Experiencing God’s Beauty through Discipline

INTRODUCTION
This green sheet of paper here describes a CD that I was involved in making. We’ll have it available next week, but I want to give you a little of the story behind it, because it helps explain why we’re making this thing available. It’s a tool to aid in devotion. I’ll tell you more about it as we go, but I want to have you all turn to the Song of Solomon, which is right after Psalms and Proverbs in the middle of the Old Testament. I want to talk a little about that and what’s on my heart in terms of this CD and why we made it.

THE LORD IS RESTORING THE FIRST COMMANDMENT TO FIRST PLACE
In July 1988, a very surprising thing happened to me. I don’t want to tell the whole story; I’ve told it numerous times. It’s a defining moment for my life personally, and a defining moment in this church and its future. The Lord spoke with His audible voice and established Song of Solomon 8:6 in our history. Most of you have heard that story and I don’t want to go through that again, just to tell the whole history and to put it together. Basically the Lord was telling us our mandate as a church in terms of the cargo we would ship from here to other places. The Lord has given this church quite a blessing and a platform of ministries coming and going, and many, many come and many go in terms of ministry and song and proclamation. It has been a wonderful thing.

Now, not the only thing, but the main thing that God said He would do was to establish Song of Solomon 8:6; He’s setting that fiery seal upon the heart. He said He would restore the first commandment to first place. He wanted this church to have a role in that. Obviously, hundreds of thousands of ministries and churches will have a role in that, but in a very dramatic way He spoke that. “I want to restore the first commandment to first place.” But rather than using the first commandment passages in the Old and New Testament that say, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (cf. Mt. 22:37), He used the language of Song of Solomon 8:6—that the Lord would put a seal of fire upon the human heart. That fire would empower people to be lovers of God.

In that divine communication, in that experience—a very dramatic, a very defining, a very awesome experience—the Lord made it clear that the book of the Song of Solomon, this eight-chapter love song, would be used by the Lord to establish people in the first commandment. The first commandment is somewhere in the top ten in the Body of Christ, but the Lord isn’t going to be content until the first commandment is in first place. It’s acknowledged, it’s sung about, it’s talked about occasionally, it’s referred to, it’s prayed about a little, but it’s not anywhere close to first place. It will be restored to first place before the Lord returns. The Song of Solomon, this eight-chapter love song, is an essential element in God’s strategy to doing it. In that, he was telling us He was going to open this book, this love song.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SONG OF SOLOMON
Most of you are familiar enough with this eight-chapter love song to know the most important interpretations. Number one: it speaks of the natural love of marriage; the beauty of married love. It talks about Solomon, the son of David, a king who reigned about 1,000 years before Christ, and his love for his bride—the way that he wooed her, and his beauty and her beauty, and the love relationship that they had. It speaks of natural love and the beauty of married love.

The second interpretation, which I believe from the heart of God is the primary one, speaks of not King Solomon, but King Jesus. It speaks, not of Solomon's maiden, but the Bride of Christ, the people of God, who
would be the bride of Jesus in the age of eternity. This is the love song from His heart to His people. It’s the song; it’s the language and the truths that will woo His people to His heart. I believe both interpretations are very important in this hour; I believe both of them are necessary, but it’s the second interpretation that I believe is the primary interpretation on God’s heart. The wooing of God’s people to God’s heart is the way to make the first commandment first.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BRIDEGROOM HEART OF GOD
Ten years ago this coming summer, the Lord said, “I want to use this body,” and He was giving me very particular boundary lines for my ministry in the future, inasmuch as I would travel outside of Kansas City. The Lord wanted to lock me up into this area, to limit my ministry to this area of encouraging the first commandment, speaking on it and calling people to it. I would use the Song of Solomon, which I’ve done for many years now when I travel.

For the first two years, in 1988 and 1989, and then on into the summer of 1990, I remember I was a little perplexed by this whole event. I said, “Huh, Song of Solomon. I’ve read it a time or two. It didn’t really do much for me.” I remember reading it right after that event. I remember I was in a prayer session when this happened. I read the Song of Solomon, and to be quite honest with you, I was a little perplexed and a little discouraged by a mandate with the Song of Solomon. Fragrance! Perfume! Beauty! Pretty! Lovely!

“Lord, give it to Sam Storms. He would be good with something like that.” Honestly, I looked and it and said, “I don’t know, Lord; this doesn’t really seem like it’s me!” I wasn’t excited about that mandate. Of course, I know the Lord a little, and enough to know that whatever He calls us to He’ll delight us in. I said, “Lord, I’m not delighted yet with this calling and it’s a little perplexing to me.” I took the next two years and began to read commentaries on it. It didn’t gel; it didn’t make sense. If I could say it this way, I couldn’t feel God in this book. I couldn’t sense the heart of God. It didn’t woo me and it didn’t encourage me and it didn’t inspire me in any particular way. It rather confused me. It was a little boring, and the symbolism a little perplexing.

But around about the two-year mark, it all began to change. In the summer of 1990, the Lord began to open it up and tenderize my heart for this book. The last nearly eight years have been wonderful; the most powerful dimension of how God has spoken to me in my entire twenty-five-plus years of walking with the Lord has been through the Song of Solomon. I look back now nearly ten years on and say, “Oh God, what a gift. What a precious thing.”

I can imagine the Lord smiling and saying, “You know, you need to just be easy on the front of things, because I’m always doing good for you and you don’t understand it on the front end.”

I’ve had a tremendous personal transformation in my inner man related to the truths in the Song of Solomon. I go about and speak it everywhere I go; I reference this book or the subject of the Bride of Christ.

