At the same time, they heard their teacher's cry: "He has come! He has come!" She rushed from the room, slamming the door behind her. She had to be put into an asylum.

The children were rigorously cross-examined by pastors. Their accounts of what had happened did not contradict one another. This is an authentic story. With sincere faith, little children can do great things for the Lord!

The bride's teeth are strong. Strength is a characteristic of this bride. The teeth are covered by lips, which are not usually seen. Thus, the bride has a hidden faith in her clean conscience, not a self-advertising faith that shouts in the marketplaces. Just as the teeth chew the food to nourish not just themselves but the whole body, the souls of brides spend their time in the service of others, holding back nothing for themselves.

Her lips are like a scarlet thread, which shows she is healthy. Her temples are like half a pomegranate, a fruit with red seeds that are easily seen when it is cut. This reminds us of a pure girl, blushing in humility at the remembrance of her sin and unworthiness. This modesty makes the bride attractive in the Bridegroom's eyes.

The neck is what joins the body to the head. The church is the Body, and Jesus its head. What unites them is faith. The faith of the bride is strong; therefore, the Bridegroom tells her, "Your neck is like the tower of David, built for an armory." In ancient times, towers were adorned with shields or bucklers. Representing the faith of the bride, the tower of David has a thousand shields hanging on it, all shields of mighty men. They are reminders of the battles of the saints who have defeated the devil, the world and sinful nature.

David committed great sins, as when he took the wife of one of his soldiers, but David had beautiful moments in his life as well. Because his son has written a song such as this, David has reached the highest point of union with God.

The breasts of the bride look like a meadow full of lilies, on which two young roes graze. Souls who have wept for Jerusalem will drink the milk of its comforts.

Let us heed the words of Paul and turn to Jesus, so He can remove our veil, transforming us into His beautiful image.



Read 2 Corinthians 3:16-18. What veils are standing between you and Jesus? Bitterness? Jealousy? Judgment? Self-righteousness? Idleness? Such things distort our view of Him and what He has for us in this life. Identify these veils that stand between you and Christ and envision turning toward Him, pulling them away. Remember: He wants to see your face and hear your voice (Song 2:14). What is holding you back?

The Mountain of Myrrh

The Bridegroom says, "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense" (4:6).

The mountain of myrrh recalls Mount Moriah, on which the Temple was built. According to the Talmud, so much incense mixed with spices was burned every day that the daughters of Jerusalem did not need to perfume themselves. There the Bridegroom will retire for prayer.

As the Lord sees the brides who suffer for Him today in communist and Islamic prisons, we can be sure He has the same words of admiration and wonder for them as He has for the bride of Solomon's Song.

A Lithuanian Christian prisoner named Mrs. Ona Pranckunaite had visited Christ on the mountain of myrrh. As she was transported from prison to labor camp in a railway wagon divided into tiny cells, the Christian Lapienis comforted her from a nearby cell with words from Scripture and Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. He said, "Onute, let us try to fulfill our assign-

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ment from God, so as to serve His glory in the honor of our nation." In a letter, Ona wrote:

I will march with strength, eyes toward heaven, wherever the torments of life lead me. Everyone has a treasure worthy of being protected. Trusting in the grace of the Lord and in your prayers, I am sure to find the strength to bear all difficulties. I fear only one thing — that I might do evil.

Do not worry about me. I find comfort and joy in prayer, in sacrifice, and in trying to help my comrades in suffering. Here we work fourteen to fifteen hours a day.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fear the tempests of our times. God permits suffering but also gives us strength to bear it. The believers who sold their consciences for a plate of lentils and became our persecutors need penitence. So do we.

Her words were fragrant — a fruit of being with Christ in the mountains of myrrh.

Cardinal Mindszenty of Hungary wrote from his insect-ridden cell: "We are small, but we can grow. The saints always reached heights when they descended into the most profound depths of human suffering. Lord, grant me only a morsel of the strength of saints." During the civil war that followed their revolution, Russian communists tortured the Orthodox priest George Snesarev of Voronesh. Nails were driven under his fingernails and toenails. He was wounded sixty-three times. Seven nuns of the Protection Convent were boiled in a cauldron of tar. Their crime? They had been praying for anti-communists. The monk, Nektary Ivanov, was made to drink "communion wine" made with molten pewter.

In all such atrocities, many Christians remained faithful to their Bridegroom. Their deeds and their beauty are outstanding, like the breasts of the bride.



Where do you flee when facing darkness and shadows in life? Find a favorite photo of a mountain or hill. It could be a photograph from a vacation, nearby sites, or even a postcard, magazine cut-out or greeting card. Put it in a place where you will see it whenever you face difficulties. Then envision Jesus carrying you up the mountain of myrrh where He will bring you refreshment and healing so that you can return to bring His fragrance to others.

Day Fifty-six

All Fair

The Bridegroom says: "You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you. Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon..." (4:7,8).

The decision of the bride to give herself to prayer makes her even more attractive in the Bridegroom's eyes. He calls her "all fair," without a spot. (This is a good example of how husbands should regard their wives. The apostle Paul says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Loving His church, He saw her to be all fair and without a spot. We must have doves' eyes like Him.)

He calls her "bride" for the first time. How did she come to bear the proud title of the bride of God's Son? It is because she gave herself for Him in persecution, just as He gave Himself for her.

A Romanian Christian named Babutz had much to tell when he arrived in the United States. He told how prisoners were systematically beaten on the kidneys after sandbags were placed on their bodies to prevent marks.

Together with thousands of others he had been sent to a slave labor camp.

His job was to clean the weeds from the River Danube by hand. Standing waist-deep in the icy water in winter, many prisoners died. Coming and going, the prisoners had to look at the swollen corpses of their friends exhibited at the entrance to the camp. They were told, "That will be your fate as well, if you do not meet your quota."

In winter, their thick clothing was taken from them. They were told: "The cold will make you work harder." Prisoners went hungry when the rats ate what little they received. One hid a slice of bread in his shirt, saving it for the next day. In the night rodents chewed through his shirt and ate the bread.

Another prisoner who was forced to work in the fields stole twenty onions to share with his friends. He was caught. He was made to choose between eating them all at once or getting twenty-five lashes on the soles of his feet. To avoid the excruciating pain of the flogging, he began to eat the onions. Soon he collapsed, his eyes swollen from their sockets like a frog's eyes.

Another prisoner caught a serpent and tried to roast it on the guards' fire. When caught, he was made to eat the serpent raw.

Once an almost blind prisoner came to Babutz joyously, wanting to share with him some crumbs of maize cake he had found. Babutz told him: "It is not maize cake. It is mouse droppings." The other exclaimed, "Get away with your dirty jokes!" and ate the droppings.

For months they were given no salt with their food. Then suddenly it was saturated with salt. Many fell sick.

Babutz's daughter was told that she could only be accepted for college if she denounced her father for "compelling her to be a believer," a charge that would mean he would be sentenced again.

If you want to see happy people, you should look at men like Babutz and the others who have suffered in Romanian jails. They have taken a course in happiness. They drown their sorrows in the deep ocean of Jesus' tears for the

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sins of the world and the sufferings of His flock. Their own pain counts little next to His. Let us try to do the same. We may be degraded. We may be frustrated, but we surely never ate mouse droppings. Let us joyfully take up our crosses. Then we, too, will hear the words of the Bridegroom, "Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse...."



Take some time to learn about a Christian who is currently being persecuted for his or her faith. (To help you with this, see page 301 for a list of resources and a Web address.) Then set aside time to thank the Lord for this believer's courage to bear the consequences for identifying with Jesus in his or her country. Pray he or she will remain encouraged and be a strong witness for Christ.



Come From Lebanon

The Bridegroom says, "Look from the top of Amana, from the top of Senir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards" (4:8).

Lebanon is a range of mountains separating Syria (a heathen country) from the Holy Land. We have left heathendom, but we have not yet arrived in the Promised Land. We are still in the Lebanese mountains, "the mountains of leopards," full of savage beasts. But from the mountains of Lebanon one can see Israel, the heavenly fatherland where the Most Beloved walked. Even the mountains that we must pass are full of beauty.

"Look from the top of Amana," says the Bridegroom. It is from here that the rivers Amana and Parpar flow, of which Naaman the Syrian spoke when He said, "Their waters are better than all the waters of Israel." While on Mount Amana, even though we are not yet in the Promised Land, we can still experience joys, some of which we will not even know in heaven, such as winning souls for the heavenly kingdom. We can only know that joy on earth — and how intense a joy it is!

Only here can we know the joy of faith. In heaven there will be no faith, only sight. There are other joys awaiting us, but we will be deprived of the joy of faith. We, who for the present know only these joys, value them. And we are also tempted to say that the rivers that flow from Amana are better than all the waters of Israel.

"Look...from the top of Shenir." The Targum of Jerusalem, an ancient Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, says that so much fruit grows on this mountain that it cannot all be harvested; therefore, much of it rots. Here the bride learns to bring her fullness of harvest to the Bridegroom.

It is interesting to observe that the "lions' dens," — the dens of those lions that desire to consume believers — are situated on the heights of Amana. Amana shares the same root as the Hebrew word for "faith," *emunah*. Nowhere is one exposed to the devil's attacks so much as on these peaks. One brings much fruit, attracting his worst fury.

Those who have not passed through the lions' dens, who have always lived in comfortable places and never on the mountains of leopards and who do not ascend the peaks of faith and prayer, are often apathetic toward the sufferings of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the former Soviet Union, the Orthodox priest Yakunin sheltered Christians of every denomination for fifteen years. When he was arrested, I received a smuggled letter from another Orthodox believer in Russia, describing Yakunin's past activities. Since Yakunin was well known, he said they were convinced the authorities would never touch him, afraid of the uproar his imprisonment would arouse in the West. However, his letter continued:

No vociferous complaints, no mass demonstrations, followed his arrest. No voice, which could have awakened the western public, was raised in time.

It seems that even the Soviet authorities were surprised that the arrest of a well-known priest and defender of religious freedom should arouse such a minimal reaction in the West. Because they now knew there would be no protest, very soon afterward the communists arrested the renowned Hebrew Christian historian Regelson, and then came the Soviet attack upon Afghanistan.

Afterward, another witness for Christ, the priest Dodo, ascended the Golgotha prepared for him a long time ago. [Dodo and Regelson later recanted under duress.] The Adventist leader, Shtshelkov, who suffered greatly for his Christian faith, died at the age of eighty-four in Yakutia prison camp.

So it will continue if we remain silent and forget the sufferers. We must appeal to men of good will throughout the entire world. I have no words to express my despair and my feelings of powerlessness.

One is reminded of this passage in Isaiah: "No one calls for justice, nor does any plead for truth.... (The Lord) saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor..." (59:4,16).

But those who have been in the lions' den provide examples of spiritual beauty. A prisoner in Cuba wrote to his wife: "The Holy Spirit brings your love and prayers to me daily. Even if I don't receive your letters, angels keep us a united, happy and contented family, which rests in the arms of the King, Jesus." This should be a lesson to those who have their marriage partners close to them and yet have not learned happiness.

In communist countries, there has not only been a dreadful oppression, but also a Christian resistance to it. When you read of it, your spirit rejoices. There are heroes in our time. When one lives in tragic circumstances, miracles become everyday events. "He who has not suffered has not seen God. We will

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not see Him from satellites, but in the lives of those who are not afraid of suffering," wrote Dodo before his arrest and downfall. Others who suffered even more under the communists did not crack.

Archbishop Luke of Tashkent shook the ladders on which the communist workmen were climbing in order to tear down the crosses from the cupola of his cathedral. Because he was also a doctor, he took care of their bruises.

Many Christians have given their lives for Christ. Six Soviet Baptists who were sent to Afghanistan as soldiers were executed, because they refused to shoot Afghan freedom-fighters. They rightly judged that the Soviet Army had no business to be in a peaceful neighboring country. It is right to defend a free fatherland, but it is wrong to fight in the name of a God-hating, murderous regime. They came from Lebanon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of leopards, and are now in the embrace of Jesus.

They knew the biblical way of happiness: "You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions" (Hebrews 1:9). They loved the righteous commandment, "Do not kill." They hated the iniquity of Soviet rule and died for their convictions. Now they know the unsurpassed happiness of heaven. In addition, they experienced hours of jubilation before their execution, just as Jesus went singing toward Gethsemane (Matthew 26:30).



In what ways is God calling you to "plead for truth" and "call for justice" for the persecuted church or on issues in your own community or nation? What is holding you back? Talk to Him about it.



The Value of a Look

The Bridegroom says: "You have ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; you have ravished my heart with one look of your eyes, with one link of your necklace. How fair is your love, my sister, my spouse! How much better than wine is your love, and the scent of your perfumes than all spices! Your lips, O my spouse, drip as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under your tongue; and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon" (4:9-11).

Jesus calls the believing soul "sister" and "spouse" — concepts that are mutually exclusive, because it is an abomination to have a sister as a spouse. But the relationship between Jesus and the Christian can take many forms. Sometimes it is that of an older brother advising a younger sister. At other times, it is the passionate love of a Bridegroom toward a bride. One analogy on its own would be inadequate to express the variety of relationships.

Even in the Old Testament when God spoke to Israel, He sometimes called Himself a Father, a comforting mother and even a Bridegroom, a Hus-

band or a Friend. He's one and the same God, yet so many analogies!

Jesus tells the bride, "You have ravished my heart." There is really no satisfactory translation of the Hebrew expression in the European languages. The nearest we could come would be something like, "My love for you drove me out of my mind." The Hebrew word for "love" used here is a plural form "loves." The bride loves Him with intellectual love, rational love and passionate love.

The Son of God acknowledges that through love, He has become our prisoner. How does this happen? Girls in parts of Asia have been known to veil their faces. To be flirtatious toward someone in whom they are interested, they lower their veil just a fraction, showing one eye. So the believing soul ravishes the heart of the Savior with one of her eyes, one of her glances.

The Old Testament records that when Jews were bitten by serpents in the wilderness, they only had to look at the brazen serpent that Moses erected in order to be healed. One look at Jesus can be sufficient to bring a soul to salvation and enter into a relationship with Him.

How can a mere look have such huge results? It is because we ravish His heart. Through a single look, we inflame Him with love. So great is the power of a loving look! God can thereby become ours.

A farmer was seen to spend many hours in church before the altar, but he never seemed to pray. When he was asked what he was doing, he said, "I just kneel and look at God." So it is that one single quality of the bride — one single loving look — that secures God's whole heart. Let us also love people for a single quality we perceive in them and close our eyes to all the rest that might be inadequate.

