

UNDER THE BANNER OF LOVE

"He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love."
Song of Solomon 2:4.

This text is taken from the greatest of all love stories. The spiritually discerning mind will not have any difficulty in identifying the lovers in this story. In the Song of Solomon, as nowhere else in the Bible, are we shown the intensity of the love existing between Christ and the redeemed soul.

It is a great thing to be a Christian. It is a great thing in view of the personal change wrought in the individual. He once was lost, but now he is found. It is a great thing, too, in view of the change which it brings over a man's relations to others, as well as that which it produces in his personal character. Once he lived for time, but now he lives for eternity. Once he served Satan, but now he serves God.

I. A Boon.

"I sat under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste" (Song of Solomon 2:3). This statement implies rest for the soul. Rest suggests the spreading branches of a great tree, under which we lie down in peace and listen to the murmuring of the brook as it hastens toward the sea. Doubtless some of you have come to this service feeling tired. The duties of the past week were strenuous, and your body calls for relaxation. You have grappled with problems that have perplexed your mind. You have had to deal with temptations that troubled your soul. To each of you our Lord is saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). I am sure that some time spent with Him will not only ease your wearied mind, and salve your wounded spirit, but it will gird you with strength for the conflict of the morrow, and change your sighing into a song.

1. He wants you to rest from the sense of sin.

It is His earnest desire that you rest in the shadow of His atoning grace. I do not know what your sins have been, nor do I wish to know; but I do want you to realize that whatever they have been, they can and will be cured if you will sit down under the shadow of Christ's sufferings on your behalf. He hung on the cross for the express purpose of making a shadow deep enough and broad enough for all the sin-laden souls of all the children of men. "Once in the end of the age he appeared and put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." The forgiveness of God does not extend one inch beyond the atonement of Christ, but it does go just as far as the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus extends.

Unless all our sins -- the sin of yesterday and the sin of tomorrow -- had been laid on Him at Calvary, there would be no hope for us, because there remaineth no more sin offering. What He did once, He did for all His people, and He did it for all time. Christ wants you and me to rest in the fact that He has settled for us the sin question forever. Christ assumed all responsibility for your sin and mine, and when God raised Him from the dead He receipted the sin bill for all eternity.

2. He wants you to rest from worry.

It is our worry far more than our work that wearies us. No sooner have we begun some task than Satan intrudes with his questions concerning the wisdom of our undertaking. If things do not go as smoothly as we wish, we begin to fear that we have taken the wrong path. Then, as we look out over Christendom and note the indifference and the coldness of so many church members, we have the fear that everything is going to the dogs. We see heresies springing up like weeds, and hear preachers and teachers denying the fundamental doctrines taught in the Word of God, and our own zeal begins to cool. This is no new experience. It has been taking place in the Lord's churches since the days of the apostles.

What we need to remember is that Christ is still the head of the church, and His mind is still guiding the work. The presence of difficulties and desertions is no proof that we are not in the right way. Our Lord, Paul and the rest of the apostles found the same problems confronting them, but they went on quietly and faithfully, and God brought them out into a larger place. When our Lord ascended from Olivet He did not go into the past, but into the future, and He is walking with His people today as their leader. When we have honestly and earnestly asked for God's guidance, and faithfully followed the path which we believe He has marked for us, then to doubt the rightness of the way we have taken is to be guilty of open unbelief. The wonderful thing about God is that He can and often does overrule the blunders of His people, and sometimes even makes them contribute to the advancement of His cause.

3. He wants you to rest in the consciousness of His presence.

All of us have times when people misunderstand us, and refuse to cooperate with us, and when an oppressive sense of loneliness comes over us. At such a time we need to sit down under His shadow.

Christ said, "Lo, I am with you alway." He also said, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." Of course, there is company and comfort in a crowd; but where and when did you ever see lovers who did not welcome an opportunity to be alone? The inspiration of the whole day is in looking forward to the quiet evening hour when we are alone with the one we love. When from time to time Christ appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, He did not have to come, He was always there, and their eyes were opened and they knew Him. At times He vanished from their sight, but never from their presence.

