



Open-Heart Surgery

Song of Songs 4:1-5:1

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Perhaps some of you know one of my favorite Puritans is Richard Sibbes. Sibbes was known affectionately as the “sweet-dropper” among his colleagues, because his sermons were so full of the sweetness of Christ. There are far worse things than to be known for preaching really good news. As it turns out, one of Sibbes favorite books was the Song of Songs. The reason was simple: it was in the Song he found, in his estimation, a treasure trove of sweetness, a gold-mine of evidence as to the perfect love of Christ. He loved the Song so much he wrote more than 20 sermons on chapters 5-6 alone. He called them: “Bowels Opened”¹. By this he meant that the Song was a picture of how Christ’s heart, his “bowels” or “gut” that place of intense feeling, his insides, have been opened up in love for his church. The song is a picture into Christ’s feelings. So Sibbes said the goal of understanding the Song of Songs is to:

“To lay open and unfold the unsearchable riches of Christ; to dig up the mine, thereby to draw the affections of those that belong to God to Christ.”²

Open heart surgery on the riches of Jesus Christ’s love. What could be more incredible than that? So perhaps that can be our goal today. In 4:1-5:1 of the Song of Songs—to open up the heart of Jesus Christ. To answer, perhaps once and for all, that question we all have: what does God *really* think about me? What does he say about me?

I will make this very simple this morning. Through the picture of the consummation of marriage, our text preaches to us the words of Christ, which we hear now and will hear forever on our wedding day. He says: “you are altogether beautiful. You have captivated my heart.”

“You Are Altogether Beautiful”

Chapter 3 of Song of Songs ended as the beloved of the king is carried in the litter of Solomon out of the wilderness to meet her king. We don’t have to picture this as a literal scene, but rather as a poetic description. What happens in Chapter 3 is the lyrical representation of a wedding. The Bride is anxious before her big day, she in a state of searching, fearful her beloved has left. But then he comes bounding down to get her, to sweep her off her feet, down the aisle, to be his. Chapter 4

¹ Of course, being a Puritan, the title was much longer: *Bowels Opened: A discovery of the near and dear love, union and communion betwixt Christ and the Church, and consequently betwixt Him and every believing soule.*

² Richard Sibbes, *Bowels Opened*



then, is a poetic description of what comes after the wedding, when the bride and groom are all alone behind shut doors. We don't have to be shy or prudish about this—what chapter 4 is describing is the consummation of marriage. It's a man and a wife totally in love, seeing each other sexually for the first time. But notice the language here: none of it is crude. It's physical, but hardly in the way you would think. It's not thoughtless. He doesn't just call her "hot". More than anything, it's metaphorical, and as we will see, spiritual. It's an ancient way of describing beauty, known as a "wasf". Her body is not a sex object—in fact, we know actually very little of what she looks like in this poetic description! What is important is that the woman is shown to be the pinnacle of beauty, even divine in her perfection.

Starting from the top, he works his way down, complimenting her beauty as he goes. What I want you to see is how the image she uses refers to her outward beauty, but link back to specific ideas. He is comparing her to a garden, full of life, fertility, and vitality. She is a protected promised land, like the perfect Israel. There are seven descriptions, the number of perfection, for she is perfect.

In **4:1**, her eyes are doves, behind a veil. Remember the dove is a sign of shyness—she has been veiled, but now her veil is coming off and her eyes are seen. The veil also shows exclusivity. Here in the bed-chamber—she is finally unveiled for all she is. The dove here is also likely an allusion in some way to Noah—the dove was let go out of the ark and brought news of life—just as the eyes of the bride are full of life. Her hair is like goats: dark, her curls bounding off her head like goats on a slope. But the goats are from Gilead. Why mention something so specific? Gilead is the place where God brought deliverance to his people through Saul, where the kingdom of Israel was more or less founded. Again he is harkening back to Israel's past and her important events.

Her teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes, **verse 2**. No doubt this means they are white, and not one is missing, meaning she has a full set (without ever having gone to the dentist). But the greater meaning is again one of fertility: all the ewes bear twins, and not one dies young. We are reminded of the promise of land of canaan in Exodus 23, where God tells his people that when he delivers into the land, "None shall miscarry or be barren in your land".

Her lips are like a scarlet thread, **verse 3**. They are beautifully rich, without the aid of lipstick. But again, an allusion—the only other time in Hebrew literature a scarlet thread is mentioned is in the story of Rahab, a story about God bringing his people into the promised land of Canaan. And the fact that her "cheeks are like pomegranates" is a sign she is full of life. Pomegranates, due to their many seeds, were fruit of vitality, and the pomegranate was a very important sign in the tabernacle and temple: they were etched onto priests garments!