The Bridegroom also tells the bride, "Honey and milk are under your tongue." The Jews saw the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey after enduring forty years of hardship. After conquering Canaan, they fought hard

to keep it. But all those years they already had the joyous realms of "honey and milk" right under their tongues. We all have the Promised Land the moment we stop looking for it in the far distance. It is there, in the power of our tongue. Confessing with the mouth that Jesus Christ is our Lord brings us salvation (Romans 10:9,10).

In the Old Testament, the caresses of the truly faithful soul were more pleasant to God than all the incense that was offered to Him in the Temple of Jerusalem. Happy is the soul that looks at Him and loves.



Spend time today just "looking" at Jesus. You might envision yourself kneeling before Him as He sits in a glorious throne room or observing Him in one of the many stories in the Gospels. Do you find yourself shying away from Him? Drawing close enough only to hear Him? Approaching Him and embracing Him? Write what you see, how you feel, how you respond, and how He responds.

Day Fifty-nine

A Garden Enclosed

The Bridegroom says: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices — a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon" (4:12-15).

Jeremiah predicted a time when the souls of Israel would be well-watered gardens (Jeremiah 31:12). For the bride, this is already accomplished. She is a well-defended and enclosed garden.

Using these images, Jesus praises her chastity. No one can enter a closed garden or draw water from a sealed fountain except the owner. When He does not come to visit her, the garden of the bride remains locked. She knows that just as a perfume bottle does not lose its fragrance if it is kept closed, neither does the soul that tends only to God lose the warmth of love and the power of virtue.

He praises the enclosed garden. The flowers and fruits mentioned are mostly exotic in Israel, and as such are types of the rare pleasures that the bride offers to the Bridegroom. She is a garden full of them. Originally, the word for "garden" was *pardes*, a Persian word, from which we derive "paradise." For Him to come near the bride was the same happiness that we shall receive when we enter paradise, because the church produces the most exquisite fruits for Him.

It is written that the resurrected Jesus came to His disciples when the doors of their rooms were kept shut for fear of the Jews (John 20:19). If they kept their doors shut against those who could only kill the body in this world, how much more should we be like locked doors, keeping out demons that can destroy us! To keep the doors locked — to be an enclosed garden in the world but not of the world (John 17:15,16) — is the proper state of your heart if you wish Jesus to show Himself to you.

We have to lock our doors against influences that can quench the Spirit in us, spoiling our intimacy with Him. Why should you be an open fountain at everyone's disposal, so men can spit in it or throw in their garbage? Is there anything that pleases you more than the presence of the Holy Spirit?

We must lock our inner castle, where God's kingdom thrives, against the images of the outside world. Our imagination and our fantasies must be as beautiful as a locked garden. Certain things may be allowed to enter, and others must be forbidden. God and the devil come with their gifts to the gate of this garden. God's gifts must be accepted, the devil's rejected.

God said to Cain: "If you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Genesis 4:7). In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."

The faithful soul desires that only the Lord shall enter. But knowing this,

the devil disguises himself as an angel of light. How can we distinguish between them? What must we do? The fact that our doors are locked is no hindrance to Jesus. He knows how to pass through locked doors. The bride is alert when she lies on her bed; she hears the voice of the Beloved (5:2). But she also knows that the devil can imitate the voice of Jesus. The many compliments make her especially suspicious.

Now when she — who is lovesick for Him, who has sought Him for many nights, walking the lonely streets and marketplaces — hears the voice at the door, she refuses to open it: "I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them?" (5:3). Jesus is pleased with her wise refusal and exclaims in admiration, "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (4:12). The Jesus she refused is the true Jesus, because He does not become angry: He knows us. He sees us. He searches our hearts and knows we are with Him. He knows for what good motives we refuse Him.

He also knows why we cannot be gardens forever closed. He knows our commitment brings us into contact with many sins, many cultures, many denials of God and many false religions, to which we would not be exposed if we remained permanently enclosed gardens. We cannot share our faith with others without also hearing their stories of wickedness in their lives and their arguments for other beliefs. It is unavoidable that some of this should seem alluring. There have been cases of missionaries falling into sin with those they were to bring to holiness.

The best thing is to avoid extremes. We must avoid being so enclosed that others will die, because we are like black holes and emit no light. And we must avoid being so open that we forget that without times of withdrawing into a quiet garden we cannot have a love-life with Jesus.

In communist countries, Jesus entered through the locked doors of cells.

The Christians filled them with songs of praise. Every October 8th, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates the birth of the seventeenth-century saint Tryphon of Viatsk. His enemies stripped him of his clothes, bound him and threw him into the snow. When they went to retrieve his body, they found not a frozen corpse but a living body that was unusually warm. The snow around him had melted. In Romania, the same thing happened when they threw a Christian named Budu naked into the snow. I have known many who were put in refrigerated cells at freezing temperatures and survived. Freezing circumstances in your own life will not freeze you if you are close to the burning fire of the Godhead.

I once attended an evensong (evening prayer) celebrated by Seraphim, the archbishop of the underground Orthodox Church in the former Soviet Union. He had led his church for thirty years, yet the communists never discovered his whereabouts.

At that evensong after he had chanted the first words, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," the whole congregation was in tears. I had heard and said those words thousands of times; but as Seraphim said them, I realized as never before the dramatic truth that all we have of God is His name to call upon. During the fourteen years of my imprisonment, "Father" was only a name to my son. He was deprived of the reality of a fatherson relationship. We are in the same position with the heavenly Father, but we have the comfort of knowing that He is a loving Father. His Son died for us; His Holy Spirit guides us. The whole message was revealed to me in the way Seraphim chanted the words. Several people in the congregation asserted that they could see a luminous being conducting the service with him, although he was alone. I believe that anyone who commits his soul to the act of imparting the gospel has angels at his side at the altar (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

This is the privilege of men who live in enclosed gardens, who allow no

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one but Jesus to enter their intimacy, who shun all influence. The right influence, the Bridegroom Himself, can leap over hindrances. Only keep your heart as an enclosed garden, and Jesus will enter it with His burning love.



How is the garden of your soul? Do you keep the gates to your soul locked, only allowing Jesus entry? Do you long for Christ to come and walk in your garden? Ask Him to come. What do you find together?



Awake, Winds

The bride says: "Awake, O north wind, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden, that its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits" (4:16).

Though He so appreciates her, the bride whispers into His ear that she still needs to make preparations before presenting herself to Him. The girls who had to enter the presence of the earthly king Ahasuerus first had to beautify themselves for twelve months: six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and preparations (Esther 2:12). How much more should girls beautify themselves before presenting themselves to the heavenly King! Therefore, the bride calls the winds.

The north wind (which is often cold) represents the discipline of God (Hebrews 12:6). The south wind (which is often warm) opens the leaves' pores to allow them to exhale their sweet fragrance and represents the comfort of God. Both are signs of His love, and both are needed so the bride's garden may spread her perfume.

The church has a rich share of discipline and comfort. Above all, the

church has the privilege of being blown upon by the wind of the Holy Spirit, which descended upon the disciples at Pentecost. That was a fulfillment of the bride's prayer.

The north wind blows with unprecedented fierceness upon Christians in communist and Islamic countries, whose rulers have a long record of crime. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, when the country was under communist influence, the prisons were filled with Christians and Muslims. The torturers used Cubanmade manacles that can be rapidly tightened until the bones break. A prisoner in the Andijane jail in Uzbekistan, which was a republic in the former Soviet Union, reported: "The inmates are beaten to death or put in straightjackets. The chief torturer is Umayukulov. Those who suffer for their convictions are put in cells together with bandits who sodomize them."

In the country formerly known as Czechoslovakia, three thousand nuns were prisoners in their own convents, which had been made into slave labor camps. The number of priests and monks who had to endure the same fate is not known. Since books with a religious content could not be printed legally in Czechoslovakia, secret printing presses were set up at enormous risk. Such presses were also run in communist Russia. Some still run in China and other communist countries today. When they are discovered, those running the presses often go to prison.

Tito, the late president of Yugoslavia, was the murderer of one in seven of the country's priests and of countless residents of convents. He was also responsible for the death of Cardinal Stepinac, who personally protected seven thousand children and defended Jews and Serbians during World War II.

At the end of that war, the Soviet army occupying East Germany killed the priests Sonsalla, Demczak and Goerlich. Innumerable girls were raped. Some of them were nuns. Brutes of the same quality still control communist countries today. All these crimes were surpassed by the holocaust in Cambodia, where around two million people were killed by the communists. Men with university degrees were eradicated. The wearing of spectacles was made a crime punishable by death, because it indicated the ability to read. Of five hundred physicians, only fifty-seven remained alive. The children of undesirables were chained together and buried alive. Scarcely any children below the age of five remained. In the beginning, no local men had the strength to unload the relief parcels from abroad.

Yakunin, a Russian Orthodox priest, was imprisoned for protesting against church leaders who compromised with communism; that is, brides of Christ who were in bed with his enemies. He wrote: "Authority in the church belongs to Christ alone who obtained it by shedding His precious blood. The church is His holy spouse, His living body. Whoever permits power-seekers to interfere with the eternal life of the church abandons Christ's bride to corruption."

Men like this would be able to agree with these words of Hudson Taylor, founder of China Inland Mission:

I was envied by some, despised by many, hated perhaps by others, often blamed for things I had nothing to do with, an innovator of what have become established rules of missionary practice, working in many respects without precedence and with few experienced helpers, often sick in body as well as perplexed in mind and embarrassed by circumstance.

Had not the Lord been especially gracious to me, had not my mind been sustained by the conviction that the work is His and He is with me, I must have fainted and broken down. But the battle is the Lord's — and He will conquer.

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In Gardenas, Belarus, another republic of the former Soviet Union, communists destroyed a fourteenth-century Gothic church. The same thing happened with the splendid temple of Widzial. In Varanavas, women threw themselves in front of the bulldozers to prevent the church from being demolished. As believers suffer for Christ's sake worldwide, the Bridegroom's winds spread their sweet aroma.



Are you experiencing God's north winds (discipline) or south winds (refreshment) blowing over you? If north winds, in what ways is He disciplining you? If south winds, how is He refreshing you? Write about it, thanking Him for loving you to the point of sending His winds to stir up His Spirit in and through you.



Chapter 5



Holy Fantasy

The Bridegroom says: "I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk. (To His Friends) Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!" (5:1).

The bride calls upon the Bridegroom to enter her soul in chapter four. When she does so, His response is immediate. He came in to her, and she spent a splendid bridal night with Him. He found His delight in her and remembers her caresses with joy. He uses different descriptions of the pleasure she has given Him. Such is Jesus' delight in the church, His bride. Having known His bride, Jesus soars on peaks of joy, because those delights are so richly varied and full of beauty. She does "more than others," like loving her enemies and giving to those who have taken from her (Matthew 5:38-48).

Then the Bridegroom calls to friends: "Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones." When you are invited to a meal, those who invite you do not always wish you well. There may be small-talk and backbiting. But the

invitation that Jesus extends is sincere and whole-hearted. Jesus calls us all to His banquet, to the joy of seeing sinners converted. He calls us to attend the wedding feast of the Bridegroom and the bride. Blessed are those invited to this banquet! God commands the guests to eat and drink abundantly.

Atheists reject the wedding feast as fantasy. A courier who smuggled Bibles into a communist country was told, "We don't accept books like these; they are fairy tales." The courier replied, "Don't you have fairy tale books in your country?" To this, the customs officer had no reply. The courier then said to him, "There is nothing wrong in works of fantasy, if the fantasy is sanctified and is only employed in the embellishment of true facts."

The union between Christ and the believer is such a true fact. We can embellish it. Fantasy is a beautiful gift of God. In the first Greek translation of Zechariah, it is written, "The Lord made fantasy" (Zechariah 10:1). It is a product of imaginative creation.

Christian hymns are the product of saintly fantasy. For example, consider, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins." The blood of Jesus coagulated in His hands and feet when He was crucified; otherwise, He would have bled to death within minutes. Only trickles of blood oozed from His wounds. But fantasy enriches reality. The sinner sees before him a deep fountain of cleansing blood, into which he can plunge. Spiritual reality can be more powerfully conveyed in fantasy than in the facts of a historic event.

Without fantasy, there would be no achievement in life. Technology, medicine and art would all wither away. Science fiction anticipated science fact. Flights of fantasy preceded flights into space. Each step forward begins as a fantasy, dream or thought, which later becomes a reality.

When the reality of the new heaven and new earth takes place (Revelation 21:1), they will be a fantastic description of a real event that will exceed our

fantasies (Ephesians 3:20). Christians believe in this invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb. They believe in the inebriating joys of drinking abundantly at His feast. Therefore, they gladly bear their crosses.

In the village of Martuk, in the Aktiubinskaia region of the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan, a school director named Goroh threatened a four-teen-year-old Christian girl named Arganessa Tissen. He said if she continued to win souls to Christ, he would authorize children to put a rope around her neck and hang her on the spot. He compelled Christian children to crawl on all fours in a mockery of kneeling for prayer and called them "Fascists."

The Baptist Anatoli Y. Khailo was imprisoned on a false charge of raping and beating a girl, even though someone else had already confessed to this crime. The girl's mother admitted that the prosecutor instructed her to give false evidence against Khailo. Just like Joseph in the Old Testament — imprisoned on a charge of attempted rape even though he was holy and refused to sin — Khailo had to suffer.

This ugly side of life can distress us, but we know about the wedding feast, to which we are all invited. We do not look merely on the rain but on the shimmering rainbow.

Christians of Belgrorod shared how they look forward to the coming wedding feast: "We thank God that He found us worthy of such an honor. We pray He will give us all the strength not to be shaken, because the hour of the Lord's coming is near. May the Lord bless us and teach us to understand the shrewd methods of His enemies."

In Solomon's Song, even erotic fantasy is sanctified, describing the drunkenness of love that the bride will experience in the embrace of the heavenly Bridegroom. This holy fantasy has helped many Christians endure communist prisons.

Many people are attracted to so much that is ugly, to things worse than re-

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ality. We who are Christians can be attracted to the beautiful, to the righteous, to the real, expressed in the most gorgeous images. Like King David, we can long to gaze at His beauty (Psalm 27:4). Though the banquet is a product of holy fantasy, it is a picture of future reality.



Francis Schaeffer wrote, "The Christian is the really free person...whose imagination should fly beyond the stars." What captures your imagination? Have you invited Jesus to take control of it, liberating it to partake in imagining the new heaven and new earth that will come when Christ returns? What's keeping you? Remember that you can call upon the Lord's north winds of discipline or south winds of refreshment to sweep through your thought life.