We rest from sin in the shadow of His atonement, from the worries of life in the shadow of His care, and from our loneliness in the shadow of His presence.

"Grace! 'tis a charming sound,
Harmonious to the ear;
Heav'n with the echo shall resound,
And all the earth shall hear.

"'Twas grace that wrote my name
In life's eternal book;
'Twas grace that gave me to the Lamb,
Who all my sorrows took.

"Grace taught my wand'ring feet
To tread the heavenly road
And new supplies each hour I meet,
While pressing on to God.

"Grace taught my soul to pray,
And made mine eyes o'erflow;
'Twas grace which kept me to this day,
And will not let me go.

"Oh, let Thy grace inspire
My soul with strength divine;
May all my powers to Thee aspire,
And all my days be Thine."

II. A Banquet.

"He brought me to the banqueting house." You will notice that it was out in the field where the bride first met the bridegroom; but, having met him there, she was led by the bridegroom into the banquet hall, and there she feasted. Of course, in order to enjoy a banquet we must have an appetite for the things that are spread upon the table.

Hunger is a great blessing. We could not subsist without food, and who can eat without ever getting hungry? A good appetite is one of the infallible signs of good health. When your appetite fails, you may be sure that your health is declining. It is a blessing to be really hungry, and to know that it is possible to satisfy one's hunger completely with good wholesome food.

It is tragic and sad when people are devoid of any appetite for spiritual things. A man may be quite decent and respectable, have an amiable disposition and a worthy character of unblemished record, and still not want anybody to talk to him about his relationship to God. He labors for "the meat which perisheth." For that which "endureth unto everlasting life" he has no appetite whatever.

"He brought me to the banqueting house" is the language of amazement, admiration, appreciation and joy. The Saviour brought us by subduing our stubborn wills and taking away all the natural enmity of our hearts toward Him. The grace of God provides a real banquet for His people. He provided the banquet, and then He brought us by the sweet constraints of grace to sit at His table. What a blessing!

There are two ideas which we seem naturally to associate with the thought of a monarch's banqueting house. First, it is a place where choice delicacies may be expected. It is not common fare for which the guests look. The richest and rarest things that wealth can purchase, or skill prepare, are provided for such a banqueting hall. Secondly, it is a place where special favors are dispensed, and confidential communications made. In like manner, the treasury of heaven is put at the disposal of the believer in Christ. He is fully assured that "God will supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

The story is told of a little girl who took her first long journey by train. Like all children she kept her face against the window pane, watching to see what was coming. Again and again she saw the train approach a great river, and her heart was filled with fear lest it should plunge in and all be drowned. But each time, just as they reached the river, she noticed that there was a bridge and the train crossed in safety. When this had happened a half dozen times, she settled back in her seat with a sigh, saying, "Somebody has put bridges for us all the way." Even so! Such is our Saviour's provision, abundant and adequate. He brings us to the banquet house.

In order to enjoy a banquet we must have an appetite for the things that are spread upon the table. It is out in the field of service that we become hungry for Christ's banquet. What are some of the things which He spreads before His people?

1. A sweet peace.

Christ offers us a "peace that passeth all understanding." Just before His death our Lord made His will, and made you a legatee. We ought to read His will, since we are His beneficiaries. Let me quote you a sentence from it: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27). The world often attaches strings to its bequests. Certain things are bequeathed to certain persons, provided they do this or refrain from doing that. But there is no string to the bequest made by the Lord Jesus. "My peace I give unto you." His peace is one that nothing can disturb. If you do not have that peace in your heart, it is because you have not been willing to receive it from Christ. When we take Him into our hearts, as the disciples took Him into the boat, the storms will cease and there will come a great calm.