That was in 1988. Then, in November 1995, the next watershed event took place. I had a dream from the Lord. Some of you who were here remember that. The Lord in this dream spoke to me. Again, I heard the audible voice of the Lord, but I was asleep. He said, “Proclaim over the people, ‘Hephzibah, Beulah,’” from Isaiah 62. I had been familiar with the passage in Isaiah 62 and I understood what Hephzibah and Beulah meant. In the dream I stood up and I proclaimed it over this church. Hephzibah and Beulah are names that God is giving the redeemed in Isaiah 62:4-5. God says, “My delight is in you and you’re married to Me” ( Isa. 62:4-5,
paraphrased). In the dream I prophesied it over the church. "‘My delight is in you!’ says the Lord. ‘My delight is in you!’ God hasn’t called you forsaken, abandoned. Though you may be forsaken of men, God delights in you. He likes you. He wants to marry you. You’re the partner that He has longed for!”

I remember that. That was on a Saturday night, and on Sunday morning I got up and did the very thing. The Lord blessed it. It was another instalment in the Song of Solomon mandate.

Then another year went by. That was November 1995, and now it was November 1996, during the Friday night watch of the Lord. It was a year plus two weeks from this very weekend. Most of you know that “the watch of the Lord” is the term we use; it’s a biblical term. It means watching before the Lord every Friday night for five hours, from 9:00pm to 2:00am. We worship, we open our Bibles, we wait on the Lord, we have some intercession, and some prophetic activity takes place. I was attending this watch of the Lord. It’s been going on for about a year and a half, and this was a year ago.

What happened is that this unusual thing began to take place. The Lord really grabbed my attention with the phrase from a secular song, maybe from the late 1960s or early 1970s. I can’t remember who the singer was, but it was the song, “You are So Beautiful To Me.” This line grabbed my attention out of nowhere. I was just doing my regular prayer time and suddenly this came to me with such clarity. I thought, “OK…” and I was still reading what I had been reading in the Word, and it had nothing to do with what I was reading, but it didn’t seem to lift. It was an unusual thing. It doesn’t happen to me so often; maybe every few years or so something like this will take place in a very dramatic way.

What I began to do was speak the words of that song to God. I said, “You’re so beautiful to me. You’re everything I need,” or however the song goes: “You’re what I want; You’re what I need. You’re so beautiful.” The sense of God’s presence began to be manifest on my physical body. My heart began to be tenderized. I began to gently weep, and the presence of the Lord intensified, and I thought, “Whoa. I stumbled into a rare current of the Holy Spirit here accidentally.” I thought, “Whoa, this is good.” I didn’t say anything. I said, “You are so beautiful to me,” and I stayed with it for a little while. The presence of the Lord didn’t lift. In fact, I was just crowned in a sense with the manifest presence of the Lord. It was like a crown. It was like a robe resting on me. I thought, “This is wonderful. Why hasn’t this happened before?”

Then a small amount of time went by and I changed directions. Instead of saying, “God, You’re so beautiful to me,” I said, “I’m so beautiful to you.” I sang it, or I said it, to be honest. I said it a little differently. I said, “I’m beautiful to God.” I had that same experience: that crowning of God’s presence, that tenderizing, that gentle weeping, that sense of feeling God all over my body, something that up to that point I had rarely experienced. It was like a swirl of the manifestation of God’s presence. I thought, “What’s happening? I love this.”

Then I changed directions for the third time. I began to prophesy over this church and then to the Body of Christ in a widespread way. I didn’t say it out loud; I whispered. No one who was walking around me knew what was happening. There were maybe fifty people in the room and I was saying, “MCF, you’re so beautiful to the Lord. In your struggles, in your weakness, in your brokenness, in your bondage, you’re so beautiful to Him because of the redemption of Jesus, because of the willing spirit, because of the cry in your heart to be the Lord’s. It’s beautiful to Him.”
I began to say it over and over. “You’re beautiful to Him, O broken ones, despairing ones, those trapped in your sin. You’re beautiful to Him; He likes you, He delights in you. Hephzibah, you’re beautiful. Beulah, you’re the one He has chosen.”

I was really in sort of a spiritual romance. I was thinking, “This is hot! This is good.” It literally went on for five hours. I was so energized by this.

At that time the watch of the Lord went from 9:00pm to 5:00am. At around the six-month mark, in November of last year, that kind of died down. We moved it back to 2:00am. But at this time it went the whole night. I remember I went home and got to bed around 6:00am, and woke up at 9:00am, a few hours later, and it was still on me. This was November 30, 1996. I came back and the building was empty. All the lights were off. I came over and walked right up to the same spot. I figured there might be some angel over here; you never know. I don’t really know how all that works, but I went right to the same spot, right over here. Don’t go stand over there and walk and try to make something happen. That was even dumb that I even told you that! Some of you’ll take it seriously. I went over there and for maybe an hour or two—I didn’t really time it—I did the same thing. I got caught up in that same energy. It was right there instantly, again. I said, “OK, here I am, Lord.” I was feeling a little tired, a little groggy. I said, “You’re so beautiful to me. Whoa! There it is!” The Spirit of the Lord was right there. “MCF, you’re so beautiful to God. I’m beautiful to You.” I was just caught up in it for an hour or two. I said, “That was wonderful.”

Then I began to put it together. The Song of Solomon—this is the mandate that God is going to give this body to ship to the nations, and really it’s the issue of the first commandment, wholehearted love and the beauty of God. That was in 1988. Then in 1995, I heard the prophecy, the proclamation, “Hephzibah, God delights in you!” and then in 1996, “You’re so beautiful.”