⁷Ryken, Leland. The Liberated Imagination (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 1989) p. 46.

Day Sixty-two

The Bride's Sadness

The bride says: "I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my beloved! He knocks, saying, 'Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.' I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them? My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door, and my heart yearned for him. I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock. I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone. My heart leaped up when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer" (5:2-6).

She sleeps, but He who is in her heart never sleeps nor slumbers. Just when the bride has fallen asleep, she hears the Beloved's voice. There is not the slightest rebuke in His words, no anger at finding her asleep. He only says, "Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect ('undefiled') one." The

Talmud says, "Open to God a door as big as the point of a needle, and He will enter with a cart full of blessings."

How can one not let in someone who begs you, "Open to me, sleeper with beautiful eyelids"? How can one refuse entry to someone who says not one angry word, though such words would be justified, but only says that He, the ruler of heaven and earth, has nowhere to lay His head? Where will He rest if His bride does not call Him? His hair is filled with dew, because He has spent the night in the fields without a roof over His head.

However, the bride stalls. She will not open to Him at once: "I have taken off my robe.... I have washed my feet," she says. If she has taken off her robe, she can either receive Jesus naked, or she can make haste to clothe herself again. She wants to look presentable to Jesus. She thinks she must come to Him perfect, or complete, when He has already made her complete through the Cross (Colossians 2:8-14, Galatians 2:20). And why did she reply that she has washed her feet and fears to defile them again? She knows that Jesus washed His disciples' feet. He will do it for her also. She is merely stalling. And then He puts His hand by the hole of the door. When we offer excuses, the grace of God tries to force the entrance. But even He cannot open the door of the heart. That door can only be opened from the inside.

It was only then that pity moved her. If you can't manage any other sentiment for Jesus, at least have pity for Him who has been hurt so much. When she rose to open the door, her hands dripped with myrrh, which was on the handles of the lock. He must have poured perfume on the handles from outside, out of a bottle He had brought for her.

She finally opens the door to her Beloved, but He has gone. He has withdrawn Himself. She did not open at the first knock, and now He cannot be found. How many reasons for sadness we give ourselves when we neglect opportunities that God offers! She remembers now how sweet His voice was. Her soul had failed when He spoke. The Vulgate, the first Latin translation of the Bible, says here, "My soul melted when he spoke" (verse 6). That is how one can tell that it is the Lord who is speaking. Disciples of Jesus who talked with Him after the Resurrection said to each other, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). How thrilling when the Lord speaks!

Human beings are strange. The bride fainted when she heard Him, but she did not open the door. Afterwards she seeks Him and does not find Him. She calls for Him, but He does not answer. It would all have been unnecessary had she opened the door at once. There are times when we cannot obtain answers from Jesus. Why did we delay in answering the door? Was it because we felt that we first had to make our hearts look presentable before going to Him? Open your heart to Jesus just as you are, not as you think you need to be. Then let God empower you through His Word, the Holy Spirit and with the help of His Body to grow in Him.

A young man was married to a girl by a priest of the outlawed Uniate Catholic Church of the Ukraine. The communists arrested her and told her husband that scores of soldiers would rape her if he did not denounce the priest. He gave in and denounced the priest who was in hiding. When his wife heard, she tried to commit suicide. His mother died of a broken heart, and the priest went to prison. The husband later confessed his guilt and died after valiantly protecting an innocent thirteen-year-old girl from the communists. At that moment he should have opened his heart to Jesus, the Savior who was ready to suffer for God's glory. Opening his heart at that moment of tragic dilemma, the young Christian would have known the simple truth that a Christian is never a denunciator, no matter what the circumstances. But he did not.

Others who have allowed Jesus to enter their hearts have acquired His courage.

When the communists took over Vietnam in 1975, they confiscated church property, including schools, seminaries, universities and orphanages. Since then, hundreds of Catholic priests have been killed or sent to re-education camps, from which not all returned. Protestant clergy have met the same fate. However, God's children continued their work.

At one time, the people of Vietnam needed a permit in order to leave their quarters. Permits were not available to pastors. However, they still left their quarters to answer calls from sick parishioners or simply to preach the gospel elsewhere. When caught, some were punished by being made to kneel in front of their doors for a whole week. So as they knelt, they planned how they would share the gospel when they were allowed to rise to their feet. If they were caught again, they risked new punishments, perhaps prison or even death, like the pastors Nguyen van Thang and Nguyen van Nam who died in Vietnamese jails.

Under Uganda's dictator Idi Amin, Christians, political opponents and common criminals were imprisoned in concentration camps where such prisoners were not fed. They lived by the law of the jungle: The strong ate the weak. Obviously, Christians were among those eaten. An old African custom prescribes that such victims are not killed before being eaten; one piece after another is stripped from the living body. This information was taken from the records of an international commission of jurists at the United Nations.

Christians bore this with faithfulness. In their suffering, many must have cried to Him and had the same experience as the bride in Solomon's Song: "I called to him but he gave no answer." Great faith is tested by long periods of waiting. But in the end, there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer. The

answer will surely come. It might not be the answer that we desired, but it will surely be the best answer for us.



Are you experiencing a time when God seems distant, not there? Do you long to see Him? Tell Him of your longing — or maybe your lack of desire — to see Him.



Day Sixty-three

Self-Seeking Pastors

The bride complains: "The watchmen who went about the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil away from me" (5:7).

The watchmen of the city represent the pastors of the church. Instead of helping the bride find her Beloved, they beat her and wound her and take away her veil. Jesus foresaw that some of His pastors would persecute His servants. They would care only about eating and drinking and enjoying themselves. Throughout church history, many great persecutions against believers were unleashed by priests who, under the pretext of defending the church, mistreated meek and spiritual children of God.

Eli the priest rebuked Hannah for drunkenness, but he had not one word of reproach for his wicked sons. Many pastors have grieved the hearts of the righteous. Even good pastors commit this sin. So the bride walks about, saddened by her own conscience and now by church leaders.

Prisoners in communist countries suffer not only physical and emotional torture at the hands of the persecutor, but also betrayal at the hands of the

leadership of their denominations. While Pentecostals in communist Romania were beaten by police, the official leaders of the Pentecostal Union of Romania (who were received as brethren at conferences in the free world), congratulated the Romanian government in the communist press for the "full liberty" it bestowed. They sent a letter to all the churches, obliging them to refrain from preaching about God's judgment, because the communists do not like to hear this subject.

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), opponents of the regime (all Christians were automatically defined as such) had to kneel for ten minutes of "self-examination" in front of a portrait of Mao, while slapping themselves on the face ten times each morning before entering their workplace — and then again in the evening before they left. They were singled out to clean the lavatories. With heads shaved, they were tied up and dragged away for physical punishment. At that time some Christian leaders in the West praised the Maoist regime as a fulfillment of God's kingdom. Later, when the crimes committed under Mao were discovered, some pastors covered them up.

This verse is a good reminder to pray for church leaders worldwide, asking God to keep them as humble servants whose role is to help the brides find their Bridegroom.



Have you had hurtful experiences in the church? With other Christians? Ask Jesus to enter that hurt and wounded place and turn it into one of forgiveness and healing.

Day Sixty-four

Lovesick

The bride says, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I am lovesick!" (5:8).

Beaten by the watchmen on the walls, the bride is unable to continue her search. She demands others to pray for her. She uses third parties as intercessors on her behalf. The lover uses all means possible to make contact with the Beloved.

She does not name Him. She tells the daughters of Jerusalem, "If you find my beloved." A powerful love always assumes that everyone else loves the Beloved. She gives them a command: "Tell him I am lovesick." A person is lovesick when he or she cannot be dissuaded from doing and suffering all things for the Beloved. It loves to a paroxysm — a frenzy.

You may know what seasickness is. There is also lovesickness. Do you know what it is to love to madness? This is love that instead of drawing on its own large resources demands even more love. It is better to have this dissatisfied love for Jesus, than a satisfied love for the world. This is the message that her messengers are to bring to Him: Though she has been neglected, she still loves.

She does not ask Him to come. She only tells Him her pain. Here we are taught that prayers should only mention one's needs without making explicit demands. Then He, knowing our needs, will do what He thinks is best. There are many such prayers in the Bible. For example, Martha's prayer: "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick" (John 11:3). This prayer only speaks of the need. The mother of our Lord at the wedding in Cana says only this much: "They have no wine" (John 2:3).

Prayers that only express the need have a unique beauty. He is the Master. Tell Him only the situation. He knows better than we do what needs to be done in such circumstances. He feels more pity when He sees the beloved soul selflessly suffering with resignation. Only speak your sorrow without demanding what you think is necessary. The bride sends messages only to tell Him, "I am lovesick."

We have many examples of this sort of love in the persecuted church in the communist world. Valya was a twelve-year-old girl in communist Russia. One day the director of her school decided she should become a member of the communist children's movement known as the Young Pioneers. She refused. Her refusal was invalid, as the director had legal rights over her such as only parents have in the free world.

Enrollment day arrived. The chosen candidates stood before a table where three-pointed Pioneer scarves lay. One by one the girls stepped forward to don the scarf and take the oath.

"Valya Vastchenko," called the director. "Valya, step forward. Take the oath."

Valya's mouth stayed tightly shut.

"Say the oath, Valya! Very well. I will read it in your name." The director pointed to two other girls. "Place the scarf around her neck as I read."

He began. "I, Valya, pioneer of the USSR, promise before my comrade-

patriots who decide the question of my admission to the organization, that I will stand firmly for the cause of Lenin and the victory of communism. I promise...."

His next words were drowned as Valya burst out in prayer to God and began to sing a hymn: "We will stand firm for the faith, for Christ, following His example."

That child knew from the experience of many others that she had destroyed her career possibilities for the rest of her life. She knew she might be put into an atheistic boarding school. She knew her parents might be put in prison and might even die there, but she did not rationalize. She loved Jesus to madness, so she could not do other than what she did.

Thomas Aquinas was discussing the Song of Solomon when he died. He wrote a song entitled, "I adore You," expressing his love and desire for Jesus:

Jesus, whom for the present, veiled I see,
What I so long for, Oh! vouchsafe to me,
That I may see Your beauteous face unfolding
And maybe blessed, Your glory in beholding.

The bride is lovesick. Therefore, she suffers. We have to defend our faith against the heresy of a Christianity without suffering, without a cross. Let me quote from typical sermons I have heard preached on television in the United States:

- 1. "If a man can stand totally in the presence of the Almighty God, he will never be sick." Thousands are sick of tuberculosis contracted through hunger in communist prisons. Others were maimed by torture. Others went mad.
- 2. "The grace of God brings about His blessings in the spiritual and the material realm." Prisoners in communist camps have shivered in the

- cold, their families fired from their jobs with no money to buy bread for their children. Their goods are confiscated. Where is the material blessing?
- 3. "As His children, it is not our place to be in the maelstrom of the storm that swirls around us. We do not have to be buffeted around by all the torments that afflict the world. Even when trouble comes, the sunlight of God is shining and there is peace upon us." This celebrated preacher doesn't seem to have heard about the dark night of the soul, through which well-known saints have passed. I dispute the claim that Christians are always at peace in all circumstances.

The bride in Solomon's Song knows deep peace, but she also knows grave torments and sickness. Those who are lovesick take the Great Commandment seriously: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Matthew 22:37). Do you know what it is like to be lovesick?



How would you describe your love for Jesus? Would you consider yourself lovesick? Does that sound strange to you? Is pleasing Him all that matters to you? If not, why? Tell Him your fears and concerns for having such a love for Him.

Day Sixty-five

The World's Cynicism

The daughters of Jerusalem ask the bride: "What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?" (5:9).

The world does not know the beauty of the Bridegroom; however, it can see the beauty of the bride — the church. Is she really the "fairest among women"? The world wonders about her love for Jesus and asks her, "What does your Beloved have more than others?" Rabbi Solomon Iarchi, a celebrated commentator, wrote, "Thus the nations ask the Israelites: What is your God more than all gods that you are burned up with hunger for him like this?"

In a book published secretly by the Orthodox underground church, the author wrote:

A man traveled on the shores of the Azov Sea. He saw fishermen at work. The thought came to him, "If the sea contained no fish, nobody would be fishing. Nobody goes to a well that has no water. If there were no grace in the church, nobody would go there. A fool can go into a cellar and proclaim that there is no sun in the universe.

Truly, for those in cellars there is none. So, there is no God for those who are in the darkness of God-denial and evil."

Living under fierce persecution as a member of a church whose people are jailed, tortured and killed, this author wrote: "God is richness, fullness of life, love. All beauty, all power, all good, is only in God."

On December 5, 1978, an Orthodox priest named Nicholas Ivasiuk was assassinated in the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan. Six men in police uniforms entered his house. The following morning Ivasiuk was found dead. His eyes were gouged out (which happened to the Baptist Victor Sedletskii), and his body was burned by cigarettes and red-hot irons. There were also numerous lacerations. He was finished off with two bullets to the head. Such things belong to the ritual of Satanist sects. The crime was committed on the eve of the Feast of Saint Nicholas, whose name the priest bore, as a calculated mockery of the saint. Ivasiuk left five daughters.

And yet from such a place of cruelty and sorrow, the Orthodox underground church published writings full of joy, jubilation and adoration of the beauty of Jesus! They have known the Bridegroom's beauty as so much more than others. They have seen Him.



If you attend a church, how would you characterize the relationships? Peaceful? Friendly? Conflict-ridden? Wounded? Ask God for ways you can help build relationships that reflect the beauty of Christ in your church.

Day Sixty-six

The Beloved's Beauty

The bride responds to the daughters of Jerusalem: "My beloved is white and ruddy, chief among ten thousand. His head is like the finest gold; his locks are wavy, and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. His cheeks are like a bed of spices, banks of scented herbs. His lips are lilies, dripping liquid myrrh. His hands are rods of gold set with beryl. His body is carved ivory inlaid with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble set on bases of fine gold. His countenance is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet, yes, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend...!" (5:10-16).

The bride answers the question posed by the daughters of Jerusalem with a model sermon. It is not a boring exposition of Bible verses but a description of what the Beloved is. Isaiah preached of Jesus' state of humility (Isaiah 53:3-11); John described His glory (Revelation 1:13-16); and the bride describes His beauty. She knows His body. She has caressed it.