2. A glorious hope.

One of our first questions about any great joy is, Will it last? It used to be said of the feasts given by Charles II that after a night of carousal it required a week for his guests to recover from the debauch. One victim spoke of the banquet as "seven hours' pleasure followed by seven days' penance." At the banquet table of our Lord we find that the more we partake the deeper becomes our enjoyment. Each new course reveals something better yet to come. Our peace is blessed and sweet, but our hope is glorious. There is the hope of being with the Lord, of being like Him and of being with those whom we have loved long since and lost awhile.

This is a real hope and not merely a wish. Hope is desire plus expectation. The Christian's hope is just as stable as his faith. What God has promised for the future is just as certain as what He did in the past. We frequently hope for large things from our earthly friends, and awake to find that we expected too much; but it will not be so with the promises of Christ. He will do "exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think." We often say that we know that in the coming day we shall be satisfied, but remember that you will be more than satisfied. You will actually be astonished at the measure of His great goodness. The cup of satisfaction will not only be full, but it will run over.

3. An eternal fellowship.

There is an unspeakable joy in the assurance of meeting with parents, sisters and brothers, husband and wife, children and friends, but the crowning glory of the banquet is to be with the bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ and enjoy an eternal fellowship with Him.

III. A Banner.

"His banner over me was love." In Exodus 17:15 we are told that Moses built an altar and called it "The Lord is my banner." I trust that we understand the significance of a banner. Every king has his royal standard, and every republic has its flag under which its people gather. We rejoice in the folds of "Old Glory" because it is the emblem of our freedom and progress. Millions of men have died in defense of the flag of their respective nations -- not for the sake of a piece of bunting, but for that which it represents. Christ's banner over His people is His love. Its background is the pure white of His sinlessness, and on it there rests the red cross of His sacrifice for us.

1. A banner guarantees protection.

When a monarch, or his representative, unfurls his banner over a fortress or a citadel, he thereby declares his determination to protect that place. As that flag waves in the breeze, it proclaims that all the power and resources of him whom it represents are pledged for the defense and safety of that place. Every citizen under the stars and stripes is guaranteed the protection of this whole nation. The flag of our country is the pledge of our security. When Christ unfurls His banner of love over the believing soul, all the resources and perfections of an infinite God are enlisted for the safety of that soul. Satan does not have any weapon that can touch any soul which is under that banner of righteousness and love. If we are under His banner, no enemy can harm us.

2. A banner implies guidance.

As a flag or banner directs soldiers where to stand, when to march and whom to follow, so those who are under the banner of His love are guided thereby. Let us not be slackers under the banner of Christ's love, but let us see the way that it is moving and march under it. Let us be loyal to His banner.

Nearly a century ago a young man was engaged to be married to the young woman of his choice in New England. Then the Civil War carried him off to the battlefield. He went through battle after battle unscathed, but in the battle of the Wilderness he was not only shot down, but both arms were riddled with bullets and had to be amputated. Some weeks went by and no letter reached the waiting girl whose anxious face appeared daily at the post office to inquire for mail. Finally, when he was recovered sufficiently to dictate, a comrade wrote for him. In the letter he related what had happened to him. He told how both arms were gone. Then he added, "You are as dear to me as ever, but I shall now be dependent upon other people for the rest of my life and I do not want to impose myself upon you; hence my friend, writing for me, permits me to say that I release you now and forever from your engagement."

There was never a written reply, but on the next train she went to the scene of the conflict, sent word to the hospital of her presence, and asked for the privilege of visiting the soldier lad. They brought her into the temporary hospital and when her eyes fell upon the one for whom she was looking, she rushed to his cot, fell on her knees, put her arms around his neck, and between kisses, declared, "I will never give you up! With these hands it will be my joy to support you while life lasts. My love will be your sufficiency."

Christ's love is sufficient for us. Let us be loyal to the banner of our wonderful Saviour and Lord, permitting love and love only to determine our actions.