About a week or two went by and I was opening my mail at the office, and one of the ladies in the congregation here—a very precious woman of God in whom I have confidence, because she’s solid and straight and has a foundation in the Lord in a really good way—had sent me a letter. It was Cindy from the north side. She had been here from about 1985 or 1986. I had known her for a long time. Apologetically, she said, “I had the weirdest dream about you. I feel a little shy about telling you. It was a little weird, but here goes.”

That’s the interpretation of that first paragraph there. I thought, “Alright…”

Now remember, November 30 was the night when I had that experience. She said, “On November 30, I saw you in a dream singing over the church the secular love song, ‘You are So Beautiful To Me.’”

I said, “Whoa!” Does that mean I’m going to start singing to you? No, I don’t think that’s what that really means.

Someone said, “We don’t either!”

I was reading the message. On the very night this was happening, the Lord was giving this dream, the very song, and in this dream she saw me proclaiming this. In the next week or two or three, or month or so, I received two or three letters from people from around the nation. One lady was from Chicago, one from Minneapolis, one from Minnesota, and they all reported the same thing—not the same secular song, “You are so
Beautiful to Me,” but they said, “God is going to give a new song to this church about the loveliness of God.” It happened two or three times. Three times I had to go back and look at my notes. I was just overwhelmed by this last year. I said, “What’s going on here?”

MOVING BEYOND THE INITIAL, LIMITED THEOLOGY OF MOSES

The Lord is saying, “I want to give a new paradigm to this people of what God looks like. I want to give them a new set of lenses. I want them to view God and themselves in an entirely different way, a higher way than they’ve ever known before, a higher way than they’ve even understood.”

Moses was the first main theologian in the Word of God. In all of redemptive history, he was the first primary theologian. Obviously, some before Moses had revelation of God, but Moses was the first one whom God set apart as one who would lay line-upon-line doctrine about what God is like and what the redeemed are like. Moses has been revered throughout redemptive history as the main man in those days. There was no one equal to Moses in those early years of redemptive history. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He only gave Moses a small amount of understanding of what He was like.

But the problem throughout church history has been this: we’ve taken the little that God showed Moses and assumed it was the whole thing. God showed Moses a certain view, a certain angle of His personality, of what He was like as a righteous judge who was terrifying against rebellion. He would smash rebellion in time and in eternity. In Exodus 19, the mountain was ablaze with fire and everyone trembled, and God really is a God who produces trembling, and the mountain shakes, and His terrifying judgments are made manifest against rebellion. Moses’ paradigm of God was very clear, but it was very limited, and that’s the part that church history hasn’t always understood. It was very clear, it was accurate, but it was limited. Moses had a part; it wasn’t comprehensive. He didn’t have the whole thing. Moses’ paradigm of God was that of a righteous judge who was terrifying. Moses’ paradigm of obedience was related to temporal blessing in this life. If you obeyed, good things happened in this life. If you disobeyed, bad things happened in this life. Moses looked at a God who was terrifying, and he talked about obedience as related to earthly blessing, or the withholding of earthly blessing called temporal judgment.

For thousands of years, the people of God, the redeemed, in both the old and new covenants, have taken their main cues about God and about life from that Mosaic paradigm of God. The problem is that although it’s accurate, it’s limited. It’s not the whole picture. Even to this day, most believers I interact with are still stuck in the limited view that Moses had of what God was like. They see God as terrifying against themselves and they see obedience mostly through the grid of being rewarded if you obey and being punished if you disobey. Most of them are stuck there with a God who is fiery, who doesn’t really like them, but He’s stuck. He has to like them because He already killed Jesus, so He’s stuck with you. Legally, He has to accept you, and good and bad will take place in the earthly arena and that will be the measure of how obedience is understood. That’s the way we view obedience, through bad things happening. That’s what obedience is about. “Obey, get a bigger ministry; disobey, lose your ministry. Obey, have more prosperity, a bigger sphere in your finances, have more blessed relationships; disobey and lose it.” Most people think of obedience with that grid, through that lens, that paradigm.

DAVID WAS A LIFELONG STUDENT OF THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD

About 400 years after Moses came along this young man, this young guitar player from the hills of Bethlehem named David. God began to open up a new angle, a new dimension of His heart to this young musician named
David. He said, “David, Moses is really right; I am terrifying, and obedience does relate to earthly circumstances, but that’s not all I have to say about myself. It’s all I’ve said up to this time, but I haven’t really said much more than that.”

One of the most amazing things about God is His desire, His delight, and His strategy to hide His beauty. God is indescribable in His beauty, but He’s hidden throughout all of redemptive history. He gives little tokens of it. The revelation of His beauty grows and escalates to the end-time church, and that will be the pinnacle of His beauty in this age. And then, in the age to come, it really goes into the next level of understanding God’s beauty. God hides His beauty. That’s one of His very clear statements in Scripture. He hides it, but to this young shepherd boy, this young musician, God says, “Let me show you a little about My beauty,” and the beauty of the Lord became the theme of David’s life.

Then David began to become a theologian, second only to Moses. He didn’t have the same place as a theologian. We have the book of Psalms; it’s about the beauty of the Lord. It’s about the beauty of God’s people. That’s a prominent theme in Psalms. There are a number of different terminologies, but it comes down to that. That’s not the only theme in Psalms, but it’s a clear, prominent theme. In Psalms, it’s a new theological insight. David takes new ground in redemptive history. Moses is in heaven looking down saying, “Hey, not bad. How come I didn’t get to bring that?”

The Lord says, “David doesn’t have it all either; just a glimpse into it.” That became King David’s life. He gazed on the beauty of God all the days of his life. It was the defining element of David, the beauty of God, with many, many sub-departments of thought on this issue of God’s beauty. David only had an introduction.

