

Spiritual Sloth and the Means of Restoration.

Song of Solomon 5: 2 - 6: 1-3.

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Christian Friend vol. 14, 1887, p. 169.

The key to the interpretation of this beautiful scripture is found in the words, "I sleep, but my heart waketh." The heart of the bride was true to her Beloved; but, together with this, there was a lack of energy, an inclination to ease and comfort, which had betrayed her into a want of watchfulness, and produced a state of sloth. This is seen from the contrast drawn between her position and that of the Beloved. While His head was filled with dew, and His locks with the drops of night, she is seen reclining at her ease upon her bed. The Scriptures abound in such contrasts, as, for example, in the case of Peter, who sat, with the enemies of Christ, warming himself at the fire, while his Master was exposed to the taunts and insults of His persecutors. (Luke 22: 55-64.)

The state of soul thus indicated is always the result of succumbing to the influences of this world, and it is a state of soul which the Lord never views with indifference. Nay, He loves His people too well to permit them to continue in it, and He thus immediately seeks to arouse them from their slumber. It is so in this scripture; for the bride is at once made conscious that her Beloved is seeking an entrance. "It is," she says, "the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night." (v. 2.) The very terms He uses — the terms of endearment — were surely calculated to awaken the affections of her heart; for they express to her her own preciousness to Him, while they acknowledge that she had not forgotten Him. But the ground of His appeal lies in the contrast already shown: He was without, waking and watching, while she was within, in ease and comfort.

How could she refuse such an entreaty? Her answer betrays the secret: "I have put off my coat: how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet: how shall I defile them?" She was occupied rather with her own ease than His claims, and hence to respond to His appeal involved sacrifice and required energy. How many of us lose the visits of Christ in this way! He stands by us, seeking to manifest Himself to us in a fuller way, and we are not unconscious of His presence; but we are preoccupied, or have set our hearts for the time upon some other object, and we thus lose the enjoyment and communion which He was offering. Like the bride, we had put off our coat, and could not put it on again. We had forgotten that our loins were ever to be girded; and we had washed our feet, and we were unwilling to defile them, even though it was the Lord Himself who was calling upon us to open the door.

But He never presses Himself upon unwilling hearts; and thus, when He found that the door was closed against Him, He withdrew. The bride was conscious of His efforts to obtain admission. She had heard His voice, and she had heard His hand upon the door; and at length her heart responds, her "bowels were moved for him." Her sloth is removed, and, arising, she opened to her Beloved; but He "had withdrawn himself." (v. 6.) She had, alas! lost her opportunity. When her Beloved pressed Himself upon her, she could not make the effort to receive Him; now that she had opened the door, it was to find that He was gone. The soul has to learn that it must wait on the Lord's pleasure, that communion and the enjoyment of intimacy are only possible to, a responsive heart; that, in a word, it can only repose on the Lord's bosom when He draws us into that blessed place. The Beloved had drawn near to the bride, and had presented Himself in all the attractions of His love for a season of ineffable blessedness; but she lost it because she was seeking rest in a scene where as yet He had found none.

The seeking had hitherto been on His part; now it was her turn to search and be disappointed. She arose to open to her Beloved, and she at once discovered how much she had lost; for the fragrant traces of His presence were left behind. Her hands, put where His had been, on the handles of the lock, dropped with myrrh. Then she says, "I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer." (v. 6.) Had her Beloved, then, renounced His love? Far from it. He was but teaching her a needed lesson, and seeking the restoration of her soul, by thus calling forth the energies and desires of her heart. In this way He was exposing her true state to her own eyes, and making her learn also that restoration is only possible through discipline. The enjoyment of the presence of Christ may be lost in a moment; it may, and often does, take days to recover it. Forgiveness, on confession of sin, is immediate; but the restoration of communion can only be gradual, and a work of time.

This is illustrated by the experiences of the bride. Let us trace them. First, "the watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me." (v. 7.) What had she to do, wandering about the city at night, without her Beloved? The very fact that she could not find Him revealed her state to these faithful watchmen, and they did not spare her. They were charged with the discipline of the city, and they failed not to administer it. And well is it for the assembly when there are faithful men who watch for souls as they that must give account (Heb. 13: 17); who do not hesitate to search souls, even if they smite and wound them, in the power of the Word. The Church cries aloud for those who can discern the state and meet the need of souls; for pastors who are skilled to feed the flock of God, and to restore the wandering and backslidden in heart.