Yet the description of the Bridegroom is far from reality. The body is too shiny. The beauty of the young man seems more of a gilded statue than a human being. It is probable she is comparing Him to a work of Egyptian art. Ancient Egyptian sculpture was colorfully painted, and the flesh of males was painted red. Therefore, she calls him "ruddy." The Egyptians also made bronze figures inlaid with gold, silver and copper. Surely we are reminded of this when the legs are described as columns of alabaster and the feet as gold. It was a common device in Egyptian statues. To the bride, these features represent stability and grandeur.

Here the young man's legs are described in their entirety; in chapter seven, only the feet of the girl are mentioned. In old Egyptian art, the legs of males were unclothed; whereas, the legs of females were never revealed except in the cases of children, dancers or dolls.

What is said here about the Messiah has a deeper spiritual significance. He is white because He is God and, though a man, without sin. He is red from the many whippings and sufferings He has endured. He is white to show sinners that their sins can also become white. But the red also warns them of the coming vengeance of God against sinners.

"His eyes are like doves." In jail I had the opportunity to observe the lives of doves. They nested in the prison walls. I saw neither fierceness nor fury in their eyes. They were always loving. This verse reminds me of them.

Of the Bridegroom's hands, the bride says, "His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl" — a precious stone (KJV). The Hebrew says, "set in Tarshish." This is a strange word, for in the Bible it can mean a personal name, a kind of ship or a country. No one knows for sure where the Tarshish was. Here the use of this word teaches us to see God's loving hand in what is achieved by human hands, in material objects and in great events involving whole nations.

Modest brides do not describe their beloved's belly to their girlfriends.

The bride sets aside the normal conventions of decency and does so. She wants to suggest to every soul that Jesus can be known in the most intimate embraces. What needs to be concealed? His naked body was displayed in public on the Cross.

She ends her description by saying, "He is altogether lovely," or, "He is wholly desirable" (NASB). Every desire of a bride can find fulfillment in Him. "This is my beloved, and this is my friend." She is sure He is her Beloved, though for a time He left her.

We see how beautiful Jesus is in the eyes of His bride by the description of Him in Christian poetry and by the works of the great sculptors and painters. We also see His beauty in the heavenly music composed in His honor by renowned composers.

Persecuted Christians know His beauty. A pupil named Atkociunaite told her teacher in the former Soviet republic of Lithuania: "I don't care what you do to me. On the eve of Easter, I will remain the whole night in adoration in the church." If He were not beautiful, no one would spend a whole night looking at Him in adoration! This was David's desire, "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord…" (Psalm 27:4).

Like all Orthodox and Catholic Christians, a Romanian Orthodox nun named Michaela believed that the communion bread and wine really are the body and blood of our Lord. Therefore, every time she looked at the Sacrament, she saw His intoxicating beauty. When the police took over the Vladimireshti convent, she protected the altar with her own body. For this, she was thrown in prison and mistreated beyond description. From her solitary cell, she tapped out the gospel in Morse code through the wall to her fellow prisoners until she died. She had seen His beauty and would not give up sharing her love for Him.

May we desire to behold His beauty and experience how He is "wholly desirable"!



God created us with a longing for beauty. His beauty is reflected in all His creation — trees, mountains, meadows, music, people. Ask God to show you His beauty in your day today. It may be as small as a monarch butterfly or as grand as a multi-colored sunset. Then set aside time this week to enjoy His beauty outdoors by watching a sunset, listening to the crash of ocean waves or the trickle of a shallow creek, walking through a field of wildflowers, or watching the sunrise against a city skyline. As you do, listen to your favorite praise music while reading Psalm 27. Tell Him how beautiful He is.

Chapter 6



Day Sixty-seven

Where Has the Beloved Gone?

The daughters of Jerusalem ask the bride: "Where has your beloved gone, O fairest among women? Where has your beloved turned aside, that we may seek him with you?"

The bride responds, "My beloved has gone to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies" (6:1,2).

ow that the daughters of Jerusalem have heard the bride tell them what makes her Beloved greater than any other, they also seek Him. When just one soul seeks Jesus in utter sincerity, others join in the search for Him. Thus the girls now ask, "Where has your beloved gone?"

The bride knows she is going to have to give good directions to those who ask. She is inspired and gives a remarkable reply, "My beloved has gone...." The King James Version reads, "He has gone down..." (emphasis added). These words are incomprehensible for those who do not know Jesus. In the same way, most believers who have lost Jesus do not find Him, because they think

He is far above them since they have fallen out of fellowship with Him. But He did not ascend. He went down.

In the beginning God created man in His own image. When that image was marred by sin, God came down and took the image of man upon Himself. He became incarnate in a body like that of sinners. That is the way He deals with us. If we cannot ascend to Him, He descends to us. As ours sins increase, so does His grace (Romans 5:20). Because we cannot be saints in our own strength, He put Himself on the same level as the sinners. That is the only way continual fellowship with Him is possible.

Many Christians in communist countries have not become heroes of the faith and have fallen away. It is a privilege to become a hero by choosing to suffer instead of making the Son of God bleed. Those who make the right choice have the joy of loving and forgiving even their torturers. However, not all make the right choice.

In the country once known as Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe), communist terrorists kidnapped Simon Chengeta, a member of parliament and a Christian. They forced his son, Steven, to beat him to death. The son, who bears the name of Christianity's first martyr, could have refused; but he probably would have been hacked to death alongside his father, while using someone else to do the deed. But Steven did not want to die, so he fell away from the faith and became a parricide (one who kills a relative).

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, communists arrested a couple and their older children. The children under six years of age were left behind in their home. No one dared to bring them even a crust of bread, which might have been considered a crime punishable by death. Christians opted to fall away from the law of love and from Christ, and the children died of hunger.

Christ teaches us to help, even when the circumstances put our lives at risk. I have known German Christians who helped Jews, and Jewish Christians

who later helped Germans when they were persecuted by the Soviets, even though the punishment for such acts of love was death.

Falling out of fellowship happens to those who believe that Jesus is out of reach and far above the fallen or backsliding sinner. But those who believe that Jesus has come down find the way back into fellowship with Him.

Once I shared a cell with two Uniate bishops. Under torture they had "confessed" to being spies, black marketeers, and collaborators with the prerevolutionary police. They "confessed" that they had denounced communists and had caused their arrest. Their tears never ceased. (It is said that until the end of the apostle Peter's days, he wept whenever a cock crowed.) The bishops constantly reproached themselves for their lack of heroism. They did not know how heroic their "confessions" were.

It was not the heroism of those who never give in, but the heroism of the fallen who know that though they are brought low, Christ went lower still, down to utter despair. They found the courage to acknowledge their sinfulness—something rare among church leaders.

In communist Romania, a Baptist pastor who was a promising teacher became an informant for the secret police. One piece of information that he passed on to police concerned a secret meeting I had with a French Christian in Romania. Everyone became suspicious of this pastor. The brethren shunned him. He had no peace in his heart: He knew what he was doing was wrong.

He was astonished to be invited to the Lausanne Conference on Evangelism. After all, he was widely known to be a communist agent. Once he arrived in Switzerland, he criticized the true Christians in Romania by calling them lawbreakers; but all the time he could not understand why pastors from the free world, who had no obligations to the secret police, did not contradict him.

In an attempt to ease his conscience, he confessed to a Western Christian

the MIDNIGHT BRIDE

publisher that he was working for the communist secret police. The publisher smelt a good story and offered him an advance on a book. He was disappointed. He had hoped that this fellow Christian would set him back on the right path.

In the end he had to return to Romania. He was determined to repent. Soon he broke off all relations with the police. They retaliated by staging a car "accident," in which he was killed. However, he had understood that Jesus has gone down, far below the depths, to which he had sunk. He died at peace with the Lord, thanks to the prayers, love and forgiveness of the underground church.

As the Holy Spirit brings sin to your attention, remember that our heavenly Bridegroom has gone down. He was tempted in every way yet without sin, yet He is still our High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses. He's waiting for us to find Him in the garden. Will you go?



How is your fellowship with Jesus? Is there something you have done, said, felt or thought that has caused you to flee in shame to the darkness of the valley? Jesus is there waiting to meet you. Will you look for Him there?



A Faithful Bridegroom

The bride says, "My beloved has gone to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine. He feeds his flock among the lilies" (6:2,3).

He who loves gardens and flowers has gone down into His garden to the bed of spices, which typify the various denominations. He picks lilies (spiritual believers) from them. They trust in Him, saying, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." The bride retained this trust even though for a time He forsook her. God, our Bridegroom, has sworn that He will be faithful. He will not lie to the disciples of David's son. When we know this to be true, we can do amazing things for Him.

Ion Cazacu was one of my best friends. During the Nazi occupation of Romania, he risked his life by "stealing" Jewish children from the ghettoes. The Jewish Christians in Iashi were in danger of death. More than 11,000 Jews had already been killed. The rest were not allowed to leave the city. Then a friendly official was persuaded at my request to issue arrest warrants for all

Hebrew Christians. As a result they were able to travel in comfortable train compartments as "prisoners," guarded by Cazacu, who was armed. Once they arrived safely in Bucharest, the order of arrest was torn up and the prisoners were brought to my house.

Cazacu and his wife were the only people who succeeded in entering heavily guarded prisons with carloads of food for the hungry Christians in detention there. That is the sort of life lived by men who know that Christ is always faithful.

In the country once called Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe), communist guerrillas killed forty Catholic, Pentecostal and Salvation Army missionaries, along with their families. The victims, including a three-week-old baby, were beaten to death with hammers, bayonets and axes. Mrs. Pickering, the mother of one of the dead, said: "We have prayed that God may forgive our enemies. There is no bitterness in our hearts."

Tremendous things have happened in Poland at the hands of those Jesus has fed among the lilies. For the first time in world history, a strike of 600,000 workers who brandished the "weapons" of prayer, Christian hymns and communion was organized. They occupied the factories, but there were no violent words or deeds. The leaders were motivated by a Christian spirit. Their chief demands were full religious liberty, the church's right to publish and to broadcast on television and radio. The striking workers made it possible for the anticommunist Cardinal Wyszinsky to preach on television after being prohibited for thirty years.

A new phase of world history was opened by the Polish strike leader, a Christian named Lech Walesa. A man whose power came from God's peace, he risked his life and liberty. He did not remain an obscure private soldier in the Christian struggle. He realized officers and generals were needed. He developed the necessary spiritual qualities, and God promoted him to a high rank.

Jesus is the only shepherd who feeds His flock in gardens among lilies. That is something no other shepherd would do! But we expect the unusual from Him.

As His bride, when the church embraces Him as faithful and true to His Word, we will fulfill the words of Jesus: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father" (John 14:12).



How about you? Do you believe God is faithful? Why or why not? Is there something God is calling you to do that requires total and complete trust that He is faithful?

Day Sixty-nine

Beautiful as Tirzah

The Bridegroom says: "O my love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners! Turn your eyes away from me, for they have overcome me. Your hair is like a flock of goats going down from Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep which have come up from the washing; every one bears twins, and none is barren among them. Like a piece of pomegranate are your temples behind your veil" (6:4-7).

The Bridegroom compares His bride with the capitals of the two Jewish kingdoms: Tirzah, meaning "the pleasant" in Hebrew, was the capital of Israel until Omri built Samaria; and Jerusalem was the capital of Judah. Faithful souls sometimes sadly ask themselves, "Do I deserve to inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem?" What a senseless question! In the eyes of the Bridegroom, we are as pleasant and beautiful as Jerusalem. Therefore, naturally, that is where we should be.

The beauty of the bride makes her "awesome as an army with banners," under which it advances to victory. The image of the army shows that His "bride" is not one individual but the whole church. The church is "awesome" through her irresistible beauty and advances victoriously toward Him. The Bridegroom pleads with the church, "Turn away your eyes from me, for they have overcome me." God declares Himself defeated. We defeat Him with our doves' eyes.

In Exodus 32, God decided to destroy Israel after it had sinned by making a golden calf; but Moses appealed to God, reminding Him of His promise to Israel: to make it a great nation. Moses also said, "Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'?" (Exodus 32:13). Then God changed His mind. Every spiritual believer can do the same. However, it's important to note that God hadn't forgotten His promise for Israel. He longed for Moses to plead on their behalf, to fight for Israel and for what God had promised. This was beautiful to God.

Such can be our victory in prayer through one loving look. Christians are called "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37). They are the conquerors through Him who has overcome all.

When the apostles watched Jesus ascend into heaven, two angels came and asked them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?" (Acts 1:10,11). If they had continued looking, perhaps Jesus would have been unable to separate Himself from the earth. He could not have ascended. Their eyes would have impressed Him so much that they would have persuaded Him to fulfill their longing to remain with them.

The eyes of Christians need not be physically beautiful, in order to impress the Bridegroom. A Christian who has undergone torture is not a pretty sight. A former Romanian prisoner named R. Radina described his experiences in jail:

Religious poems were being recited when, all at once, a man with his head red with blood entered the cell. Maddened with pain, he could not speak, but only howled like an animal. The prison director had beaten his face with a stone.

An imprisoned Christian child, Mihica, was beaten with a stick on his head and on his lame leg. His crime was that he had shared his bread with other sufferers. He had considered a slice of bread too sumptuous a meal to eat all by himself.

Radina also told the story of the Romanian Uniate priest Onofrei Pompei. He was abused and hanged in the loft of his house. When the assassins departed, the rope broke and the priest regained consciousness. God can save a person, even when it seems that all hope is gone. After that experience, Onofrei spent years in communist prisons. Radina says of him: "His expression radiated a strange light. He seemed a true saint." This is the look that conquers even God.

The prayers of martyrs are not rejected. Pure souls whose eyes are swollen, ringed with dark circles, bleeding, lift up a loving look to the Bridegroom. He has suffered for us as the Son of God, for whom goodness and love are the norm. These souls, though sinners, have loved Him. Having to conquer their own nature in order to be able to love at all, they are unconquerable when they look at Him in adoration.

The Bridegroom's words, "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep.... Like a piece of pomegranate are your temples behind your veil," are an almost verbatim repetition of the compliment in chapter four. Before she refused to open the door to Him, He praised her. Now He pays her the same compliment to

show that His love for her is the same as before her fall. Even if His people are full of weakness, Jesus loves them. In the eyes of the King, the bride is as beautiful after her fall as she was on the day she was first presented to Him. His love knows no alteration.



Even in your darkness and despair, God longs for you to look at Him. What's holding you back from gazing at Him?

Day Seventy

His Harem

The Bridegroom says, "There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her. The daughters saw her and called her blessed, the queens and the concubines, and they praised her" (6:8,9).