In the next generation, his son, Solomon, went way beyond David. God, if you will, downloaded into his spirit a whole new fullness concerning the subject of the beauty of God—His fragrance, His longings, how He beautifies His people, how He shares His beauty, how He imparts it, and how He makes His people beautiful like He is. Solomon went far beyond his father, David. We have the Song of Solomon, the most rare, unique, priceless document up to that time; there’s nothing like it. God unfolds His heart in symbolic language and talks about the desires, the longings, the beauty that He possesses and that He imparts into His people.

King Solomon went far beyond his father, David, who went far beyond Moses. Then the prophets came along and they became as theologians, articulating what God is like, and they took an extra step. Then the gospels emphasized that this God was fully human. Not only is He beautiful; not only is He God and terrifying. David and Solomon said, “Yes, He’s God. He’s terrifying, but He’s beautiful.” The prophets outline and fill that out a bit, and the gospels come around and say, “He’s fully human. The beautiful God is fully human.”

Then the epistles come along and say, “He wants your partnership. He wants to be your partner and He wants you to be His partner.” The beautiful God who is fully human wants you in partnership with Him in this spread of His purpose on the earth.

**THE SONG OF THE SOLOMON IS THE DOORWAY THROUGH THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

Then the book of Revelation comes along, and it’s magnificent; it exceeds the Song of Solomon and marries all of them together: the terrifying God of Moses, the beauty of David and Solomon, the splendor that’s revealed in the prophets, the humanness that’s revealed in the gospels, the partnership in the epistles, the book of Revelation. Beloved, there’s no book like it anywhere in all of history. No book is like Revelation. It brings
them all together; it’s the final statement of God to the human race. It’s stunning. He marries them all together. We can’t afford to go without the book of Revelation.

At least in my experience with the book of Revelation, the real introduction to this facet of beauty is through the doorway of the Song of Solomon. Song of Solomon is the doorway into the book of Revelation, which is the final statement, the grand statement, the fullest statement God will ever make about Himself to the human race in this age; there’s nothing like it. The most prized document any human being will ever touch is that document given right in the center of the Aegean Sea 2,000 years ago to an aged apostle in prison. Boom! It’s given to him. That priceless information, the jewel of the human race as far as I’m concerned, is that document. The way into that jewel, I’ve found in my experience, is through the door of Song of Solomon.

David encountered it in the Psalms, and Solomon took it a step further. It’s a paradigm centered on the beauty of God relating to the subject of fragrance. Fragrance is one of the images; it’s one of the figures by which God’s beauty is spoken in Song of Solomon. It changes your life. God shares His beauty with His people. Most believers are stuck with Moses; they’re stuck in the Moses paradigm of obedience, the Moses paradigm of God, the elementary, introductory revelation that God gave the human race through Moses, and they haven’t gone on to David and Solomon. They’re stuck.

OBEDIENCE IS THE CONTEXT IN WHICH WE ENJOY BEAUTY

Beloved, when you begin to see a God who is beautiful, it’s not long until you see the next logical implication of a beautiful God: He beautifies His people, the redeemed. A beautiful God with a beautiful people changes your emotional chemistry when it connects with you. In the last ten years since the Lord gave this mandate of Song of Solomon, I’ve began to really press into it, and I know that I’m at the tip of the iceberg only, but it has changed me. This divine information about God’s beauty changes your emotional chemistry. It changes the way you feel; it changes the way you look at life. It ruins you for everyday, normal life. It’s supposed to. Yet I feel this mandate, this defining moment, these supernatural events, but I look at this flock, this flock that God has called me to be a shepherd over. Most of them are completely unfamiliar with the prized jewel of this love song of eight chapters, and how many more are unfamiliar with the book of Revelation. I look at the people I love most anywhere in the earth, and they’re living under the paradigm of Moses. When they sin they run from God instead of to God. They obey so that their ministry will go better or so that circumstances will be easier. Obedience is what enables the beauty of God to crown your experience. Obedience is more than an issue of temporal circumstance on the earth; obedience is the doorway by which God unfolds you and breaks forth in power and transforms all around you.

David and Solomon’s paradigm of obedience was significantly related to the subject of the beauty of God and all of its sub-departments. There’s a far higher way to approach sin and obedience than through judgment and circumstance. It’s through the paradigm of beauty. It’s a beautiful God calling you to indescribable beauty, and it’s passed on through you. You enjoy it through the context of obedience, but the real subject, if you go to heaven, is the subject of beauty. It’s not the subject of gritting your teeth and hurting. People think of obedience like this: “Oh, that’s the thing you do. You grit your teeth and hurt and you’ll probably blow it and you’ll get wiped out in the end so why try?” That’s how most people view obedience. Obedience is the context in which you enjoy beauty. You feel beauty, you pass it on to others, you rejoice in it, you flow in it. You say, “Oh, this is good. This is wise.” That’s the paradigm of God and obedience that David and Solomon initiated.
A CHALLENGE TO ENGAGE WITH AND PROCLAIM THE SONG OF SOLOMON

We’re in Song of Solomon. I was telling this all to Wes Campbell. We were stuck in an airport one time with a four-hour layover. Wes Campbell is a pastor from Canada; most of you know his name. I’m up here and he’s saying, “What’s going on?”

It was the forty-day fast last year and I said, “Oh, I’ve been getting captured with the subject of God’s beauty, just some months ago in November.” It was now February of this year. I said, “The Lord has spoken this thing about beauty and this lady had this dream. I was singing the song ‘You are So Beautiful.’” I said, “The Song of Solomon! I love it, I love it, I love it. That’s what I’m preaching.”

