

Session 4 The Paradox of Grace: Dark but Lovely (Song 1:5-11)

For **additional study material pertaining to this session, see mikebickle.org*

I. THE PARADOX OF GRACE: DARK, BUT LOVELY (1:5-6)

A. The Bride's spiritual journey begins with what I refer to as the "paradox of grace," because, as she discovers her sin, she sees that she is lovely to God. We see this in her twofold confession of faith (1:5). The Holy Spirit allows her to see her sinfulness as well as her loveliness to God. The tents in the fields of Kedar were dirty, while the curtains in Solomon's temple were beautiful.

⁵I am dark [in my heart], but lovely [to God], O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. ⁶Do not look upon me, because I am dark... (Song 1:5-6)

B. The spiritual crisis of stumbling and failing is common to every believer. How we respond to this crisis determines whether we go forward to grow strong in the Lord or draw back in shame. The Bridegroom King gave the maiden a sevenfold answer to her spiritual crisis (1:8-11).

C. God shows different emotions, depending on how people respond to Him. Some people are confused, not knowing whether God is mad, sad, or glad. We must not think God is mad with us, and live in *condemnation*, when He is actually delighting over us. Neither should we live in *presumption* and think He delights in us when He is grieved over our intentional compromise.

D. We must understand the foundational premise that spiritual immaturity is not rebellion. They may sometimes look outwardly the same, but they come from different heart responses. A sincere yet immature believer shows their sincerity by quickly repenting and renewing their war against the sin they just stumbled in. God enjoys His relationship with the sincere believer who stumbles, but rebellion (consistent intentional compromise) arouses His anger.

E. One who genuinely loves God has a "willing spirit"—they are sincerely seeking to obey Him. Our obedience and love for God are sincere, even while weak and flawed; weak love is not false love. But the *sincere intention* to pursue full obedience is different from the *attainment* of it.

⁴¹"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mt. 26:41)

F. I believe that the most powerful longing of the human heart is for the assurance that we are enjoyed by God. We were created with a longing to be pursued, delighted in, and enjoyed by God. The fear of rejection and the trauma of shame are emotionally devastating. If we "feel" rejection from God, even though He is not rejecting us, it greatly hinders our spiritual life.

G. A sincere yet weak believer will grow most effectively with ***confidence in love***—confidence in God's love for them and confidence in knowing that He esteems their love for Him as genuine. The foundation for this confidence comes by understanding Jesus' work on the cross. When we understand ***what*** He did on the cross, then we can understand ***why*** He did it.

H. God enjoys and delights in the relationship with His people, even now in our spiritual immaturity (Lk. 15:4-5, 8-10, 20). A hypocrite is not one who says one thing, but does another thing; rather, it is one who says something about obeying God without *seeking or intending* to obey it.

II. HER JOURNEY BEGINS WITH THE PARADOX OF GRACE (1:5-11)

- A. The paradox of our faith is that we are dark in our heart, yet lovely to God. Some emphasize how sinful we are (darkness of heart), and others how beautiful we are to God (in Christ). Both of these truths must be held in tension to properly understand our relationship with God in Christ.

⁵*I am dark [in heart], but lovely [to God]...⁶*my own vineyard [heart] I have not kept.*
(Song 1:5-6)*

- B. We are lovely before God, even in our weakness, for four reasons:

1. **God's personality:** God has a loving and kind personality. In other words, because of who God is, He sees us in His generosity—“*Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.*”

2. **The gift of righteousness:** We receive the beauty of Jesus' righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

3. **A willing spirit:** A willing spirit, the sincere intention to obey God, is beautiful to Him.

⁴¹*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.* (Mt. 26:41)

⁴*The incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit...is precious in the sight of God.*
(1 Pet. 3:4)

4. **Our eternal destiny:** In the resurrection we will live in perfect love forever. God sees the end from the beginning and sees us now in the light of eternity, with perfect obedience.

III. HER SPIRITUAL CRISIS (1:6-7)

- A. The maiden described five pressures related to her spiritual crisis (1:6-7). She felt shame when people stared at her because of her failure; she felt rejected by her angry brothers; she was overworked by being forced to keep other vineyards; she allowed her own vineyard (heart) not to be kept with fresh love for Jesus; she served Him at a distance, instead of drawing near.

⁶*Do not look [stare] upon me, because I am dark because the sun has tanned me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard [heart] I have not kept.⁷*Tell me, O You [Jesus] whom I love, where you feed Your flock...for why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of Your companions?* (Song 1:6-7)*

- B. **Shame:** She felt shame as others stared (NASB) at her because of her dark heart (failure).

- C. **Rejected:** The sons were angry because of her youthful zeal. The sons speak of older, spiritually dull leaders who do not value the fervency in young believers. Why?

1. First, zealous believers bring conviction to spiritually dull believers, who often simply dismiss true spiritual zeal as legalism.

2. Second, the untempered zeal and pride of zealous believers often make spiritually dull leaders angry. Our zeal must be seasoned with wisdom and humility. Some new believers condemn others who do not express devotion to God in the same way that they do.

