

When We Seek and Don't Find

Song of Solomon 3:1-5

4 July 2021

11:00 AM (Halifax); 3:00 PM (Glenholme & Livestream)

Introduction:

Today we continue our sermon series on the Song of Songs.

This week, I read through the entire Song a few times. The more I do that, the more I appreciate the fullness that is in this Song.

- It gives us a wonderful picture of the many different experiences that the church (which is the bride of Christ) has with Christ her husband.
 - It does not hesitate to describe the most difficult times with candour.
 - Nor does it hesitate to describe the experiences that are so marvellous that they might seem unrealistic to those who have not experienced them.
- It always speaks of the relationship that the true bride of Christ has with Him.
 - It does not, in other words, speak of the relationship of those who merely profess faith but have no part with Him.
 - Consequently,
 - There is in the bride always a love for her Lord that belongs only to those who are saved by grace.
 - The seed of faith remains in her, and an element of hope that keeps her from utter despair is always present.
 - It is clear that she has an anointing from the Holy One that abides in her and teaches her so that she continues to abide in Him.
- Already, we have seen how, as the bride of Christ,
 - We yearn for the expressions of His love—His kisses that are better than wine.
 - How we rejoice that He has brought us into His chambers to be with Him forever.
 - How we delight to be with Him as He shepherds His people.
 - How He takes pleasure in us like an excellent perfume and we in Him.
 - How we find our happiness under His protection and how His fruit is sweet to our taste.
 - How He sometimes takes us into His banqueting house and reveals His love to us in such a way that we are overcome and yet beg for more!
 - And most recently (last week) we saw how He visits us so that our relationship with Him blossoms with fresh new growth like a season of spring after the winter.
 - Today we are going to see something opposite to that—a season of night when we seek Him and cannot find Him.

Our text is found in chapter 3, verses 1-5.

- Please give full and reverent attention because this is the word of God.

Song of Solomon 3:1-5: By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him. ² “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 The

watchmen who go about the city found me; *I said, "Have you seen the one I love?"* ⁴ 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. ⁵ I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.

There we conclude today's reading.

- May the Lord bless us and edify us through His word.

You can see here that this speaks of a time of struggle for the bride because she cannot find Christ her husband.

- The church as a whole, as well as individual believers, experience such seasons in our relationship with Jesus.
- But you see that this short passage also speaks of what the true bride does in such times, and of how she experiences His return to her, and of how she responds when He returns.

This passage is not about someone becoming a believer who was not already a believer.

- It is about those who love Him very much, but who are in a season in which they have no sense of His presence—no sense of Him speaking to them through His word.
 - If you are not a believer, you can certainly learn from this passage that you need to seek Him and find Him—but you need to seek Him that you might be reconciled to God by faith in His saving work on the cross.
 - You can't have this relationship with Him that is described here until you have first trusted Him for the forgiveness of your sin and as the one who gives us eternal life that we might serve Him and be His wife forever.
- Let's begin now to look at what those who are His bride sometimes experience:

I. Here is a time when we, the church, cannot find Jesus our husband.

A. This is especially burdensome, coming at this point in the song, because we have just been begging Jesus to keep up His springtime visitations.

1. Look back at chapter 2 and remember what we experienced and how we pled with Him.
 - In 2:8 & 9, it describes how He took the initiative to come to us.
 - We perceive His coming like a gazelle in mating season, leaping across mountains and hills to come to us in the springtime.
 - He is coming to us with fresh love with a desire to bring fresh growth to our relationship with Him.
 - We perceive this because He begins to make Himself known to us in fresh new ways—His word begins to speak powerfully into our hearts and lives.
 - We begin to see new things and our excitement builds.
 - In verses 10-15,
 - He declares that the winter is past.
 - He calls us to arise and come away with Him—speaking tenderly to us as His love, His fair one, and His dove, whom He yearns to be with.