He said, “How is your church doing with that? Do they understand it?”

I said, “No, not really.”

He said, “Does that bother you?”

I said, “Yeah, but how many weeks in a row can you preach on Song of Solomon? People just all drown in it.”

Not everyone; some of you’ll come up afterwards and say, “Oh, do another week please, please, please.” In the big picture it’s not the only diet God has for His Word. It’s my favorite one; it’s the one I like the best, but a body needs the whole diet, not just a one-string fiddle, so to speak.

He said, “Here’s what I want you to do. I have an idea and I want you to do it.” He said, “You’re coming to do a conference at our church in a few months.”

I said, “Yeah, in Canada.”

He said, “I will have professional recording equipment set up. I will get some musicians. I’ll get Joann McFatter to help in song and I want you to pray Song of Solomon in a way that blesses you.”

I said, “What do you mean?”

He said, “I will record it and put Joann’s music on it with all the musicians.”

I said, “I’m going to go in a basement and pray and pretend like you five guys aren’t there, right?”

He said, “Yeah.”

“OK, and you’ll record it and give it to people?”

He said, “Yeah.”

“Have Joann sing on it and get some more musicians? No, that’s dumb. I don’t like that. That’s weird to me. I can’t do that.”
He said, “I bet you could. You just lock in and you close your eyes and you open them an hour later and we will record it.”

I went to his place and had everyone set up there. I can’t rehearse this, so I just took the Song of Solomon, closed my eyes, and prayed it for an hour with just a momentary break, literally five or ten seconds here and there. They captured it. They got all the music and many of the songs Joann sings.

That’s what this thing is about. It’s a tool. He said, “Why won’t you help your people get connected in the flow of Song of Solomon?”

“I AM DARK, BUT LOVELY, O DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM”
The theme of the book is in Song of Songs 1:1-4. Chapter 1:1-4 is the theme; it’s magnificent. Every line is filled with meaning. In verse 5, the journey of the maiden begins, and it begins in a very significant place. This is the absolutely indispensable—I’m saying this strongly because I believe it—beginning place for people who are going to mature in the first commandment. “I’m dark, but I’m lovely” (Song 1:5, paraphrased). It’s the paradox of grace. The maiden understands the darkness of her sinful heart, but the paradox of her loveliness before God. She stands before God, not deceived about her bondage. She isn’t in presumption; she isn’t living in denial or cover-up about her struggle and her brokenness. She’s fully open about it. “I’m dark of heart, I’m in bondage, I’m struggling, I’m failing, but in Christ Jesus I’ve been crowned lovely in redemption.”

WE’RE LOVELY TO GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE STRUGGLE
This series on beauty might go on and on and on with some intermissions, because I feel I need to stay on it. I’ve been working on this theme for a year, ever since that dream, and I want to begin sharing now line upon line the things that the Lord has communicated to me about his beauty. I don’t intend to explain why we’re lovely to God; I want to declare that we’re lovely to God in the midst of the struggle. Some people, because they’re living in serious unreality, think they have no struggles. “I’m doing so phenomenally; therefore I’m lovely.” Their loveliness in their own mind is rooted in the fact that they’re doing well. That’s a total deception. You’re not lovely because you’re doing well. If you think you’re doing really, really well, you’re probably out of touch with the true standard of what it’s about.

WE CAN’T MATURE IN LOVE TILL WE KNOW THAT WE’RE LOVELY TO GOD
All of us have major struggles (Js. 3:2). Paul the apostle even spoke of the fears that hounded him at the very end of his life, and the pride that was still so much a part of his life that God had to put a thorn in his flesh to keep him from exalting himself as a mature apostle (2 Cor. 12:1-9). I take seriously the fallenness of the human heart, but I take seriously the redemption of Jesus that makes us beautiful in the midst of our fallenness. Most people say, “I’m dark of heart.” They acknowledge their struggle; they acknowledge their bondage and they say, “I’m dark of heart and I’m ugly to God; I’m ugly to myself, and I’m ugly to anyone who understands me. I’m dark and ugly.”

That’s not the beginning point. You’ll never mature in the first commandment until you somewhere, at least in an introductory way, can say, “I’m dark in my struggle. I’m dropping the ball, but I’m indescribably lovely to a God who shares His beauty with His people and crowns them as beautiful in redemption.”
THE PROGRESSION OF HOLY PASSION IN THE HEART OF THE BRIDE

Again, we’ll look at why and how He does that at another time. All of chapter 1 and the first half of chapter 2 describe the first seasons of her progress. She’s on this journey. It’s an eight-chapter love song, describing her progression into holy passion, step by step. It’s my favorite course in the training center. It seems like every year or two I get a chance to teach this straight through for twenty sessions. I absolutely love it. I love people getting touched and changed, but I love it going through my own soul again, and it always changes me to teach this course. I walk away thinking, “I really believe it this time. This time I really believe it.” Then the enemy comes and diminishes it. The teaching of this course is absolutely one of the greatest things that happens in my life in a natural way, because my heart has to run through this all again for twenty sessions at the training center.

Incidentally, for some of you who came up afterwards and asked about this, you can get tapes of this at the bookstore. If you want to work through it, we have a workbook if that’s something that strikes you at this time. What I’m really saying is that this book has to touch us sometime, somewhere. That’s our calling as a people: to swim in the waters, the refreshing waters of the fragrance of God in this book.