Verse 4 may seem like a strange compliment. But consider: she is strong, able to bear much weight on her shoulders. Her beautiful figure though is not just like any tower, but the tower of David—likely a reference to the unmatched strength of the Davidic king—she is a garden, an promised land, that is protected and preceded over by the king of the land and his warriors. Finally, he stops at her breasts. This is sensual language, but not explicitly or graphic. The idea is that to gaze upon the woman, is to see a picture of both strength and tranquility, of gracefulness and



peace: like gazelles grazing in the flowers. It's captivating, entrancing, like a picture of the promised land of Eden where peace flows. Again, he repeats that beautiful refrain from chapter 3 in **verse 6**. Except this time, the springtime has come, the day has breathed. Now, instead of hiding in the clefts and turning from his beloved, he is ready to go up to her mountain, to rest by her unencumbered in the sweetness of her scent. Both of these fragrances played important roles in the temple: her perfume is the perfume of the temple—she smells like God's presence. To be with her is to "ascend the hill of the Lord".

All of this extravagant language culminates again in **verse 7**. **You are altogether beautiful my love, there is no flaw in you.** His compliments are spiritual, like a Christian husband telling his wife: "your beauty is a picture of God" or "when I am with you, I am full of the blessing of God." The husband in Song of Songs is opening up his true heart, his true affections, and saying: "when I look at you, I see divine perfection." Husbands should learn to speak to their wives in this way. We should all learn to see sex in this way: as a physical representation of divine intimacy, as a leftover from the garden, as an allegory. But what I want you to take from this picture today is very simple: Jesus sees you this way. When he looks at you, he sees divine perfection.

How is that possible? The gospel teaches us that Christ's mission was to seek and save the lost. Salvation, however, is not just about what you are saved *from*, namely your sin, but what you are saved *to*, that is the holy righteousness of God. In Song of Songs, the bride is described as a holy temple, an untouched garden. In the gospel, we receive the righteousness of Christ by faith—not just so God tolerates us, but in a way that we become pleasing to him. We ourselves are a pleasing aroma, offering our own bodies as living sacrifices, wrapped up in the pleasing aroma of Christ's sacrifice.

From head to toe, Christ looks at us and sees spiritual beauty beyond comparison. Just as the bride here is the picture of divine perfection, so the glorified church is God's way of picturing perfection in the world to come. Your eternal beauty is God's design, his plan A for the world. Christ, your husband, looks at you, united to him, and what he sees is Eden coming back, the promised land returned.

So Jesus looks behind the veil, behind what we hide. Our eyes to him are full of life when they look at him. We may not feel it, but we have the capacity in Christ for great spiritual vitality, for flourishing. He creates in us, in his church, where there is no barrenness, no dry trees, no eunuchs. We are like the garden, protected and guarded by the king's tower and the king's men. In Christ, we are at peace—like two gazelles grazing among the flowers.

Now, you may say today: I feel none of this. I am not beautiful, especially in regards to my inner life. Even my best actions are tinged with pride and selfishness! How can Christ look at me, even know my thoughts, and see no flaws? The reality is that Christ's love *is* what makes you beautiful, and it is the one thing that can never be stopped. Here is not just some mushy gushy stuff, as if God loves you "just as you are". God wants to make you even more beautiful! But never forget... Christ is not



waiting for you to get your act together. His disposition, his heart openen to you, is delight. He sees and is pleased with your humble state.

This goes deeper than you think. Spurgeon speaks of how even our feeble acts of faithfulness are beautiful to God:

I confess," say you, "that all my graces are a stench in my own nostrils, and all the good things I trust I have, I cannot look upon them with any pride or self-congratulation. I must bury myself in dust and ashes; and even those things, I can but weep over them, for they are so marred by my own evil nature." But now then, the very things that you and I very properly weep over, Christ delights in. He loves all these: the smell may seem to be but very faint and feeble, yet Jesus observes it, Jesus smells it, Jesus loves it, and Jesus approves of it... O Jesus, this is condescension indeed, to be pleased with such poor things as we have. Oh this is love, it proves thy love to us, that thou canst make so much out of little, and esteem so highly that which is of such little worth!³

When my toddler son colors me a picture, I do not chide him that it will never hang on the wall of a museum. I hang it on our fridge—because I delight in it. Jesus Christ delights in you. Clothed in his righteousness, he is not ashamed of you—he sees your beauty. Can you receive this? What are the dangers of receiving this?⁴ Doing so will change how you see the world. What are the dangers of not receiving this?

“You Have Captivated My Heart”

It is one thing to find something beautiful, and another to be drawn to that beauty before all else. I may find beauty in watching the Baylor Bears play basketball, but not enough to empty my bank account for final four tickets. You may find immense beauty camping in the grand canyon—but eventually you have to leave back for a much more modest, much less wild home.

Marriage, however, is different. Marriage says: I find something so beautiful that I am willing to melt my life into it, a person so lovely that I want to blur the lines of where they end and I begin. So Jesus says is the heart of marriage: “a man shall leave his Father and Mother, and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become *one flesh*.”