- And then in verse 16, we express our delight with the fact that He belongs to us and we belong to Him. We note how, as the gazelle, He loves to browse among the lilies—among us His bride.
 - And then we ask Him to keep coming back to us until the last day when we will be with Him forever without any more shadows.
 - Verse 17 says: **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 Bethel.**
 - Keep coming to us in this gazelle-like way, overcoming all the mountains that separate us—the mountains of Bethel (or separation).
2. But though we pled for these visitations of spring to continue, now they have ceased.
- A season of night has set in.
 - The winter has returned.
- B. We describe our earnest search for Him in verses 1-3 of our text.
1. In verse 1, we say, **“By night on my bed I sought the one I love. I sought Him, but I did not find Him.”**
- The picture here is not of a huge bed where we are looking for Him in the bed.
 - No, this is an allegory—this is a poem.
 - The idea is that it is a night season in our relationship with Him and He cannot be found—
 - He is not manifesting His love to us—we have lost the sense of His love.
 - He is not revealing Himself and His truth to us.
 - Even though we pray and read His word, the Holy Spirit is not working in a way where it is really getting through to us...
 - The word does not convict us, encourage us, renew us, instruct us.
 - Our relationship with Him is dried up and does not seem to be growing much.
2. We are distressed—especially so—because it is not as though we were not trying or that we do not care that things are this way.
- Quite the opposite is true.
 - In verses 1 & 2, we speak of seeking Him—no less than four times...
 - And in each verse, we mention with sorrow that we did not find Him.
 - This is not a time where we have ceased to read God’s word and pray.
 - Or when we have hardened ourselves and given ourselves over to idols.
 - We are earnestly seeking Him but still not finding Him.
 - That makes it especially troubling.
 - We are like Job in his distress when he said, in Job 23:8-9: **“Look, I go forward, but He is not *there*, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; 9 when He works on the left hand, I cannot behold *Him*; when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see *Him*.”**

- Or like the Canaanite woman we read about in Mark who pled with Him and was told that He did not come to give the children’s bread to the dogs.
 - He had not come for the Gentiles but for the Jews.
- 3. But you see that we do not stop with seeking Him in private.
 - We also look to find Him in public ordinances—we seek Him in the church where He meets with His people.
 - a. In verse 2, we resolve that we will arise and seek Him among His people.
 - That is the right thing for us to do—get help from our brothers and sisters and especially from the ministry of word and sacrament and from the counsel of the elders.
 - Verse 2 says: **“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.**
 - In this Song, the city is the city of Jerusalem, which is the city of God—the city which for us in the New Testament is the people that gather to meet with Jesus and that are bound together by covenant as His followers.
 - We explain how we go all about the city searching for Him—we have come with eager anticipation to be blessed among His people in His ordinances of worship, but with the same sad result.
 - **“I sought Him, but I did not find Him.”**
 - b. In verse 3, we explain that the watchmen took notice of us.
 - We want to find Jesus and these watchmen find us.
 - The Bible frequently refers to prophets and ministers as watchmen who watch for the souls of the flock of Christ.
 - These watchmen appear to be doing their duty—they are going about the city as they should and they find us in this state...
 - But they are not able to help her—at least not right away.
 - Verse 3 says: **The watchmen who go about the city found me; I said, “Have you seen the one I love?”**
 - There is no immediate answer.

TRANS> It is an extremely difficult time.

- We are doing all that we can, but we simply cannot find Him.
 - We are seeking but we are not finding Him.

II. So what’s going on here?

- **Let’s look a little more closely into this.**
- A. There is no indication that we have done anything here to drive the Lord away.
 - 1. We are seeking Him very earnestly here as we have already established.
 - We have already mentioned that we, the bride, are earnestly and repeatedly searching for Him.