THE WORD OF GOD IS THE BEST COMMENTARY ON THE WORD OF GOD

Anyway, for the first chapter and a half, the Lord reveals Himself to her in His loveliness. He reveals her as lovely in her immaturity. It begins there. There are five different faces of Jesus in the eight-chapter love song. Five different times He reveals Himself in a completely new way.

She is so filled with the pleasure of God. She is so rejoicing. I’m looking at this, and at each line I want to go off into a little parenthesis, but I think today I’ll just do one of them. Right in the middle of chapter 2:3, she’s struggling in immaturity. That’s very clear through the language. By the way, here’s another parenthesis: the language and symbolism aren’t that difficult. There are about fifteen or twenty main symbols. They’re all defined in other parts of the Word of God. The Word of God is the best commentary on the Word of God. If you want to know what flowers mean, God defines what flowers mean in other parts of the Word of God. There are about twenty symbols. Once you get these twenty symbols, they’re not even that confusing; all of a sudden, the doorway opens and you begin understanding it a little. Only the Lord Himself can reveal it to your spirit.

UNDERSTANDING THE BEAUTY OF GOD WILL MAKE A MAN A MAN

When I first looked at this book, in the first two years, I didn’t understand the symbols. I didn’t even like the idea. Perfume and fragrance and sweetness! I thought, “I don’t know; I don’t know,” but now that I look back, I do know. This doesn’t undermine our masculinity; it establishes our masculinity. It makes a man a man to understand the fragrance of the beauty of God and how God gives it to him. At first I thought it was something that really wouldn’t suit me well. Now I look back, and it was the most wonderful thing God ever gave me. Don’t be afraid of the symbolism, and, if you’re a man, don’t be afraid of the feminine language and paradigm of the tenderness and the beauty and the fragrance of God’s heart, because He wants to awaken that part of who we are in redemption. Sam, you need to get the tapes and really work on this heart, and you’re really going to enjoy it. Actually, Sam is really good at this stuff. This is something the Lord has given him in a special way. He has a book coming out, a new one, called The Singing Heart of God. These themes are really captured, and I’m really excited for that book to come out in a month or two.

She’s still struggling in immaturity in chapter 2:3. She says, “I sat down in his shade with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste” (Song 2:3). What a sentence! She’s sitting; she isn’t striving. She’s in a place of
rest. It’s His shade, not her shade. It’s the shade of the tree, the tree of the cross, the finished work of the cross. She’s resting under the shade of that great tree on which Jesus paid the price of sin. She says, “It was great delight. I could feel that God liked me, and I liked God. I liked my fellowship with God. His fruit was very sweet to me.”

She’s broken, she’s immature, she’s very young in the Word and the things of the Spirit, but she has the capacity with the right view of God to sit in the shade, and rest, and eat fruit that’s sweet to her taste in great delight. She is enjoying Jesus in this season of her life. Do you know why so many of us don’t enjoy the Lord even twenty, thirty, forty years later? Because we’re standing; we’re not sitting. We’re not in His shade; we’re trying to create our own shade. We’re trying to present ourselves to God based on our own immaturity, and when our maturity is low, we feel rejected. When our maturity is high, we feel secure, and of course pride comes with it. We either feel rejected or we feel pride when we gauge ourselves by our own maturity level. It’s not your shade; it’s His. It’s the shade produced by the tree on which He hung, and you sit in it. You receive and it’s sweet and it gives even the journey a touch of delight.

She’s having the time of her life right now. She takes the phone off the hook, locks the door, puts her Vineyard worship music on, gets her best devotionals out, and says, “Oh, I love You, I love You, I love You.” That’s where she’s at. In her struggle, she’s enjoying God, feeling God, seeing God’s beauty, seeing herself as lovely to the Lord even though she’s immature. It’s fantastic! Every line in chapter 1 and chapter 2 develops that theme in a remarkable and poetic and romantic way from the heart of God.

“HE COMES LEAPING UPON THE MOUNTAINS, SKIPPING UPON THE HILLS”
Then, suddenly, in chapter 2:8, it all changes. Here we see the second face of God. He’s not the One feeding her grapes underneath a shade tree, lying on a bed behind a fence, behind closed doors. He changes. She says, “He comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills” (Song 2:8). She compares Him to a gazelle. She looks at Jesus and He’s skipping effortlessly over hills. She says, “Huh! I thought You were feeding me grapes in my private house with the door locked and the phone off the hook and the sweet music.”

He says, “I do that, but that’s not all I do. I’m the One who skips and leaps on mountains effortlessly.” There are several meanings for the symbolism of mountains in the Word of God that are all in the same vein of thought. Mountains speak of obstacles. Jesus said, “You’ll speak to the mountain and it will move” (Mt. 17:20, paraphrased). Mountains are obstacles. Mountains are governments that rise up against God. It talks about the opposing governments; powers and principalities are mountains. Opposing nations are mountains to the kingdom of God, and that’s clear in the symbolism from Genesis to Revelation.

Jesus is pictured leaping effortlessly on the mountains, like a deer, like a gazelle, saying, “They form no obstacle to Me. My Father has given Me all authority.” He’s leaping and skipping on mountains. It’s wonderful; it’s new to her, but it’s wonderful. It’s the Jesus with the mandate to disciple nations.

IT’S SAFER ON THE WATER WITH JESUS, THAN IN THE BOAT WITHOUT HIM
He looks at her. She’s behind her bed, eating her grapes, with her sweet music, enjoying the Lord in her brokenness, and He says, “Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away with Me” (Song 2:10, paraphrased).

“Come with You where?”
“On the mountains. You’re My partner. I don’t want to do it without you. You’ll never enter into the fullness of your beauty and you’ll never know what life is about until you leave the comfort zone and come with Me on the mountains.”