In the next place, the bride encountered the "keepers of the walls," and they took away her veil from her exposed her condition, her nakedness, bereft as she was for the moment, through her negligence and self-seeking, of her Beloved. If the watchmen answer to pastors, the keepers of the wall will find their correspondence in those who seek to maintain holiness in the house of God. The walls guard those within from the enemy without, exclude evil, and preserve those inside in peace and security. The keepers of the walls therefore maintain separation from evil and separation to God, jealously shutting out all who have no right of entrance, and admitting only such as can exhibit their title. When thus they found the bride seeking after her Beloved during the night, they take away her veil; for it was incumbent upon them to ascertain whether she was what she professed to be.

What a contrast between the bride in verse 1 and in verse 7, She had said, "Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits." (Cant. 4: 16.) And He had instantly responded, "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse, . . . I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk," etc. But there followed, as is so often the case in the experience of souls, a reaction upon this supreme season of enjoyment; and hence the next words are, "I sleep, but my heart waketh." And now she, who had been so happy in the presence of her beloved, feeding in His garden, is smitten and wounded by the watchmen, and unveiled by the keepers of the walls. But this very condition into which she has fallen is the way of recovery, and the action both of the watchmen and the keepers of the walls has this in view. They are the servants of the Beloved, they have His mind, and He it is who has guided them in their work; and hence the gracious effect of their ministry immediately appears in her intensified desire after her Beloved.

This is seen in her appeal to her companions, the daughters of Jerusalem: "I charge you," she says, "O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love." Her yearning after restoration, as thus expressed, is most touching. Still, it is sad to see one who had been in the enjoyment of the intimacy of His affections compelled to enquire, from those who had never been in her special place, where her Beloved might be found. They had never been, like her, the objects of His endearments; and, strangers to the sorrow that now filled her soul, they could not understand the fervour of her emotions. Like Mary, when, as she thought, others had taken away her Lord, and she knew not where they had laid Him, she had lost everything. The world was but a vast wilderness; nay, a sepulchre, if He were lost, Happy the soul that knows something of this blessed experience!

The daughters of Jerusalem, whose eyes had not yet been opened to perceive the beauties of the Beloved, and surprised at the absorbing character of the bride's affection, reply, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? what is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?" (v. 9.) It is this question that brings out the truth of her heart, whatever had been her temporary indifference; and, fired by her zealous love at such a question, as well as astonished that any could be blind to the excellences of her Beloved, she pours forth a glowing description of His beauties, dwelling with delight upon the details of every feature, thus betraying her intimate acquaintance with the One of whom she spake, and summing all up in the familiar words, "He is altogether lovely." Then, turning to her companions, she cries, "Thus is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem."

It is a wonderful testimony, and the secret of it, as well of its power, was a full heart. Her heart was boiling over with a good matter, and she could therefore speak of the things which she had made touching the King. And this is the secret of all ability to testify of Christ. First, acquaintance with Him; and secondly, the heart filled with Himself — with the sense of His love, His grace, and His perfection. This is the best wine "that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak."

Three things remain to be noticed. First, the effect of the bride's testimony. The daughters of Jerusalem are aroused to desire to seek the Beloved with the bride. Just as when the Baptist, with a full heart of admiration, looked upon Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God," his disciples were drawn away after the One to whom their master had testified, so the

companions of the bride were irresistibly attracted to the Beloved by the testimony of the bride. Nothing affects souls like the witness of an overflowing heart in the power of the Holy Ghost.

In the next place, the bride's restoration of soul is completed. Drawn out by the question of the daughters of Jerusalem, while she lingers with joy over the beauties of her Beloved, her soul is wrought upon, her affections are revived, and she discerns at once where the object of her search is to be found, and is thus able to tell her companions. "My beloved," she says, "is gone into his garden, to the beds of spice, to feel in the gardens, and to gather lilies." All doubts have been dissipated, and she adds, with ineffable joy, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies." Let the reader carefully note this divine way of restoration. Whenever souls have fallen into a cold, lifeless condition, whenever they complain of a want of spiritual energy, let them occupy themselves with the varied perfections and graces of Christ. as revealed in the Word; and, while pondering upon what He is to themselves, let them withal declare His beauties and attractions to others, and they will find that their hearts will soon glow with the returning fire of affection, and that they will be happy again in the sense of His presence and love.

The last thing is, that the moment the restoration is effected, the Beloved expresses to the bride her preciousness in His sight, and His appreciation of her love. In one word, communion of affection follows upon her restoration. May both writer and reader be satisfied with nothing short of abiding communion in the love of Christ! E. D.