- And notice as well—we repeatedly and very naturally call Him “the one that I love.”
 - We refer to Him with this title four times in the first four verses.
 - There is no indication of bitterness or hostility, but just the opposite—there is appreciation of Him and delight in who He is.
 - We remember that He is the one who saved us from our sins and who loves us and we want to be with Him—we want Him to come to us and manifest Himself to us the way He so often does—but He is not.
2. We also see that when He finally does come to us (in v. 4), there is no indication that we have pushed Him away and no indication that we need to repent in any way.
- We are like Job.
 - The Lord withdrew from him for a prolonged season, exactly not because he had done wrong, but because he had been upright and blameless—more than anyone else in the world at that time.
 - His friends said it was because of his sin, but the Lord said it was because of Job’s faithfulness that He was testing him.
 - John Owen says: The Lord Christ is pleased sometimes to withdraw himself from the spiritual experience of believers, as unto any refreshing sense of His love, or the fresh communications of consolatory graces. Those who never had experience of any such things, who never had any refreshing communion with Him, cannot be sensitive of His absence; they never were so of His presence.
3. We could list off many examples faithful persons God sent to wilderness.
- There is Abraham, promised a child from whom his salvation and the salvation of the world will come, and yet he is barren into old age.
 - He seeks the Lord year after year, but still no child is born.
 - Think of Jacob’s son Joseph, such a faithful young man, yet cut off from his family and the ordinances of God and delivered over to bondage in Egypt, first as a slave and then as a prisoner, though falsely accused.
 - Where was the Lord in all of this?
 - Why for all those years did the LORD not deliver him?
 - Even after his family was restored and came to Egypt and Joseph was made ruler, still his people ended up spending centuries in Egypt under extreme bondage with many cries and groans to God who had promised that from them salvation of the world would come.
 - There is Moses who forsakes Egypt and sets out to deliver his people, only to receive resistance and rebuke from them.
 - He goes off to the wilderness for forty years alone and then must spend another forty years in the wilderness for another forty years.
 - There is David, so faithful when he served Saul, yet driven out from the people of God to wander in the wilderness for years with Saul trying to kill him.

- We see many examples in the Psalms when David cries out to the Lord, not so much confessing sin, but asking why he has been cut off.
 - We could mention Paul who speaks of times when he was forsaken and when he could find no rest and had the sentence of death upon himself.
 - And that this often happened when he was engaged in faithful ministry.
 - He speaks of his thorn in the flesh and his repeated prayer for its removal with no answer until at last the Lord made it clear to him that the thorn was to stay, but that that His grace would be sufficient for him.
 - We could speak of Jesus' disciples who left all to follow Him only to have Him end up dying on the cross.
 - All that led up to that, including Jesus' refusing opportunities to lead the nations against the Romans who were occupying their land, and His sorrow and prayers leading up to the cross and then the abuse that He received—all this was contrary to the prayers of His disciples toward Him and toward the Father. It was wilderness.
 - And think of Jesus Himself.
 - At both the beginning and the end of His public ministry He was sent to the wilderness—to experience times when He cried out to God and could not find Him in the desert.
 - Were not all of these those who, for a time, sought the Lord and were not heard even though they had not forsaken Him?
- B. You need to know that the LORD uses these times in the life of His people, His bride.
- Surely you can see how God uses these times.
 1. He helps us to see even more than we already did what really matters.
 - When we are saved and we walk with the Lord, we enjoy a sense of communion with Him, but now this sense of communion is dried up.
 - It make us realise that nothing matters so much as our relationship with Him—it becomes a greater priority for us than ever before to walk with Him in sweet fellowship and to maintain it.
 2. He also strengthens our faith in such times.
 - If you look at the great examples the men of faith listed in Hebrews 11, you will see that they were shown to be men of faith—and (might we say), made to be men of faith, by enduring hardships that left them with nothing but God's promise.
 - They all had times when their prayers whether for the son of promise or for deliverance from their enemies were not heard—when they sought the Lord but did not find Him for a season.
 - Like I told you last week, the winter is good for us. It helps us to build strong spiritual muscles.
 - We learn, as Abraham did, to hope against hope.
 - We learn to persevere in our faith and to cling to God like Job did.
 - Like Jacob and the Syro-Phoenician woman, we refuse to let God go until He blesses us.