The mountains mean different things to different people in different seasons of your life, but Jesus is confronting the comfort zone. Peter was in the boat and the storm came. Jesus was on the water and He said, “Come” (Mt. 14:29). It’s the same idea: “Come out of the boat, away from your comfort zone.”

Do you know what, beloved? It’s safer with Jesus on the water than in the boat without Jesus. We all know that, but it terrifies us to walk it out. We all can say yes and we can all come preach a sermon on it, but when Jesus is out of the boat and He tells you to come out or He tells you to come to the mountains—it’s the same idea—we say, “No, let me pray about that for a while.” It’s a great concept; it’s another thing to do in reality.

He’s on the mountains and He says, “Come with Me. It’s safer with Me on the mountains than it is on your bed behind locked doors. You’re My partner. Your beauty will only be fully experienced in the context of My embrace, discipling nations.”

Those nations are in our neighborhoods and in the context of our families and in our work place. You don’t have to go get on a plane to go disciple the nations; the nations are in your backyard. Your nations are in your neighborhood. “The nations” means the people God puts you in front of.

CHALLENGED AND WOOED BY THE LORD TO A NEW ENDEAVOR OF OBEDIENCE
This is what happens in verses 8-17. She isn’t being rebellious; she’s afraid and immature. In verse 17 she turns Him away and she says, “No, I can’t. I have too much fear. I have too much fear” (Song 2:17, paraphrased). The Lord feels the trembling of her heart. In verse 17 she says no. The Lord is encouraging her. Again, every line is filled with such meaning. It’s fantastic. Every single phrase, I believe, can be a volume, an entire book written in the heart of God with a one-phrase title. Every phrase is a whole volume that God could say about this dimension of the song. This is the great love song of all the ages.

The Lord knows that she’s going to say in verse 17, “Turn away; I can’t go with You to the mountains. I can’t rise up. I don’t have the power.” He begins to woo her in verse 14. He has been wooing her in verses 11-13 as well, but in 14 He feels her heart trembling. The Lord is calling all of us out of the comfort zone. Every one of us, undoubtedly, is in a season where we’re being challenged by the Lord to a new endeavor of obedience. Most of us in this room are in a place where our hearts are trembling and we’re saying, “I don’t want to, I don’t want to! I can’t, not yet; give me more time. I promise I will, but not right now.” That’s where most of us are right now. Is that true? It’s true.

The Lord looks at her and says, “Here’s what you’ll do. I can see you; I can feel the trembling of your heart.” Look at the middle of verse 14: “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice.” Why? “Your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely” (Song 2:14). “I feel your fear. I can feel the trembling of your spirit. I know you think the first commandment of wholeheartedness is going to hurt you. It will crown you with beauty. I know you don’t know that. I know you think that getting out of the comfort zone will hurt you, but it really will crown you with beauty. I know you don’t know that. Ask Me for help.”

She says, “I will come before you.”
THE BEAUTIFUL GOD WILL MAKE HIS PEOPLE BEAUTIFUL
Here’s what religion says. If all you have is Moses, you say, “I can’t ask You for help because my voice is an abomination. My prayers are an abomination to You.”

The Lord says, “No, they aren’t. Your voice is sweet to Me. Just say, ‘Please help.’ It’s sweet to Me.”

The beautiful God who makes His people beautiful says, “Even the cry of help is sweet to me. I love it. I like it when you’re struggling and you’re caught in the mud.”

You say, “Help, oh please help.”

He says, “It’s sweet to My heart.” He’s the uncreated God declaring this over the redeemed. He says, “Not only that, but you’re lovely to Me. You’re beautiful.” Most people when they struggle imagine that their voice is an abomination and their face is ugly to God. It’s a totally new paradigm. Solomon takes whole new ground. David introduces it and Solomon establishes it. The immature are lovely and their voices are sweet, even in the cry for help.

“CATCH US THE FOXES, THE LITTLE FOXES, THAT SPOIL THE VINE”
In verse 15, she prays, “Catch the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vineyard” (Song 2:15). The vines and vineyard, in the symbolism of the eight-chapter love song in the Song of Solomon, speak of her love. The fruitful vine speaks of mature love. She says, “The little foxes, the little areas of fear, are destroying my ability to walk in love. My vine is being destroyed by these little compromises. It’s not the scandals I’m worried about. I can’t let go; I’m too afraid to do it. I don’t want to be used in evangelism. I don’t want to be used to speak the word of the Lord to someone. I don’t want to take a stand and believe for something. I’m afraid if I come out of this I’ll hurt, so I don’t want to go out of it.”

The Lord says, “The little foxes are destroying your ability to enjoy love.”

“MY BELOVED IS MINE, AND I AM HIS”
Then, what she says next is so powerful. Here she is in the midst of her struggles and she says, “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (Song 2:16). She says this and beloved, if you can say this, you win. She says, “I love You and You love me and I know it. It’s not an issue of You forsaking me; it’s not an issue of me being ugly because I’m broken. You love me. I love You. You love me. You love me. You love me. You just told me in verse 14 that my face is lovely. You just told me that my voice is sweet. I love You. You love me. I love You. You love me.”

She stays in that reality in the struggle. Here’s what most of us do. “I’m a hypocrite. It’s too late. I’m in despair. It’s already too late for me to walk in love.” In despair and condemnation they quit, but she refuses to yield to that in verse 16.

In verse 17 she says, “I can’t do it. I prayed like You asked me to pray in verse 14, and I prayed in verse 15, ‘Catch the foxes,’ and I can’t do it. I’m still afraid.”