Toward the end of his life, Solomon had some seven hundred princesses as wives and three hundred concubines. When he wrote the Song of Songs, he had fewer.

In a spiritual sense, these words show us that the souls of believers are God's, that Christian churches are His. But we are not all equally loved. There is one holy and apostolic church, and it is made up of Christ's followers. This church is one, just as Noah's Ark in the period of the flood was one (1 Corinthians 12:12). Only one is His dove, His undefiled, "the only one of her mother" — His bride and His "queen."

Jesus longs for everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). He is especially drawn to this choice dove — members of His body. Jesus longs for souls who

belong to His Body with all their hearts. That does not mean, however, that those who are not physical members of a church are either excluded from the kingdom of God, or cannot be Jesus' sheep. God is more concerned about our names being in His Book of Life, not on the church membership roster.

Jesus has His "queens" in every denomination. I had been in prison eight years when one day a group of Orthodox priests was arrested. It was their very first day of the ordeal. It was winter, and we sat on the bare concrete. From time to time, drunken guards would bawl, "All priests out!" The priests were taken from the cells and severely beaten. I had known one of them for many years and asked him, "Brother, are you grieved?" He answered, "I know only of one grief, that of not being a saint." In such circumstances, the words vividly showed the beauty of that soul and made a lasting impression on me.

Seventh-Day Adventists courageously stood up for their faith in communist Russia. Anatolii Miller, Boris Karpenko, Kovaltchuk and Galetskii are names of some of the Adventists who were jailed for Christ's sake. Communists took a child named Michael Kozak away from his parents because they taught him the Adventist faith. He was interned in an atheistic boarding school. When he insisted on going back to his parents, he was put in a psychiatric asylum to be "healed" of his desire. In spite of such things, the Adventists remained faithful to their Savior.

In Cernanti, in the former Soviet Union, the Sedletztzy family received the sealed coffin of their son who had refused to give up his faith while serving in the army. The officers demanded an immediate burial, but the family opened the coffin. They found the youth's face distorted from beatings, his eyes gouged out, tongue torn out and fingers cut off. He was a Baptist, faithful unto death.

In communist Romania, it seemed that Saint Basil the Great was alive again, because his words were on the lips of saints under interrogation. When a pastor was threatened with deportation, his reply was: "Where can you exile me? I will be in my Father's world wherever you send me."

When police threatened to confiscate his property, he replied: "That's all right by me, but you will need a very long ladder. I have gathered my treasures in heaven."

"We will kill you!"

"We Christians do not fear death. It means passing over to a better life."

"You are fools. We will not kill you but keep you all in a prison cell behind locked doors and iron bars. We will not allow anyone to visit you."

"We have a friend who can pass through locked doors and iron bars. We cannot be separated from the love of Christ."

Christians are those who have promised faithfulness to God unto death. God keeps His promise. He never breaks it. Neither should we.

Jesus has many "queens" in every denomination, but he also has concubines. Concubines are girls or women who are not legally married to men. In communist countries, official churches that have compromised with the government. They are "anti-churches." Some of their pastors or bishops are real believers, but they are believers who waver between two masters — Christ and communism. They serve communism but stealthily slip away from it to say words of love to Christ. When Jesus was on earth, He, too, had His secret believers. There were secret believers in Christ among members of the Communist Party in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and even among the officers of the communist secret police. There are some today in communist countries like China. However, they do not want to lose their livings and their positions. What they are doing is wrong, but Jesus accepts them as His concubines.

May we be undefiled brides of Christ, faithful only to the One who can be nothing else, for He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13)!



How would you describe your commitment to Christ? Focused or divided? Identify those areas of the heart that are distracting you (fear, unbelief, anger) and causing you to seek out others in Christ's place. Read Hosea 2:14-23 and listen to God's words of commitment to Israel. Find a picture or object that is symbolic of marriage (ring, cake, dove, dress). Place it where you will see it to remind you of God's perfect and unbroken commitment to you.

Day Seventy-one

The Church's Glory

The Bridegroom says: "Who is she who looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?"

The bride says: "I went down to the garden of nuts to see the verdure of the valley, to see whether the vine had budded and the pomegranates had bloomed. Before I was even aware, my soul had made me as the chariots of my noble people" (6:10-12).

The description of the church in verse 10 is similar to that in Revelation 12:1: "A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars." It is written in the *Zohar*:

Israel's light will come little by little, until they will become strong. God will illumine them forever. All then will ask, "Who is she that looks forth like the dawn," this being a reference to the first tiny streak of the dawn; then "Fair as the moon," the light of the moon being stronger than that of the dawn, and then "clear as the sun," that

is a still stronger light; and finally "terrible as an army with banners," expressive of the light in its full strength.

For, just as when the dawn emerges from darkness its light at first is faint, but gradually brightens until full daylight is reached, so when God bestirs Himself to shine upon the Community of Israel, He will first shed on them a streak of light like that of the daybreak which is still black, then increase it to make it "fair as the moon," then "clear as the sun," until it will be "tremendous as an army with banners."

The persecuted church "looks forth as the morning" and is "fair as the moon, clear as the sun" (6:10). The Orthodox monk Michael Ershov was in jail for forty-five years. While in prison he had healed many possessed, lame and blind people. What reason did he have for complaining or grumbling against Christianity? Instead of doing so, he used his time in prison to do good.

Kiwanukas of Uganda died in 1977. Together with fourteen other Christians, he was murdered by a hammer-blow to the head. His head was then cut off and taken to President Amin's house. His body was thrown into a lake.

Amin asked Bishop Luwumba whether he had any weapons. The bishop showed him the Bible. Amin shot him first in the mouth then in the chest. This murderer of Christians drank his blood and ate a piece of the victim's flesh. His advisers assisted him.

Despite such sufferings, the bride of Christ continued to spread the knowledge of His beauty in dark Uganda. In truth she looks forth as the morning and is fair as the moon, clear as the sun.

The bride says, "I went down to the garden of nuts," where she learned something important. A believing soul is like a nut. It might be dirty and muddy outwardly, but the dirt never reaches the kernel. It is the same with the Christian when he is polluted by living in this world.

A Catholic seminarian named Ion Budu died near me in a communist

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prison. His greatest wish was to serve as a missionary in India or Japan. His last words to those with him were: "If any of you ever go to Asia, tell the people there that I love them. May I die serving them through my longing for them, so that my death will be a sacrifice on their behalf." I was the only survivor of that prison ward of dying men. When I went to Asia, the people were deeply moved as I told them how a prisoner who had died a martyr's death had loved them for Christ's sake. His soul was unpolluted in a communist prison.

Because the bride has humbled herself and gone down, she is taken up in "the chariots of my noble people" or "the chariots of Amminadib," as the King James Version says. Some commentators believe Amminadib to have been the name of one of Solomon's celebrated chariot drivers. The speed of his driving would be symbolic of the swift response of the Savior to the call of love. But the old Jewish interpreters divided the word thus: Ammi-nadib. This means, "the chariots of my willing, or princely, people." Matthew Henry wrote of this passage:

Christ's people are, and ought to be, a willing people. If they continue seeking Christ and longing after him, even when he seems to withdraw from them, he will graciously return to them in due time, perhaps sooner than they think and with a pleasing surprise. No chariots sent for Christ shall return empty. All Christ's gracious returns to his people take rise from himself. It is not they, it is his own soul, that puts him into the chariots of his people; for he is gracious because he will be gracious, and loves his Israel because he would love them; not for their sakes, be it known to them.... Let her not despair of obtaining as much comfort as ever she had before this distance happened, but take the comfort of the return of her

beloved.8

The bride shines intensely because she follows Jesus' example. He has gone down (6:2). The bride has also gone down. Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Make haste and come down" (Luke 19:5). Whoever belongs to Jesus must humble himself. Let us willingly and humbly put ourselves into such a chariot. The swiftness of Christ's grace will not fail us, no matter what our circumstances.



Are you facing circumstances that require an added measure of grace so you can both endure and thrive? Write about them, while asking God to use these circumstances to share the gospel.

 $^{^8}$ Henry, Matthew. "Commentary on Song of Solomon 6." "Matthew Henry Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible." http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/MatthewHenryComplete/mhc-com.cgi?book=so&chapter=006. 1706.

Day Seventy-two

The World Calls

The daughters of Jerusalem: "Return, return, O Shulamite [bride]; return, return, that we may look upon you! 9

The Bridegroom, "What would you see in the Shulamite — as it were, the dance of the two camps?" (6:13).

Seeing her thus glorified, the other girls call out to her what for centuries the world has been shouting to those who sit near Jesus in the chariot of trials: "Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return!" The world is very demanding. It wants to draw us back down to its level.

At a jail in a communist country, young officers would take girls out of their cells and take them to restaurants. The girls, who had had no fresh air in cells crammed with a hundred other unwashed people, were offered ice cream and the cozy surroundings of a cinema where they were shown erotic films. Most believers refused. One girl accepted. The communists had been nice to

⁹ Some Bible versions have different notations regarding who is speaking here.

her, so she had to be nice in return. The voice had been too insidious: "Return, O Shulamite. Love me. You probably do not know the blessedness of the love of a man. I'll reveal it to you. My kisses will warm you." She did not answer, "I belong to God," as she should have done.

When she was freed, she accepted an invitation to speak to her fellow inmates and attack the faith. As she spoke against Jehovah, tears rolled down her face. She had returned to the world, while the others — the true brides — had remained steadfast.

For the first time, we discover the name of the bride — "Shulamite." The Shulamite is the same person as the Shunamite. The bride's name is a reference to Abishag the Shunamite, one of David's concubines.

In Hebrew the word "shulamite" means "peacemaker," or "peaceable." It is a name like Solomon, which means "peace." The bride is a female Solomon. Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), and the church is the princess of peace, the Shulamite. Those who look at her can only think she is beautiful.

The Russian believer Ghenadii Shimanov is an example of a beautiful soul who refused to respond to the call of the world. Because he was an active believer who sought to win souls for Christ, he was put into a psychiatric asylum. There, Dr. Shafran argued with him: "Why won't you abandon your way of life, and hold on to your life, your freedom, and the happiness of your family? You could also keep the core of your faith intact. All you have to do is to give up propagating it. It only brings you sorrow. The odds are against you. You have the whole State opposed to you. In this sort of situation, every fight becomes an act of suicide. And what does your religion say about suicide? It forbids it.

"One of my neighbors is a priest. We live in the same house. He is high in the Moscow patriarchy, an educated, intelligent man. One day he said to me, 'Religion and life are two completely separate things that shouldn't be allowed to mix.' A highly intelligent man! He can help you to reach decisions of which you are not capable on your own. Or do you prefer the martyr's crown?"

Shimanov refused to abandon his Christian activities and return to the world. He remained in the asylum. He had to endure gagging and straight-jackets, but he looked forth as the morning. He was fair as the moon, clear as the sun.

The end of verse 13 would be better translated, "two companies of mahanaim," a category of angels specializing in sacred dancing. When God the King entered into His sanctuary, "The singers went before, the players on instruments followed after; among them were the maidens playing timbrels" (Psalm 68:24,25). So it happens when the Shulamite meets her Bridegroom. In Genesis 32, it is written: "So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, 'This is God's camp.' And he called the name of that place Mahanaim" (verses 1,2).

The world will not stop calling out to Christ's followers, trying to lure them away. Our Bridegroom longs to show His grace to us as we take that step into those chariots of trials with a willing and humble spirit.



What people or situations are trying to pull you back into the world? What is it about them that is so enticing? What will happen if you listen and act on them? And if you do not? Read the account of Jesus being tempted in the desert in Luke 4:1-13. Think about the way Jesus refuted Satan's attempts to entice Him. What truths can you cling to as you face your own temptations?



Chapter 7



Day Seventy-three

The Holy Dance

The Bridegroom says: "How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O prince's daughter! The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a skillful workman. Your navel is a rounded goblet; it lacks no blended beverage. Your waist is a heap of wheat set about with lilies" (7:1,2).

Here the bride is described as a dancer. People have danced to the glory of God. After the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, the women "went out after [Miriam the prophetess] with timbrels and with dances" (Exodus 15:20). When David returned from his victory over Goliath, "women had come out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy, and with musical instruments" (1 Samuel 18:6). David danced mightily before God (2 Samuel 6:14). Ecclesiastes says there is a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3:4). Jephthah's daughter came to meet him with timbrels and dances (Judges 11:34). Jeremiah prophesied that girls would rejoice with dancing when Jacob was ransomed (Jeremiah 31:13). When the prodigal son returned to his father, there was music and dancing (Luke 15:23-25).

The Shulamite also dances. She dances gracefully like a true princess. Her beauty is again described to us but with different imagery, because not one earthly analogy is adequate to portray all the splendor of a faithful soul.

At this stage of her spiritual growth, the description of the bride reveals her as more beautiful than she was immediately after the wedding. The sinner who repents is more beautiful in God's eyes than the righteous person; therefore, the angels find greater joy in looking upon such a person (Luke 15:7).

Reading these verses, one realizes that the Bridegroom cannot find enough words to show His love to the bride who returns to Him. He borrows images of oriental sensuality and gives such free rein to His imagination that the translator is tempted to water down the vividness of the original. Solomon uses language that no one in the West would dare use, with the exception of describing a woman totally abandoning herself, without reservation. It is the language that Solomon used to speak of the dancers in his harem. The Bridegroom praises even the most intimate charms of His bride. He praises her beauties, and she praises His. He honors us, and we honor Him.

His first words of praise are, "How beautiful are your feet in sandals." She has shod her feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15). Hers are the shoes of messengers bringing good news, telling of peace and salvation (Romans 10:15).

"The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a skill-ful workman." The apostle Paul says that the Body of Christ — the church — gets its nourishment by the joints (Colossians 2:19). This is an image of those pastors who lead their flocks well and teach them. Such pastors are jewels in the eyes of God.

The bride dances before the Bridegroom. Fascinated by her dance and her body, he exclaims: "Your navel is a rounded goblet; it lacks no blended beverage. Your waist is a heap of wheat set about with lilies." The belly is the organ

from which food is distributed to the whole body.

There are not enough words to describe the beauty of the bride of Christ under persecution. In Guinea, Africa, under the dictator Sekou Toure, Cardinal Tchidimbo and other Christians were kept for up to eight days in tropical heat without food or water in cells full of rats, lice and insects. The cables that bound them cut into their flesh. They were flogged and called "Christian dirt." Three hundred prisoners were locked in a single unventilated room where they suffocated.