- D. **Burnout:** She was mistreated by the angry sons who overworked her by giving her many responsibilities in different vineyards (plural). Spiritual burnout does not come from hard work as much as from working with a wrong spirit—by seeking to gain approval from people, and by not connecting with the Spirit in the work. Embracing too many responsibilities out of the desire to be noticed by others often leads to burnout.
- E. **Dullness:** She did not keep her own vineyard (heart). Taking care of her own vineyard speaks of nurturing her personal relationship with Jesus. We cannot impart to others what we do not possess in our own hearts. The most important thing we can do in our ministry for others is to cultivate spiritual depth in our own hearts. Originally, what she most wanted was the kisses of His Word. Yet the vineyard of her heart was choked by the weeds of busyness, sin, and shame.
⁶*They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept. (Song 1:6)*
- F. **Distance:** She felt the pain of serving Jesus at a distance as a “veiled woman.” Women veiled themselves when working with strangers with whom they were unfamiliar. She asked, “Why should I serve down the road instead of near to You?” She lost her sense of nearness to Him.
⁷*For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of Your companions? (Song 1:7)*

IV. HER DESPERATE CRY TO HAVE MORE OF JESUS

- A. The maiden longs to be fed by Him and recover her sense of nearness to Him (1:7).
⁷*Tell me, O You [Jesus’] whom I love, where you feed Your flock, where You make it rest at noon. For why should I be as one who veils herself by the flocks of Your companions? (Song 1:7)*
- B. In her crisis, she cried out to Him in desperation. She was saying: “I have been fed by others, but now I want You to feed me and satisfy the cry of my heart.” She remembered the sweetness of her communion with God in her times spent in His “chamber” (1:4). She asked for counsel, “Tell me, where do you feed Your flock?” This is an expression of her prayer, “Draw me away.” She is desperate to encounter Jesus. Ministry activity and even promotion will never be enough.
- C. Bible teachers can inspire and point us to the green pastures of truth. However, for truth to feed our heart, we must turn it into a dialogue with Jesus.
- D. She longs to be satisfied with Jesus. She cried out, “Where will You satisfy me, even in the heat of the day?” At noon, or in the heat of the day, sheep will lie down if their stomachs are full. God wants us to rest in the midst of the heat of the day (life pressures) by connecting with Him.
- E. Her love for Him was sincere as she cried out, “Tell me, O You whom I love.” She is not a hypocrite, but has confidence that her love is real, even in her crisis and spiritual dullness.
- F. God’s love is beyond comprehension (Eph. 3:19), and there is no condemnation in Christ.
¹⁹*...to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge. (Eph. 3:19)*

¹*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ. (Rom. 8:1)*

- G. Many sincere, repentant believers expect to be rebuked after seeing their sin and weakness. The Bridegroom King speaks comfort to the heart of His people when addressing their sin and shame. He wants the spirit of shame and rejection to be broken off their hearts.
1. The Lord promised to give Jerusalem double honor in place of her shame (Isa. 61:7) and commands us to speak comfort to her after her many years of shame (Isa. 40:1-2).
⁷Instead of your shame you shall have double honor...therefore in their land they shall possess double; everlasting joy shall be theirs. (Isa. 61:7)
¹“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God. ²“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her...that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD’s hand double [honor] for all her sins.” (Isa. 40:1-2)
 2. The Lord gives a new name to His people to show He delights in them (Isa. 62:4-5). He reveals His heart as a Bridegroom in removing shame from His people (Isa. 54:4-8).
⁴You shall no longer be termed Forsaken...but you shall be called Hephzibah...for the LORD delights in you...⁵as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:4-5)
⁴You will not be ashamed; neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth...⁵For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts...⁸But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you.” (Isa. 54:4-8)

V. THE BRIDEGROOM’S SEVENFOLD ANSWER (1:8-11)

- A. The Bridegroom answered the maiden’s prayer (1:7) by giving her seven statements telling her where she could find Him and be fed by Him (1:8-11). He affirmed her as beautiful in His eyes, and gave her a threefold instruction (1:8), a threefold affirmation (1:9-10), and a promise (1:11). His seven statements in this passage represent a vital part of the theology of holy passion.
⁸If you do not know, O fairest [most beautiful] among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds’ tents. (Song 1:8)
- B. Jesus wooed her heart by saying, “O most beautiful of women.” He knows that her garden is not being kept, but He sees the cry in her heart to love Him. She is unlovely to the angry sons, but is most beautiful to Him, even in the midst of her failure. The word *fair* is translated in most other versions of the Bible as “beautiful” (NASB/NIV). The first issue in understanding how the Lord feeds the heart of His people starts with understanding how He sees them in their weakness.
- C. He gave a threefold instruction as to where He feeds her and establishes intimacy with her (1:8). He emphasized the importance of not living in isolation, idleness, or with an independent spirit.
⁸Follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds’ tents. (Song 1:8)