The Lord says, “OK, I understand.”
HE WILL PRY OUR HANDS FREE OF THE THINGS THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN FEAR

Just a few more, final comments, and then I’ll pray over you. I call chapter 3 “the dark night of love.” It’s the sweet chastisement. The Lord knows she is in a dilemma. The Lord knows if she doesn’t arise and leave the comfort zone, she will never walk in beauty and enjoyment to the fullness. The Lord knows she is His inheritance. He looks at her and says, “I’ll be tender with you and I’ll be gentle, but I will pry your hands free from the thing that you’re hanging onto to keep you earthbound in fear. I will bring you into beauty.”

The rest of the book is the beauty of God. We’ll look at it a little more next week. He says, “I will crown you with beauty and pleasure, but I have to pry your fingers loose first.”

“BY NIGHT ON MY BED I SOUGHT HIM WHOM MY SOUL LOVES”

“By night on my bed I sought the Lord; I sought the One I love, but I did not find Him” (Song 3:1, paraphrased). Here she is by night; she is in the dark night right now. She has turned the Lord away. She is on her bed. She isn’t supposed to be on the bed; that’s chapter 1. She’s supposed to be on mountaintops with the Lord. She’s supposed to arise and leave the bed. She said, “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, not yet.” She’s still on her bed. It’s the night time in her soul right now.

She says, “But You’re the one I love. You told me I was sweet and lovely. You told me You love me and You know I love You. I love You, I love You, I love You. You’re the one I love.” She’s sincere in love, but she’s not yet mature. Beloved, you can be sincere and not be mature.

You’re not a hopeless hypocrite; you’re not despised of God. You’re immature, but you still love Him. The night still settles down upon her soul. The Lord has worked in such a way; in a holy way, in a good way, she is addicted to his presence. She says, “Oh, You’ve become so dear to me. I can’t live without feeling You.”

He says, “Good! I will withdraw My presence in order to draw you off the bed into greater beauty than you’ve ever known.”

“I sought Him, but I did not find Him.” The dark night sets in; the terror of the night, the dark night. “I can’t find Him, I can’t feel Him, I don’t feel beautiful. Oh God, I’m so used to You. I’m so connected to feeling You, I can’t live without You.”

He says, “I’m only prying your hands loose to bring you to greater enjoyment and greater beauty and greater understanding of who I am.”

“I WILL ARISE NOW, AND GO ABOUT THE CITY IN THE STREETS”

Finally, in verse 2, she determines to arise. She acknowledges that the hiding of God was sweet chastisement. She acknowledges it as the sweet discipline of the Lord to pry her loose from being earthbound.

Beloved, if God keeps us earthbound in our thinking, yes, we feel safe, but we’re empty, we’re despairing, we feel lonely, and we never enter into the beauty we have in redemption when we stay earthbound in our thinking. It’s God’s kindness to pry us loose.

She says, “I will arise, and I don’t care what it costs me. I don’t care what it costs me.” There’s a lot to say in between verses 1 and 2 that I’m skipping. “I don’t care what it costs me; I want the manifest presence of God.”
God says, “I’m not angry. That’s not why I left you. I want to woo you because I love you so much. I want you to feel more and experience more.”

THE GOD WHO CHASTISES US UNTIL WE FACE OUR FEARS
Then in verse 4, she goes into the house of her mother. Her mother throughout the book speaks of the wider, the larger Body of Christ. I won’t develop that figure right now, but it speaks of that. Even Paul the apostle uses that figure of the mother as speaking of redemptive history. She comes to the confession. Blessed be the God who chastises us until we face our fears. Blessed be the God whose sweet discipline won’t leave us earthbound, but will bring us out of our fears and into life in the spirit.

Amen. Let’s stand.

MINISTRY TIME
Beloved, undoubtedly some of us in this room have been challenged by the Lord right now, and you’re still on your bed and He wants you on mountaintops. I’m not talking about something really exotic or bizarre; that’s not what I mean by mountaintops. I’m talking about the little challenges that are mountains to you that cause fear, that paralyse you. The Lord says, “I want you to rise.”

You say, “I’m stuck in my bondage.” Some of you are stuck in scandalous sins.

The Lord says, “I like you. Let Me hear your voice.”

“I can’t. I’m stuck in pornography. I don’t want to pray. My prayers are despised.”

God says, “No, your voice is sweet to Me. Pray for deliverance. Your face is lovely; come to Me.”

“I can’t get out of pornography, God. Do You understand? I’m stuck. I can’t go to the mountains.”

He says, “Ask me. When I withhold My presence, I will woo you with such a fiery desire that you’ll eventually reach to Me until I deliver you.”

Do you know what most people do? They run from God instead of to God because they see themselves as ugly and despised instead of lovely and sweet. Beloved, when you begin to get the revelation that you’re not a hypocrite, and that your love is real, and that you’re sweet and lovely, and that you’re loved though immature, you will arise. It won’t matter what it costs you. You’ll desire to experience more of what you had, no matter what the cost.

I want to lead us right now. Father, we want to arise. Lord, we want to arise right now. We want to leave the comfort zone of our sin and we want to be embraced by You.

I will play this tape. It’s one excerpt; it’s about four minutes. Joann isn’t on this one. She is on a number of them. I’m just praying a devotional.
MIKE ON TAPE:
Oh, I turned You away. You were skipping on mountains and leaping on hills so longing for my partnership with You as Your bride. So longing that I would arise and flee the comfort zone; that I would get out of the boat, walk upon the water with you, but I turned You away. The little foxes have spoiled the fresh love of my devotion to You. But don’t turn Your face away from me, O God. Call me forth; embrace me as You hear my sweet voice.