Others were given electric shocks while their hands were tied to iron bars placed so high that only the tips of their toes reached the floor. For days the full weight of their bodies was taken by their tied hands.

Some were forced to kneel on sharp stones. Their skin was flayed, and pepper was poured on their open wounds. Hot pepper was injected into the rectum — a torture that produces unspeakable pain. All the time they were told, "If you denounce others, we will give you water."

Some died. They did not become Judases. The Cardinal survived. After his release, he wrote a splendid book about how suffering purified him and made him love the Bridegroom more.

Amidst our suffering, let us honor God by dancing before Him with hearts full of humility, words of praise and acts of kindness!



Do you believe God beholds you with such delight and beauty? Does knowing this make your heart dance before Him? Why or why not? Spend time journaling your responses to God, taking special care to be honest before Him.

Day Seventy-four

The Captive King

The Bridegroom says: "Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. Your neck is like an ivory tower, your eyes like the pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon which looks toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel, and the hair of your head is like purple; a king is held captive by your tresses" (7:3-5).

Her two breasts are like "two fawns, twins of a gazelle." This means that both Old and New Testaments are a delight to her.

Her neck is like "an ivory tower." Uniting the head and the body, the neck is a symbol of faith. This means that her faith cannot be strangled.

The secret police had come to search the house of Antonii, the Orthodox bishop of Arkhangelsk in communist Russia. Finding the vessel used for Holy Communion, they threw it on the floor and trampled on it. The bishop threw himself across it, trying to protect it with his body. He lost consciousness. When he awoke, he was in jail.

They asked his opinion about the future of the Russian church and wanted to know if he desired the overthrow of the Soviets. He answered that the church would be glorified through the suffering of its martyrs, as it was in the first centuries, and that he prayed daily that the Soviet government would not shed blood and would be forgiven for its sins.

He was first threatened with death then promised freedom if he became an informer for the police. The bishop was not frightened and could not be bought. He was put in a small cell together with five others. They endured bitter cold and received only two glasses of water a day — nothing else. They could not wash or change their clothes and lived in their own stench. They lost their teeth. The bishop became so weak that he could not clean the invading bugs and lice out of his beard. When he felt death was near, he chanted his own funeral service. He died with prayers on his lips. He was an authentic bride of Christ. His faith could not be strangled.

Her nose is like the tower of Lebanon — one of the towers built by David in the north of Palestine to serve as an observation post against the Syrians.

Believers must have a keen sense of smell, discerning the spirits. As from the tower of Lebanon one could see enemy armies from afar, so the bride smells heresy far off.

Our intellect prefers to see the similarities between doctrines rather than the differences between them. Consequently, it gives vague information. We need a nose like the bride's, capable of discerning the spirits. Pastors in the underground church need such a nose to discover communist infiltrators.

The tower looks toward Damascus, the capital of Syria, always Israel's enemy. To her enemies she is "awesome as an army with banners" (6:4).

Her head is "like Mount Carmel," a hill full of rich vegetation. She has a beautiful abundance of red hair. The Nazirites were a kind of monk living at that time. No razor ever passed over their heads. It was believed that the secret

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of their power lay in their hair. The bride's power of attraction also resides in the richness of her hair.

One of the strangest verses in the Song of Solomon follows the praise of the bride: "The king is held captive by your tresses." The Hebrew word translated as "held" is asar, which also means "imprisoned with chains and fetters." The word rahat, which the King James Version here renders as "gallery" is in Genesis 30 translated as "gutters."

The explanation of the verse is simple: The King has found His bride in the world's gutter. Publicans, crooks, loose women, murderers, those of us with more "respectable" sins, are all lost. When we are converted, He admires the beauties of our souls, described in detail in the preceding verses. His love for His bride binds Him to her as if with fetters.



Read the account of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil in Luke 7:36-50. Imagine yourself among the invited guests. As you watch this woman enter the room, fall at Jesus' feet, and then listen to Simon's words, would you find yourself agreeing with Simon or with Jesus? Even though you may know the Christ-like response, would that be your heart's first response?



Day Seventy-five

Jesus Admires His Bride

The Bridegroom says: "How fair and how pleasant you are, O love, with your delights! This stature of yours is like a palm tree, and your breasts like its clusters. I said, 'I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches.' Let now your breasts be like clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and the roof of your mouth like the best wine."

The bride says, "The wine goes down smoothly for my beloved, moving gently the lips of sleepers. I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me" (7:6-10).

There is nothing more delightful than love that bears all things, believes all things and hopes and endures all; love that is extended to enemies and beyond the grave; love that gives its life for the beloved. Love is the wisest thing. That is why the Syriac translation calls this book, "The Wisdom of the Wise."

Jesus speaks to the bride in the language of admiration, which must not surprise us. Faithfulness is a part of Jesus' nature. It is natural for Him to be faithful (2 Timothy 2:13). Faithfulness is also practiced by many downtrod-

den, mistreated men of this earth who do not understand why they suffer, yet they still maintain their faithful, pure love for God. That is something God admires.

I knew a railway worker who was a Christian. His only daughter, whom he loved very much, died when she was fourteen. She was drowned head-down in a ditch full of sewage. The man did not torment himself with doubts but continued in his love for God while preparing to suffer imprisonment for His sake. God made our souls pleasant and beautiful, and He admires us as an artist admires his work.

The stature of the bride is like that of a palm tree — straight, powerful, high and gracious. The palm tree was an emblem of Israel. A medal was struck for the Roman Emperor Titus, who destroyed the Jewish state. It bore the figure of a grieving woman seated beneath a palm tree. The inscription read, *Judaea capta*, meaning "Judaea is taken." She might be a captive, but Israel was still a palm tree, standing erect, refusing to bow to heathen idolatry.

The Bridegroom says to Himself, "I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches." He is expressing His desire to be strongly united with the believing soul. Let us take heed of the words "I will go up." Jesus said there are some who will do greater works than His (John 14:12). He ascends to those disciples, revealing Himself to them (John 14:21). He will grasp the boughs of these palm trees. When He does, it will be seen whether or not they are strong and resilient. A palm tree that He embraces becomes sanctified.

Not only in Solomon's temple, but also in Ezekiel's ideal temple were figures of palm trees as well as cherubim. The use of the palm tree as a symbol for a bride is emphasized by the Hebrew text in these passages since the word used for "palm tree" is not the usual *tamar*, but its female form, *timmorah*.

The bride's breasts are "like clusters of the vine." Just as grapes refresh man, so Jesus is refreshed by our fruitfulness, by our work for Him. One char-

acteristic of love is taking pleasure in anticipating its joys beforehand. So Jesus exults beforehand in the joy that He will receive from faithful souls.

In the former Soviet republic of Moldavia, there were only two Catholic churches. One of them, in Sloboda-Rashkovo, was bulldozed to the ground by the police.

Weeping, the Catholics lifted the church's communion wafers from the mud and ate them with reverence. Walls were torn down, but the Christians' reverence for God had increased. The police destroyed the physical building, yet the church became more beautiful than it was before. Jesus "goes up" toward such believers.

In the former Soviet Union, police frequently raided Baptist underground church meetings, confiscating Bibles, hymnbooks and the purses of some of believers. They kicked Christians in the stomach and chest. While the believers were being beaten, they usually prayed and sang. Such music has a spiritual beauty of its own. To these believers, Jesus says, "How fair and how pleasant you are, O love, with your delights!" These are the Christians likened by Him to palm trees, to whom He goes up.

The communists do not know the words of Gregory of Palama: "The Christian's life is outside, beyond and higher than its physical self," or the words of Martin Luther, "Truth becomes more triumphant when attacked, more glorious when oppressed."

May the branches of our palm tree strengthen in the winds of adversity and opposition as we stand for the Truth!



What circumstances have shaken the boughs of your faith? Ask God to strengthen them, so He may grab hold of them for His purposes.

Day Seventy-six

The Bride's Invitation

The bride says: "Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine has budded, whether the grape blossoms are open, and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love" (7:11,12).

And its desire is for you" (Genesis 4:7). In Psalm 45, it is written, "Listen, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your own people also, and your father's house; so the King will greatly desire your beauty; because He is your Lord, worship Him" (verses 10,11). Two powers — sin and the King — compete for our love and affection.

She who has chosen Jesus, the King, will demonstrate how greatly she desires Him. She says, "Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages." Faithful souls hate towns full of sin and noise. Serving the Lord is difficult if things continually distract you. Isaac went out into the field

to meditate quietly (Genesis 24:63). Jesus advises us, "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place" (Matthew 6:6). The bride does not seek amusement in noisy places. She desires solitude. She doesn't want Jesus to judge the church with the same judgment that will be meted out to the spoiled residents of the town. Jesus will see the reality of her faith in a quiet, rural environment. In company with Him, she will go early to the vineyard to see if the vines are flourishing and if the tender grapes have appeared. There they will examine souls, to see whether they have grown in grace and truthfulness.

Wang Min-Dao, a hero of the faith in China, broke under torture and acknowledged before a large crowd: "I am an anti-revolutionary criminal. I am grateful to the government for pardoning me and saving me from the depths of my sins." Later he repented. He went to the police station with his wife and said: "I am a Judas. I have betrayed my Lord. Imprison me." He sat in jail for more than twenty years. He was later released and continued his involvement with the house-church movement until he died in 1991.

If the Bridegroom and the bride go up to the "vineyards" in communist China, they will find the vine has flourished, and the tender grape has appeared.

Under communism in the city of Omsk, Russia, a Baptist church was celebrating Easter. Its members had gathered at the home of Sister Helen Siusa. Thirty policemen who were mostly drunk rushed in and attacked the believers, ruthlessly beating up everyone, including women, children and the elderly.

When the police tried to arrest the preachers who had already been in prison, the children cried, "We will not give up our fathers!" Their tears were heartrending, but the police did not think so. They kicked them with their boots and shouted: "You are enemies of the people! You should have no work and no food! There is no law to protect you!"

The Christians, however, were unafraid. That same afternoon they held their worship service again in the same house.

A Russian Pentecostal believer named Vashtshenko was imprisoned twice. His four sons carried on his work. One of them, Hariton, became a Pentecostal bishop whose children were asked to deny Christ in school. They refused, so they were taken away from their parents and placed in an atheistic boarding school. Their mother was forbidden to visit them. This is what they wrote to their parents: "We weep at night. The boys beat us. But do not worry, Papa and Mama, for God is our protection. We weep because we are not allowed to come home."

Their daughter, Valia, refused to eat without saying grace. She was mocked but continued to thank God for her food with the other Christian children. She wrote: "The director shouts at us, and this is good; the bigger our sorrow, the nearer we are to God. By God's will I shall remain a believer. I do not want to learn anything in this atheistic school."

An Orthodox priest named Talantov and his son were killed by the communists. His other son, Boris, continued to witness openly for Christ. For this, he was also sent to prison where he died.

The Baptist preacher Peter Vins died in prison for his faith. His wife was also in prison for three years. Their son George, General Secretary of the Baptist Union of the USSR, also went to jail.

Christians in communist and other restricted countries bear rich fruit for God. The bride can quietly call the heavenly Bridegroom to get up early to go with her to the vineyard. Together they will see the vine flourish and the tender grapes appear.



Is Jesus tugging at your heart, longing to take you to a place of solitude? In the next few days, set aside time to get alone with Him. Select a small portion of Scripture from the Psalms or one of Paul's Epistles and meditate on it, asking Him to speak to you through it. Journal about what you hear Him say through His Word.

Day Seventy-seven

A Pleasant Perfume

The bride says, "The mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our gates are pleasant fruits, all manner, new and old, which I have laid up for you, my beloved" (7:13).

The precise identification of the mandrake is unknown. It could be the cantaloupe. This has a pleasant perfume, which typifies the perfume spread in this world by believers, especially by young believers who grew up in a family of the faithful and have not known the life of sin.

In antiquity, the fruit and roots of the mandrake were thought to have aphrodisiac qualities. Leah gave mandrake to Rachel. The fragrance we spread in the world stimulates the faculty of love in others.

In China, where Christians have been fiercely persecuted, someone wrote on a wall, "God loves every man." The next day he found more writing below: "even the communists." These words were probably written by a Red Guard who had found assurance that God loved him, too. The light had passed quickly from one soul to another.

Unlike the evil workers in the vineyard who have withheld their harvest

from the master, the bride has laid up fruits at the gate. He is not greedy. He is not in a hurry to collect them. He allows them to mature.

We know how to keep the fruits that were not picked by the Master, just as women know how to preserve fruit. The bride has kept new and old fruit for her Master. Jesus said, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old" (Matthew 13:52).



Think about all the things God has done in and through your life. Think about everything He has given you. Thank Him for all He has done and all He has given you. This week ask Him for opportunities to use these gifts to bless others.

Chapter 8



Day Seventy-eight

If You Were My Brother

The bride says: "Oh, that you were like my brother, who nursed at my mother's breasts! If I should find you outside, I would kiss you; I would not be despised. I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, she who used to instruct me. I would cause you to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases."

A Relative: "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?"

The bride says: "I awakened you under the apple tree. There your mother brought you forth; there she who bore you brought you forth" (8:1-5).

The most intimate of relationships with Jesus cannot be expressed in public. Before the world, we may only have the relationship between brother

and sister, in which kisses are considered respectable.

The bride is modest. She knows how far she is from what a wife should be. She still has to learn. So, she says that if she should find Him, she would lead Him into her mother's house, the church.

What daring words she uses! We are accustomed to think He leads us as king, shepherd and teacher. But we can also lead Him — by prevailing love and prevailing prayer. In fact, a contest is taking place. He wishes to lead us to the mansions He has prepared for us in His Father's house: We insist on first taking Him to the house of our mother where the bride will learn to give Him spiced wine, the juice of her pomegranate. The mother, the church, has long experience in the kind of adoration that pleases Him. We all can learn from her.

The bride's friends ask, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?" First it was the Jewish people. Now, it is the church—every soul that places his or her trust in Jesus Christ. Every "coming out" of the wilderness is a "coming up."

The wilderness is exhausting. You cannot come out of it in your own strength but only by leaning upon the Beloved. The literal translation is, "her arm under his arm-pit," an expression showing great familiarity.

The persecuted church leans heavily on Jesus through the wilderness of governments hostile to Christ, especially when they confront government officials.

In what was called the Soviet Union, more than a hundred people gathered in a single room at the house of Brother Kozorezov when he returned from prison. He preached to them from Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Flowers were presented to him.

A tape of this meeting was sent to us. On it, police was heard shouting:

"Finish! Disperse! To hell with you!"