- D. **Instruction #1:** “*Follow in the footsteps of the flock*” by being involved in a church (1:8c). Scripture emphasizes the importance of belonging to a church, and *not living isolated from it*.
1. He tells her to follow in the footsteps of the flock, to get involved in the fellowship of the Body. The *footsteps of the flock* speak of where all the sheep walk with God. He was saying *follow in the place* where the Body walks, or *get back into fellowship* and do not overreact to the angry brothers who judged and mistreated you. People isolate themselves from the Body as a result of feeling rejection, bitterness, or shame related to the Church.
 2. Jesus prophesied that He would build His Church (Mt. 16:18). He is returning for a connected Church filled with glory. Much is lost in our spiritual life (and in our children) if we forsake assembling together and instead embrace a “churchless Christianity.”
¹⁸“***I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail...***” (Mt. 16:18)
²⁵“***...not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another...***” (Heb. 10:25)
- E. **Instruction #2:** “*Feed your little goats*” by serving others in a local church (1:8d). Scripture emphasizes the importance of serving and *not living in idleness*. We are to take care of our God-given responsibilities in caring for and discipling those who are younger in the Lord. God ordained that each believer be a “joint of supply” that reveals His love to others (Eph. 4:16).
¹⁶“***... the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body...***” (Eph. 4:16)
- F. **Instruction #3:** “*Besides the shepherds’ tent*”—by honoring spiritual authority (1:8e). Scripture emphasizes honoring spiritual authority, *not living in a spirit of independence* that disregards it.
¹⁷***Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive [cooperate with], for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you...*** (Heb. 13:17)
1. She was called to serve the Body “beside” the tents of the true shepherds. Jesus wants us to have a humble heart toward the shepherds (leaders) under whom He places us. One practical reason for submission is so that a body of believers can function in unity.
 2. The function of leadership in the New Testament was “to rule,” which consisted of shepherding the people and giving direction to the local church so that it could function in unity (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thes. 5:12; Heb. 13:17, 24). This includes establishing its vision, values, action plans, and problem solving in spiritual and administrative issues, etc. The elder should never dominate a believer’s faith (2 Cor. 1:24; Mt. 20:25; 1 Pet. 5:3).
- G. **Summary:** The Bridegroom’s answer touches three common temptations. First is the temptation to isolation or bitterness by feeling mistreated by the angry sons or shame related to our sin. Second is the temptation to selfishness that allows us to idly use all our free time on ourselves. Jesus wants us to take care of the little ones. Third is the temptation to live with an independent spirit that resists spiritual authority and walks in lawlessness and pride.

VI. THE BRIDEGROOM'S 3-FOLD AFFIRMATION (1:9-10)

- A. The Bridegroom gave a threefold affirmation of her beauty and sincere desire to obey. He spoke affectionately, calling her “My love” and affirming her as “lovely,” beautiful, in His eyes (1:9).
⁹I have compared you, My love, to My filly among Pharaoh’s chariots. ¹⁰Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with chains of gold. (Song 1:9-10)
- B. **Affirmation #1:** “My filly among Pharaoh’s chariots” speaks of the Bridegroom seeing her strong desire to follow Him. A filly is a young female horse. Pharaoh had thousands of horses. The horses that pulled his personal chariot were the most obedient and strongest horses on earth.
- C. **Affirmation #2:** “Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments” speaks of the Bridegroom seeing her emotions as beautiful. He sees the sincere devotion of His people even in their weakness. Cheeks speak of emotions throughout the Song, because they reveal emotions of anger, joy, sadness, etc.
- D. **Affirmation #3:** “Your neck is [lovely] with chains of gold” speaks of the Bridegroom seeing her submission to His authority, and her resolve to obey Him even in her weakness.
1. The neck speaks symbolically of the will. Scripture speaks of those who are stiff-necked, which means they are stubborn or rebellious. The neck also speaks of godly submission. The neck is what turns the head as it chooses which way to go, right or left. In time of war, a conquering king put his foot on a defeated king’s neck to show his submission.
 2. The chains of gold bear the king’s emblem and speak of royal authority. A chain of gold with the king’s emblem on it was worn by the prince as he walked through the town.

VII. THE LORD’S PROMISE TO MAKE HER LIFE BEAUTIFUL IN HIS SIGHT (1:11)

- A. The Bridegroom is still answering the question, “Where will You feed me?” (1:7). He will beautify her life. The ornaments of gold speak of Christ-like character worked in her.
¹¹We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver. (Song 1:11)
⁴The incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit...is very precious in the sight of God. (1 Pet. 3:4-5)
- B. “We will make you” is God’s promise to complete His work in her character and ministry. The beauty that Jesus possesses is the beauty that He imparts to His people (Isa. 61:3).
³...to give them beauty for ashes [our brokenness], the oil of joy for mourning. (Isa. 61:3)

VIII. QUESTIONS FOR SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION (e.g., FCF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS)

1. Identify one point that inspired or challenged you. Why? What will you do differently to apply it?
2. Identify one point that you want to impart to a younger believer. Why? How will you approach this?
3. Identify one point that you would like to gain more understanding of. How will you seek to gain it?