- We do not grow visibly so much, perhaps, in these seasons, but we grow deeper and stronger. We build strong muscles.
3. Besides all that, the wilderness helps us to show our fidelity to God, our loyalty and our unrelenting love for Him.
 - We are able to say with Job, “Though He slay me, yet will I praise Him.”
 - People see us suffering for the Lord cheerfully and our character is proven to them—they see that we really do love the Lord.
 - I remember before I was a believer seeing the difference in those who professed Christ who really seemed to love the Lord and those who did not.
- C. What is our duty when we are called to the wilderness?
1. It is to do exactly what the bride does here in the Song of Solomon.
 - a. It is to keep on seeking Him—four times in two verses she declares it.
 - The whole church is told in Isaiah 62 to give the Lord no rest until He hears us and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.
 - Before, He came to her and called her to arise and come away with Him, but now when He goes away, she arises on her own and goes to seek Him.
 - You can see that in verse 2—“I will arise now and go about the city...”
 - That is exactly what you ought to do.
 - b. Not only that, but is also your duty in such times to keep on trusting Him—she keeps on seeking because she believes that He will return to her.
 - She believes His promises and walks by faith, not by sight or sense.
 - Already, we looked at the example of those God has chosen to be examples of great faith who did just this.
 - Guard against doubting Him and doubting His goodness.
 - c. And finally, our duty is indeed to keep on loving Him—
 - Four times she calls Him the one that she loves—literally, “the one that my soul loves”—meaning every bit of her.
 - When He withdraws, you must guard your heart from bitterness. Remember what you know of Him, whether you feel it or not.
 2. Men that have walked with God have sound advice for us.
 - a. Samuel Rutherford, who had more than his share of sorrows—hard things in ministry and the deaths of one after another of his many children—says:
 - “As nights and shadows are good for flowers, and moonlight and dews are better than a continual sun; so is Christ’s absence of special use, and it hath some nourishing virtue in it, and giveth sap to humility, and putteth and edge on hunger, and furnisheth a fair field to faith to put forth itself.”
 - b. John Owen, whom I quoted before, also said: “Our duty in this case is, to persevere in our inquiries after Him, in prayer, meditation, mourning, reading, and hearing of the word, in all ordinances of divine worship, private and public, in diligent obedience, until we find him or he return unto us as in former days.”

- c. And Burrows warns us not to be careful that we don't mistake what the Lord is doing when He withdraws in times when we have indeed not forsaken Him.
 - He says: "Many good people mistake at such time [when a sense of Jesus' presence is lost], by despairing and reproaching themselves, instead of seeking Him. ... But these withdrawals are for a wise end, and are essential in our preparation for heaven. They test the strength of our faith and steadfastness of our love; they lead to deeper searchings for secret sins; they advance humility by making us feel our weakness and our dependence on God."

TRANS> I hope that helps you understand that sometimes, even though we have been faithful in our walk with Jesus, He withdraws for a time for our benefit.

- But now we must move on to what comes next in verse 4 & 5.

III. In verse 4 & 5, we, the bride, find our husband at last.

- Soon the night of weeping is over. Joy comes in the morning.

A. We declare that we have found Him.

1. What joy exudes from our words here!

- After repeating the lamentation, "I sought Him, but I did not find Him," we now break out in verse 4, "I found the one that I love!"
- We say, "scarcely had I passed by them (the watchmen), when I found the one I love."
- What happiness!

2. It is so good that we did not stop seeking after we went to the watchmen.

- James Durham points out that in such times, the truth is that He was never actually far from us.
 - He was with us all along—just not manifesting Himself to us.
 - And what's more, He was not far from manifesting Himself to us.
- What if the Syro-Phoenician woman had stopped seeking Him when she had been right on the brink of finding Him?
 - Yes, He will still come to us, but it is for us to keep on seeking Him until He does. It is so much better that way.
 - Don't stop seeking until you find Him.

B. And look, we go on to declare how upon finding Him, we cling to Him.

- She says (still verse 4), "I held Him and would not let Him go."

1. These beautiful words express our delight in finding Him.

- Upon finding Him, we realise all the more how wonderful it is to have Him once again making Himself, His love, His promises, His ways, and His ordinances fresh and effective for us.
 - Once again, His Spirit is at work in us and we are able to behold the glory and excellence of Christ, to see His love, and to love Him...
 - To know more fully the height and depth and length and breadth of His love for us and to bring forth fruit for Him in our lives.

- This is our meat and drink as His bride.
 - We will not let Him go.
2. But how can we say that we will not let Him go?
- Can He not go whenever He pleases?
 - Of course He can, but even He Himself speaks to us of our clinging to Him so as not to not let Him go—
 - For example, when He wrestled with Jacob on the night that Jacob’s name was changed to Israel,
 - Did the Lord not speak as if He could not leave unless Jacob would let Him go?
 - **Gen 32:26-28: And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”** ²⁷ **So He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.”** ²⁸ **And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”**
 - Somehow, Jacob held Him.
 - And to Moses, when God’s people had sinned by turning to the golden calf, the LORD said:
 - **Exodus 32:10: “Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.”**
 - It was as if Moses had a hold on Him so that the LORD could not get away from him.
 - By this the LORD is encouraging us that His love will not let Him leave us when we hold to Him.
 - It is like the love of a mother for her terrified little child who clings to her and she says, “Let me go now,” and of course she could easily overpower the child and get away,
 - but it is her love that holds her there for the child.