Kozorezov was heard answering, "We preach the love of Christ."

A police officer said: "What do I care? It's forbidden here. Disperse while we're still speaking politely to you."

Kozorezov replied: "We are servants of love. Whence comes the evil?"

The police officer retorted: "I know nothing of that. I want no sermons. You are not allowed to gather here."

As the tape finished, the choir began to sing.

The bride says, "I awakened you under the apple tree." We believers raise up the Savior through our prayer. The disciples woke Him up during a storm: "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" (Matthew 8:25). This is also the frequent prayer of the Psalmist: "Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God!" (Psalm 3:7).



In which areas of your life do you need Jesus? Your home? Your work environment? Your attitude toward others? Imagine yourself walking with Jesus into these areas. What would you ask Him to be and do in them?

Day Seventy-nine

His Seal

The bride says to the Bridegroom, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm" (8:6).

She prays she might keep His love. In the Far East, men sometimes wear jewels on their breast or arm engraved with the portrait or name of their bride. She wants the Beloved to have such a jewel. She would like to be a seal on His heart, so that nothing else might enter. The soul wants to know for certain that it will remain in God's love.

The bride's prayer has been fulfilled. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus said on the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). In Greek, the word is rendered *teleo*. In the New Testament, all Jesus' words are translated, for he spoke in Aramaic. The word He must have actually used is *kalah*, which has two meanings. One is, "It has been accomplished," or "finished." The other is, "bride." It is possible that His very last word before death was a loving sigh for His bride.

Of some souls God has said, "I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16, NIV). As the Lord said to Zerubbabel, He says to a believer who has reached this spiritual state, "I will take you, Zerubbabel My

servant, the son of Shealtiel and will make you like a signet ring [a seal]; for I have chosen you" (Haggai 2:23). But before this is fulfilled, God told him terrible things would happen: "I will shake heaven and earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots and those who ride in them; the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother..." (Haggai 2:21,22).

Sometimes we pray foolishly. We are like doctors who want to destroy tuberculosis but object to destroying the microbes causing it. We want the kingdom of God — where we will know in perfection what it is like to be near the Beloved — but as long as something signals the destruction of Satan's kingdom, we make intercession: "Don't let anything be destroyed!" The churches storm heaven with their misguided prayers.

That is what I alluded to when I compared the desire of the Bridegroom (who wants to lead us into His Father's mansions) to that of the bride (who wants to lead Him to her mother's house). We will understand we are a seal on His heart only when our hearts and prayers quiet down to: "Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done..." (Matthew 6:9,10).

Oleg Berdyuk, a Ukrainian writer who was in jail, described how he came to faith in Christ. He was a child when an artificial famine engineered by the communists killed six million Ukrainians. He went to visit a relative, but she had starved to death. In an open Bible on her table, he read Magdalene's words: "'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.' Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, 'Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away'" (John 20:13-15).

That impressed him, but the church disgusted him. Once he heard a priest chanting in the sanctuary, "God, grant a long life to Stalin, God's chosen one, devout Christian and leader." That was how religious stooges referred to the murderer of millions of innocents. This made him vulnerable to respond to the call of the world: "Return, O Shulamite." He became an atheist, but then he dreamed two dreams. In one he saw Christ with an incredible weight on His shoulders, blood streaming down His body, His eyes sorrowful yet hopeful. In another dream, Christ was wearing a crown of thorns and showed him raging torrents, high mountains and cliffs and said, "Follow the path." He asked, "Why?" Christ only replied, "Go."

Then one day he seemed to feel the presence of Christ while he was awake. It was not a thought about Christ. It was Christ Himself. Oleg knelt and said the only words that hallow God: "I accept all that fate brings." These words are similar to those of the virgin Mary: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Even when you have arrived at this place, vigilance is necessary, not striving (Psalm 46:10). Being assured of God's favor can only be maintained in a state of patience, goodness and righteousness.



Read the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, meditating on each phrase. Write down any thoughts or further Scriptures that come to mind during this time.



Love Is Like Death

The bride says to the Bridegroom, "For love is as strong as death" (8:6).

Death and love have many common features. Nothing can resist death or avoid it. In the end, everything must come under the law of death. So it is with love. Those assailed by death must die. Likewise, those assailed by love must love. Death makes man understand that there are limits to human power.

I cannot resist sharing a joke in this context. A pastor was once delivering a thundering sermon about sin and hell. "One thing is certain!" he said. "Every man, woman and child in this parish will die one day. There is no escape!"

A boy in the front seat began to laugh.

"Every person in the parish will die one day!" the pastor reiterated.

The boy continued to laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded the pastor angrily.

"I'm not from this parish!" said the boy.

Using energy to struggle against death is pointless. It can be postponed for a time but not escaped. The same is true with love. You cannot decide

with whom you will fall in love. There are two people destined for each other: When they meet, the barriers fall. Because of love, Edward VIII of Britain gave up his throne to an empire for a divorced woman. The bride elect can do no other than love Jesus ardently. He can do no other than love her.

At first glance it seems strange that the bride did not have more appropriate images of love than death and the grave. The bride sees nothing wrong in death, which brings her into His embrace. For her, it is natural to compare love to death. This is true for Christian martyrs.

In the fourth century A.D., forty Roman soldiers who were Christians were sentenced to death by freezing in Sebaste, Armenia, under Emperor Licinius. It was winter, and they were forced naked into a river. If they denied their faith, they would be allowed to warm themselves at a fire along the shore. The mother of one soldier helped her son into the vehicle that was to take them to the river. As he got in, she encouraged her son: "Go, walk with your brethren. Don't linger. Do not arrive in the Lord's presence after them."

One of them did recant. It is said that a soldier watching along the shore saw an angel descend from heaven with forty crowns in his hand. He placed a crown on every head but had one remaining for the youth who had fled the Angel of Death, the harbinger of the final triumph.

The soldier watching along the shore immediately stripped off his clothes and plunged into the cold water, shouting, "I am coming, Angel!" He died with the rest. That is how brides feel and act.

Just as death is impressed by nothing and cannot be bribed or persuaded not to act, so is love. Love for God, just like death, takes away man's desire for temporal things. Just as death never releases its prey, neither does love.

Surely this is what God's love toward us is like. He puts aside His glory, His righteousness, His law, His divinity and His eternity for His beloved bride. He becomes a slave for her. He dies on a cross for her. His love is a love to the end.



Read the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 8:35-39. Think through the list of circumstances and things that Paul identified as incapable of separating us from God's love. Now think about your own life. What situations or things have been driving a wedge between you and God? Why? Ask Him for the grace to drink deeply of His love despite any tragedy or conflict that may enter your life.

Day Eighty-one

Unquenchable Love

The bride says, "Jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it" (8:6,7).

The King James Version (Authorized Version) translates this as, "Jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame." His jealousy is as cruel as the grave. Jealousy is love's legitimate reaction to insults. He is jealous when we fall into idolatry. On our part we have to be jealous and intolerant of the things that belong to our lower nature. Our prayer is, "Lord, be jealous of me and do not give me into the hand of anything else." Such love is unquenchable.

Chinese Christians have endured suffering with fortitude, intolerant of giving into self even when faced with death. During the Boxer Rebellion, when members of a secret society known as the Boxers entered the house of Sister Ming, she asked them to allow her the favor of changing her clothes. She put on her bridal gown and beautiful ornaments. For her, death was a wedding feast. The Boxers killed her.

Prisoners brought to Wronski jail in Poland were asked, "Who among you is a believing Christian?"

All stepped forward.

"We have kneeling chairs for you," they were told.

The prisoners were made to kneel on ordinary stools. "Pray aloud," they were ordered, "and take off your shoes!" During their prayers, blows fell on their bare feet. The Christians all had difficulty walking the next day.

Their cells were cold. Christmas dinner consisted of plain bread and overcooked potatoes, yet the prisoners had to work at chopping down trees. Whoever stayed in the toilet more than five minutes received truncheon blows.

Despite such terrible conditions, their love for God was not quenched.

God did not forsake loving Israel for the cause of some mighty empire. On the contrary, He gave other nations as a ransom for Israel. God's love for the faithful soul will last forever. This is the summary of this whole book and its moral. The love magnified in this book is true love, which does not lose heart when faced with great danger. It is a love that inspires courage and sacrifice, preferring voluntary poverty to servile riches; a love that hates with vigor everything that is false and mean; a love that matures into calmness and faithfulness.



Read Ephesians 3:14-19. As you do, make those words your prayer to God, visualizing Christ filling every square inch of your heart, rooting you in love. Write down what Christ is saying to you.

Day Eighty-two

Priceless Love

The bride says to the Bridegroom, "If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised" (8:7).

Such love is not for sale. Like wisdom, it cannot be bartered for gold. It cannot be bought with silver.

The Bible says, "Buy the truth, and do not sell it" (Proverbs 23:23). Jesus said, "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed" (Revelation 3:18). Simon the sorcerer interpreted words like these without careful meditation and offered money to the apostles. He said to them, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:19). His fault was that he did not understand spiritual things. God's gifts cannot be purchased with money. Isaiah says, "Buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1).

The commandment is strict: Paying for God's gifts with money is forbidden.

To give everything is the responsibility of all Christians. Simon sinned by

the fact that he still had money and offered it to the disciples in exchange for something that only God can give. Early church Christians gave everything at the time of their conversion (Acts 4:34,35).

The gifts of God can be bought but only through the renunciation of sin and vanity. Moreover, riches are incompatible with love, and the believer must consistently refuse pursuing their hope in riches. As Jesus refuses our money and seeks us, so the bride must seek not His gifts but Jesus Himself.

Some years ago a missionary captured by Chinese communists was about to be beheaded. Suddenly, she began to laugh. Her captors asked, "What is so funny about being beheaded?"

"I was just thinking," she replied, "how ridiculous my head will look rolling down the hill!"

They let her go. With this sister, she had renounced the self. Her love for Jesus was as strong as death.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, a civil war raged for many years between the conservative population and the communists. At that time, an Orthodox priest who was walking down the street saw five soldiers of the conservative White Army tie a communist soldier to a tree and prepare to execute him. On seeing the priest, the officer who led the firing squad greeted him with the usual Russian greeting, "Bless us, Father."

"I can't bless a killing," answered the priest.

Moved, the officers freed their prisoner.

A few weeks later, a woman called that priest to administer the last rites to her dying son. As he entered the house, the priest heard the son yell to his mother: "Why did you call a priest? All those villains must be killed! I am a communist. I can't stand priests."

But recognizing the priest, he exclaimed: "You are the one who saved me from being shot. You said, 'I can't bless a killing.' Do you see the big knife on

the table? My assignment was to kill you with it. If you had known that, would you still have stopped my execution?"

"Even in that case," replied the priest, "I would not have blessed the killing, because God has forgiving love for us all. God has sent me a second time to save you."

A minute later, the man was dead, but all the hatred had disappeared from his face. The priest's love came at a cost: renouncing the self. His love was also stronger than death.

In the former Soviet Union, brothers and sisters in Christ were sent to psychiatric asylums. A letter smuggled out told of Sitchovka, a prisoner in an asylum who was shown a straitjacket by a secret police officer posing as a doctor. The officer said: "Don't worry. We won't use it on you. We've got something better — the chemical straitjacket."

The prisoner was led into a room of cats that were unable to move even when pinched or threatened with a flame near their whiskers, because they were under the influence of an alkaloid drug. When an officer tried to push a cat forward, it displayed every sign of stupor. Another cat stood motionless, with its hind legs on a chair and its front legs on the floor. Cats, mice, apes and birds were in the room and drugged by some poison. They stood petrified like statues.

The officer laughed and said to the believer: "One of your brethren mentioned the prophecy that when Jesus returns, wolves will dwell with lambs. We don't need Jesus. We do it ourselves! We have our own savior, and we will break you with it. You can't withstand this."

Our Christian brother added in his letter, "The magicians at Pharaoh's court also imitated the miracles that Moses did, but Moses remained God's man."

The love of such Christians, who know these horrors await them if they

remain faithful and yet continue to serve the church, is not only as strong as death, but also stronger than the fear of being deprived of their minds forever; and it is a love that cost some their lives.



Today, spend time thanking the Lord for the faith of our persecuted family world-wide. Ask Him to encourage and embolden them as they sit in a prison or lay motionless after a beating. May their courageous witness give us the push to step out of our fear and comfort and tell others the most beautiful love story of all time — Jesus!

Day Eighty-three

A Little Sister

The bride's brothers say: "We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our sister in the day when she is spoken for? If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; and if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar."

The bride says, "I am a wall, and my breasts like towers; then I became in his eyes as one who found peace" (8:8-10).

Here we have a supplement to the Song of Songs. Once she is sure of the unlimited love of God, the bride's mind is at rest and can turn to her sister's problem. In full reciprocal love, they discuss what is to be done with the younger sister who does not yet have breasts, which means that she has no prominent qualities in her body. Works are a part of spiritual maturity. The more we grow in Christ, the more we give (not just financially but of ourselves). The apostle Paul wrote that we were created for good works (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus assures the bride that the Holy Trinity will do everything for her. If

she be a wall — if she is a person who can resist temptation, if she is as strong as iron — then God will do her great honor. However, if she is a door, which can easily be opened — if she falls easily in sin, if her virtue is not solid — she will be enclosed with walls of cedar, a strong and durable wood. The weak believer is guarded in a special way, though believers who are able to resist sin are not left unwatched, as strong castles can also fall.

The bride is assured of what God will do for her small sister, remembering the miracles He did for her who is like a wall and who has breasts like twin roes, or fawns, typifying unconquerable virtues. She has found favor with Him. The Shulamite, the princess of peace, has found *shalom* (peace) with Solomon, the prince of peace.

Some Christians are strong. All seductions rebound off them. On such strong walls, Jesus can build castles of silver. I am reminded of Hannington, the Anglican bishop of Uganda, who was eaten by cannibals. He went to his death reciting the Lord's words, "Love your enemies, bless those that curse you" (Matthew 5:44). On that wall, God built a splendid castle. Hannington's sons became missionaries and baptized their father's murderers. Those converted cannibals told the story.

Some twenty Russian girls were novices in a secret convent. When it was discovered, they were all sent to Siberia. The last advice of the abbess to the girls was to stay together if possible and to tell someone — be it friend or enemy, policeman or fellow-prisoner — that they belonged to Christ.

They were sent to forced labor and had to chop down trees. One night a group of prisoners who were common criminals came to the girls' barracks. The girls were frightened, but the men told them: "You have spoken about your faith. So, explain God to us. We have not seen a priest for thirty years. We need a word from God."