This ultimately is the difference between appreciating beauty and falling in love. Love leans in all the way. And the difference between what God means by “falling in love” and what your Netflix que means is that true love is not ultimately about sex or feeling. True love is about intimacy that is deeper than what happens in the bedroom—about a bonding of souls. Sex is meant to point us there, to help us show and express the king of love were created for. But it’s not the end—that is why there is no sex in Heaven. And neither is marriage the end—again it’s a pointer. There is no marriage in Heaven. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be God and his

³ Spurgeon, “Christ’s Estimate of His People”, NPSP 5

⁴ Great questions from Julia Hardyman, *Jesus, Lover of my Soul*



people—totally and completely in love. Not just appreciating holiness like an amateur cook appreciates a michelin star restaurant, but totally, completely, enraptured.

This is the picture we get starting in **verses 8-9**. All of the places mentioned are in Lebanon—that foreign, lush and beautiful place where the trees are tall and the animals are wild. Come out of the wilderness into the well-kept garde, says the groom. In verse 8 she is finally called *bride*, a term used very rarely. It's exclusive, intimate. Interestingly enough, in **verse 9** she is also called “sister”. This is a reference again to the intimacy of their relationship. In this culture a sister was a confidant, a friend, a companion. In calling his bride his sister he is saying: “you are more than a pretty face. You are more than a lover. You are family—my dearest friend, my closest companion”.

Notice the language here: it's infatuation, desire. “You have captivated my heart” is akin to “you have stolen my heart”. In chapter 1 the love of the groom was compared to wine, but here in **verse 10** he confesses that he too is lost in the love of his bride, intoxicated with it. Notice in **verse 11** the reference to honey and milk, again an allusion to the promised land. And **verse 12**, she is like a “garden locked”. What other garden in history is locked and sealed but Eden?⁵ The lock on the garden also implies exclusivity. The bride is the “private garden” of the groom—no other lover is allowed in. Love is faithfully exclusive.

He goes on to describe the garden captivating him in **verses 13-15** with descriptions of foreign spices, herbs, and trees. Since none of these plants were “native” to the land of Israel, we know this is a poetic description. He is comparing his bride to a perfect, global garden, a kind of magic garden where every kind of good thing flourishes. No wonder he is captivated!

In Scripture and in this Song, the “garden” or the “vineyard” is a picture of sexuality. We see here God's design for our sexuality—that it is meant to be exclusive, reserved for covenant marriage—that, as we learned before from the Bride's warning not to awaken it before it's time—it's full of passion and power. We also learn something not just about our sexuality, but the spirituality that our sexuality points to.

Our inner lives are like a garden—we lock them up, rarely letting anyone in. We are afraid of being hurt. Perhaps, sometime comes along who feigns enrapturement—who says “I'm in love with you”, and we open ourselves up, physically or even spiritually. This “opening up” can also apply to the idols in our lives, those things we let into our garden that destroy it, not cultivate it. Many of us are hurt, pain from our past. Many of us experience times of great spiritual deadness, we find it difficult to let the right things into our heart, and so we'd rather just wall up and forget about spiritual things all together. Why do you think agnosticism is such a popular ideology? Who wants to believe in God or follow Jesus, if it might get you hurt again? Who really *cares* anymore?

But your bridegroom, Jesus, is captivated by your beauty. He was motivated to death and spiritual darkness for one reason: his love for you. He would go to the ends of the earth for you—he already

⁵ Pointed out by James Hamilton, *Song of Songs*



did, and the ends of hell too. That was what he showed on his cross. As his eyes looked out, what he saw was his church, his beloved.

Jesus is not frustrated with you. He isn't trying to exit an unhappy marriage. He isn't burdened by you. He isn't trying to find some alone time to recharge before he can be with you again. If you are his, and his righteousness covers you and washes you, he is continuously, eternally, enraptured by you.

Let Him In

Will you take a risk then, and let him into that unkept garden of your heart? He wants to make it Eden again. Look how the bride responds in **verse 15-16**. Whose garden is it that she opens? Not just hers, but *his*. Nothing is off limits. In the first garden, one fruit could not be eaten. In the second garden, every fruit, the choicest fruits, are available. Not even the potential of separation will haunt you when you fully belong to Jesus and your marriage with him is consummated in eternity.

When we really grasp the love of Jesus, we can't help but open up and let him in. **5:1** is a picture of his willingness to come in, and of the world's response of praise for such a true and pure love. If you are married, you may have had a nice wedding, but doubtful your wedding night was anything like this. I doubt the chorus of the stars praised your love. Nor should you expect perfection on your wedding night, if you are unmarried and engaged to be. We are fallen people with fallen sexuality. More than likely, your wedding night is more awkward than idyllic. But here is a picture of heaven—of divine love. It's not about sex, it's about being more loved and delighted in than you have ever felt. If this is foreign to you, pray for it. Pray you could really understand the love of Christ.

Open heart surgery time. If you could lay Jesus down on the operating table and reach not just his physical heart but his soul, what would it beat for? What drives his passion, his decisions, his action? It's you. You are the gold at the end of the mine. Will you let him in?