TRANS> And look, we keep up this controlling talk...

C. We force Him to return to our brothers and sisters in the church also.

1. Not only do we claim to have held Him and not let Him go, but we claim to have done so **“until I had brought Him to the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me.”**
 - He has returned to us and we insist on bringing Him to church—the house of our mother.
 - You realise, of course, that the bride of Christ is not only the bride of Christ, but also the mother of herself as it were.
 - With Christ, she begets herself as it were, through children born to her members whom God takes to be His own, and through evangelism where she brings sons forth from the nations.

- Isaiah 54 speaks of how though we were desolate, when He returns us to us we bring forth many children:
 - Isaiah 54:5 says: **“For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is His name; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth. For the LORD has called you like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a youthful wife when you were refused,” says your God. 7 For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you.”**
 - When He returns to us and begins to manifest Himself to us, we not only refuse to let Him go for our own sake, but also for the sake of our fellow members in the church.
 - Like Moses, we won’t let Him alone until He blesses them and returns to them also. We will not be satisfied until we have brought Him into the house of our mother who conceived us.
 - We will give Him no rest until He makes Jerusalem praise in the earth... not the city built with man’s hands, but the city of those born of the Lord.
2. And to our brothers and sisters, we, the bride, renew the charge that we gave them before.
- **Verse 5: I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.**
 - a. The daughters of Jerusalem are the disciples of the church.
 - They are those men and women that the church has begotten—that she has brought to Christ and baptised and that she teaches to observe all things that the Lord (our husband) has commanded us.
 - Here is that charge before the gazelles and does who represent strong passion, a yearning for intimacy and love.
 - b. And our advice is not to rush into anything superficial or artificial, but to cultivate true love, to let love grow as it will without trying to force it.
 - Do not stir it up or awaken love until it pleases.
 - c. This is one of the greatest errors of the church as I told you before.
 - Instead of waiting for Christ to come to us by His word and Spirit to manifest Himself and His love to us, we try to drum it up.
 - 1) One way to drum it up is to pretend that we have this closeness with Him when in fact we do not.
 - It is far better to acknowledge what you don’t have—what as not developed, but what is only starting, and to seek to see it grow.
 - 2) Another way to drum it up artificially is to try to stir it up by stimulants.
 - Instead of the simple worship that He has appointed for us in the New Testament, we try to stir up our love with all manner of rituals and ancient traditions that He never commanded.

- Or we try to stir up our affection with dancing around the golden calf as it were—sensual music, light shows, drama, fake tongue speaking, fake prophecy, performances.
 - These artificial stimulants deceive us because they stimulate us and make us think that we have stirred up love when we have not.
- 3) And perhaps an even worse way to drum up love is by modifying Christ to be someone we would find easier to love.
 - Perhaps we don't like some of His commandments—maybe we want to be more free sexually, or to enjoy drinking and carousing—so we try to modify Him in our own minds to be a husband without these rules.
 - Perhaps we don't like it that He is a holy God and a consuming fire who sends His enemies to hell—so instead of learning to love Him as He is revealed in His word, we ignore those aspects of His character so that it will be easier to love Him—
 - but when we do that, we are no longer loving *Him*, but an idol of Him.
- d. The bride warns her daughters not to do this:
 - **I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.**
 - Keep on seeking Him and you will find Him.
 - Keep on seeking Him and you will love Him and experience His love.
 - Waiting can be hard, but wait and He will bring you from grace to grace, from one degree of love to another.
 - Did Moses not pray even after he had seen so much of His glory, “Show me Your glory?”
 - And did Paul not pray that in Eph 3:18 that we would **be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**
 - Go with the true church.
 - She is the one in our text who seeks Him and waits until He comes.
 - She keeps on seeking until she finds Him.
 - She says (Psalm 27:13-14): ***I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. 14 Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!***
 - Brothers and sisters, our love for Him is to keep on growing until the day of His return.
 - And in the end, the reason it does is not because we seek Him, but because of His grace that seeks us.