That night the barracks became a mission center. Even the guards

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sympathized. Many were converted, and the novices baptized them. Former criminals helped the girls fulfill their work quotas so they could have time for prayer.

These are the brides of Christ, with great and strong breasts.



Read Ephesians 2:4-10. What does the idea of being created for good works stir inside you? Does it scare you? Inspire you? Give you hope? Intimidate you? Why? Write about it as if Jesus were sitting next to you. Reread Ephesians 2:4-10. What assurance does He give you?



Day Eighty-four

Solomon's Vineyard

The bride says: "Solomon had a vineyard at Baal Hamon; he leased the vineyard to keepers; everyone was to bring for its fruit a thousand silver coins. My own vineyard is before me. You, O Solomon, may have a thousand, and those who tend its fruit two hundred."

The Bridegroom says: "You who dwell in the gardens, the companions listen for your voice — let me hear it!"

The bride concludes, "Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices" (8:11-14).

In Hebrew, *hamon* means "a great, noisy crowd." Solomon had a vineyard in Baalhamon. Jesus has His vineyard, His church, in the midst of a noisy multitude.

The bride discusses what fruit their vineyards must produce. She says, "My own vineyard is before me." Before, she did not look after her vineyard. Now she has decided to care for it, so God will be able to build a palace of silver upon her testimony. She promises Solomon one thousand pieces of silver from the profits of her vineyard and allows two hundred for the workers who

tend it. She knows such fruits will come at a great cost.

The Zohar rightly says, "Wherever the name of Solomon is mentioned in Solomon's Song it is holy, except in the words 'A thousand unto you, O Solomon." The author has descended from celestial heights down to financial dealing. He could not help revealing that the Word of God has passed through human hands.

Rembrandt painted a splendid picture of the Good Samaritan. In front of the inn where the wounded man was brought, he painted a dog relieving itself. This is the most prosaic thing in life. In the middle of his most tragic tirade, Shakespeare's King Lear speaks to the fool in bawdy language. No work of art or religion is exempt from at least a token acknowledgement of the meanness of human nature.

There is an important lesson in this verse. The bulk of a church's finances must go toward the propagation of the gospel. We must provide for ministers but not extravagantly. It is a scandal that some ministers in the United States have large salaries when those in the Third World often live at poverty level. As for those under communist persecution, who thinks of them?

Now it is time for the Bridegroom to depart. He goes into the mountains, and the bride remains in the gardens below. His last words are, "You who dwell in the gardens, the companions [the angels, the glorified saints] listen for your voice — Let me hear it!" He asks her to pray. Thus this beautiful book comes to an end.

Toward the end of his life, Solomon was disappointed in the Shulamite, to whom he had dedicated his Song. In the beginning her love was passionate, but it finished with who knows what tragedy. When Solomon was old, he wrote, "My soul still seeks but I cannot find: One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found" (Ecclesiastes 7:28). Will our soul also disappoint the Prince of peace? When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?

The bride's love is great, but great love needs to be tended to remain great. If you put a single gram of radium in a vault and leave it untouched, it will be only half a gram of radium after a certain period and then it will be only one quarter of a gram after more time. Radium disintegrates. Love disintegrates, too. It must be kept warm and made to grow through frequent meditation and contemplation of the Beloved. The love described in the Song of Solomon, where the bride gives the Bridegroom a thousand pieces of silver, is not a hopeless ideal. It really exists.

Igor Ogurtsov, an Orthodox believer, was sentenced to twenty years in prison for his Christian activities. Converted by his grandmother, he was one of the organizers of the All-Russian Social Christian Union for the Unification of the People. For a time he had been detained in a psychiatric asylum for being too religious.

A fellow prisoner described him as a man of pathos, or sorrow. All who drew near Ogurtsov felt that he was far ahead of his contemporaries. He declared his aim was the Christianization of politics, economics and culture. After ten years of prison and torture, he was still strong enough to write:

There is only one choice before mankind: a free return to God and acceptance of His love, whereupon all the powers and beauty of man will flourish; or departure from God, whereupon we will have a Satanocracy and a twisted conscience, as a result of losing the true aim and purpose of life. Capitalism and its sick child, communism, can be conquered only by the Christianization of the whole social order.

At forty he had lost all his teeth in jail. He suffered from avitaminosis (a disease caused by lack of vitamins) and hypertonicity (muscular and arterial tension). He could hardly stand on his feet and still had to do slave labor. Neither the world nor the churches mentioned him, but he offered a great feast to

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Christ. He paid Him his full due: a thousand pieces of silver.

Petras Plumpa, a Catholic, wrote from prison:

Wherever we live, the most important problem is the salvation of souls. If the King of souls has sown us in the field of sorrows, let us bloom in sorrow; if in solitude, then in solitude let us bloom. The Creator sows the most beautiful flowers in inaccessible places among mountain tracts, and, though no man sees them, they have their own value. The anguish of a soul, though unseen, can be plucked and offered like a flower to the Savior. This is the most beautiful decoration in the altar of Jesus. Lacking such decoration, even the finest churches have sad faces.

For the sake of souls like this, our Beloved, who is now like a gazelle or young stag upon the mountains of spices, will return. The bride who dwells in the garden of faith amidst sorrows waits for Him.



Your journey with Jesus through the Song of Solomon does not have to end. It has just begun. Make a commitment to spend regular time with Him to nurture the love He has given you. Read a chapter from the Psalms or the Gospels each day, keeping your journal handy to write your own love letters to Jesus and pen any thoughts you hear Him whisper to you. Draw pictures of the images He uses in the Gospels to help you embrace the eternal truths He longs to take root in your heart. And then remember your persecuted brothers and sisters. Pray they have courage to stand strongly for Jesus in the face of atheistic dictatorships and militant religious radicals, knowing one day we will stand before God's throne and together embrace our Bridegroom.



The Recessional

A rriving at the end of this book, we wonder. Everything written in it, even the most intimate sexual details, is about the love of a faithful soul for a Bridegroom, whom she has never seen. She speaks of kisses, of caresses, of embraces, although she has never touched Him or perceived Him with her senses.

In a similar way, our universe is mostly hydrogen, and no one has ever seen a hydrogen atom. Millions of them would fit on a pinhead. The hydrogen atom is a speculation in our minds. Yet the whole of our physics and chemistry is based on unseen atoms. We can even construct atomic bombs, using atoms that we cannot see. Space and time are only mental constructs, but that does not stop us from living comfortably in space and time.

A heavenly Bridegroom does not have to be touchable in order to be loved or to find complete delight in Him. It is good that He cannot be understood. Instead of trying to understand Him, we need to draw nearer and nearer to Him, so we can know Him.

When an electron jumps from the outer shell of an atom to the inner shell, light is emitted. Similarly, whoever runs to His embraces becomes an emitter of light. Jesus' words, "You are the light of the world," become a reality (Matthew 5:14).

There are some things that are completely absent from the Song. For example, the word "truth." Why is this? When scrutinized, many accepted beliefs are seen to be inadequate. At best they prove to be partially true — true for the left side of the brain. Our brains are divided in two. Only the left operates logically and declares what is true and what is not. The right side is as important as the other but is usually left out in the search for truth. It is irrational,

lyrical, prompted by impulse, feelings and emotions. A "truth" examined only by the left side of the brain cannot be entirely true. It ignores half of reality.

What is normally termed "truth" brings things to a halt. Therefore, Solomon never uses the word. For him, the only thing that comprehends the whole of reality, that unites the two halves of the brain's experience, is love like that between the heavenly Bridegroom and His bride. Only belief in love to the uttermost can pass every test.

Another curious omission from the Song is any mention of good deeds done by the bride. We all have access to the state of being a chosen bride. Some of us, because of natural disadvantages or the possession of a stingy nature, lack the power to do good deeds. But even such people can shine like jewels if they only have ardent love and good will, allowing the Holy Spirit to change their hearts so they can focus on others, not themselves. It is not good deeds that qualify you to be a bride of Christ.

The Song of Solomon shows how right the apostle Paul was when he taught, "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). When we experience holy, supreme love, the moral law that defers to deeds stands mute in adoration.

One final thing is lacking in Solomon's Song: a biography of the bride. What is her story? How did she live before becoming a believer? Was she a decent girl or a loose one? What sins had she committed and how many? Humans have biographies, but she is more than human. She partakes of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Darwin looked in vain for the connecting link between ape and man, but we know the link between the entire creation and the Creator. It is the bride. She is the highest point that creation can reach. She met the One who came down to the lowest level that the Godhead can ever descend, and they

united. She is a queen and a servant. She is as tiny as a worm, yet she is great (Matthew 20:26).

We find the nature of the bride hard to grasp. We inquire about her past; to Jesus, she is simply the bride. Jesus never gave us His own biography. The evangelists are silent about His life between the ages of twelve and thirty. She does not ask Him about His life's story. He rewarded her discretion by not asking questions about hers. Today, they are Bridegroom and bride. Like the high priest Melchizedek of old, they appear "having neither beginning of days nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3).

Adam must have been created as a man of a certain age. Like him, the bride does not have a past. She and the Bridegroom know only an eternal "today" of love.

Handel composed *Messiah* while enraptured, in ecstasy. For twenty-three days, he hardly ate. When he completed the second part with "The Hallelujah Chorus," his servant found him sitting at his desk with tears running down his cheeks. He said, "I saw paradise truly, and the great God himself." Solomon must have composed the Song in such a state of mind.

Therefore, the prayers of the bride are innocent as spring mornings, clear as mountain streams. She does not utter prayers for forgiveness, for they are what sinners need. She has passed beyond this. Christ has finished His work with her. All she can do is sing hymns. Earth and heaven ring with her hallelujahs.

However, she does not isolate herself on the peaks. She prefers not to be called a "saint." Dorothy Day said: "That's how people try to dismiss you. If you're a saint you must be impractical and Utopian and nobody has to pay any attention to you."

I must finish with an apology. I could not make words convey what

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happens between the Bridegroom and the bride for the same reason that you cannot weigh granite columns on pharmaceutical scales. Solomon could not do it, so I most certainly cannot.

We all retain primitive concepts from our early religious training. When we climb unknown spiritual mountains to describe the unknown, we use the language of the known. There is nothing else we can do.

It is the same in science. In any chunk of ordinary matter you have 100 sextillion atoms made up of who knows how many billions of billions of elementary particles. It is unimaginable and inexpressible. Science, therefore, uses primitive pictures. It uses models of atoms, though it knows well enough that no atom conforms to the model. Reality puts shivers up one's spine. It cannot even be described.

But for believers, there is a way to know the quality of the relationship between the Bridegroom and the bride. Become a bride, and then you will personally experience that relationship.

When you become a bride, do not become blind in one eye, seeing only the celestial without concern for the earthly. Likewise, do not become blind in the other eye, seeing only the practical day to day. Both belong to God. Be a great saint, but be a human saint! Remember: Solomon's Song is only one of many books in the Bible.



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About the Author



Pastor Richard Wurmbrand (1909–2001) was an evangelical minister who endured fourteen years of Communist imprisonment and torture in his homeland of Romania. Few names are better known in Romania, where he is one of the most widely recognized Christian leaders, authors, and educators.

In 1945, when the Communists seized Romania and attempted to control the churches for their

purposes, Richard Wurmbrand immediately began an effective, vigorous "underground" ministry to his enslaved people as well as the invading Russian soldiers. He was arrested in 1948, along with his wife, Sabina. His wife was a slave-laborer for three years on the Danube Canal. Richard Wurmbrand spent three years in solitary confinement, seeing no one but his Communist torturers. He was then transferred to a group cell, where the torture continued for five more years.

Due to his international stature as a Christian leader, diplomats of foreign embassies asked the Communist government about his safety and were informed that he had fled Romania. Secret police, posing as released fellow-prisoners, told his wife of attending his burial in the prison cemetery. His family in Romania and his friends abroad were told to forget him because he was dead.

After eight-and-a-half years in prison, he was released and immediately resumed his work with the underground church. A couple of years later, in 1959, he was re-arrested and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.

Pastor Wurmbrand was released in a general amnesty in 1964, and again

continued his underground ministry. Realizing the great danger of a third imprisonment, Christians in Norway negotiated with the Communist authorities for his release from Romania. The Communist government had begun "selling" their political prisoners. The "going price" for a prisoner was \$1,900; the price for Wurmbrand was \$10,000.

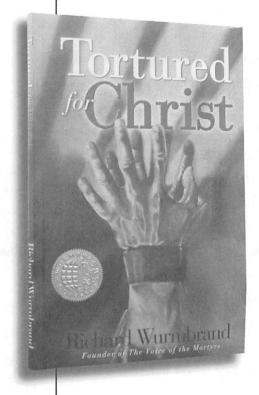
In May 1966, he testified before the U.S. Senate's Internal Security Subcommittee and stripped to the waist to show the scars of eighteen deep torture wounds covering his torso. His story was carried across the world in newspapers throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Wurmbrand was warned in September 1966 that the Communist regime of Romania planned to assassinate him; yet he was not silent in the face of this death threat.

Founder of the Christian mission, The Voice of the Martyrs, he and his wife traveled throughout the world establishing a network of more than thirty offices that provide relief to the families of imprisoned Christians in Islamic nations, Communist Vietnam, China, and other countries where Christians are persecuted for their faith. His message has been, "Hate the evil systems, but love your persecutors. Love their souls, and try to win them for Christ."

Pastor Wurmbrand authored numerous books, which have been translated into more than sixty languages. Geoffrey Hanks included a chapter on Richard Wurmbrand in his book 70 Great Christians Changing the World, counting him among the seventy greatest Christians our world has known. Christian leaders have called him the "Voice of the Underground Church" and "the Iron Curtain Paul."

Tortured for Christ

Months of solitary confinement, years of periodic physical torture, constant suffering from hunger and cold, the anguish of brainwashing



and mental cruelty — these are the experiences of a Romanian pastor during his fourteen years in Communist prisons.

Richard Wurmbrand's crime, like that of thousands of others, was his fervent belief in Jesus Christ and his public witness concerning that faith.

Meeting in homes, in basements, and in woods — sometimes daring to preach in public on street corners — these faithful souls persisted in their Christian witness knowing full well the ultimate cost of their actions.

This is their story - a classic account of courage, tenacious faith, and unbelievable endurance. This

history of the underground church reflects the continuing struggle in many parts of the world today.

Read the book that launched the ministry of The Voice of the Martyrs in the founder's own words.