

Listen to the pronouns in this passage.

Did you hear it?

In chapter 4, he describes her in the second person: “you are beautiful” –

In chapter 5, she describes him in the third person: “His head is the finest gold...” –
describing him to her friends.

And right in the very middle, he speaks to her in the first person (5:1),

and at the very end, she speaks of him in the first person as well (6:2-3)

Think of what this does to those who listen:

while the Bride is showing off her Beloved to her friends –

the Beloved is not “showing off” his Bride

as much as he is delighting in his Bride,

and calling the hearers to share in his delight.

This is a remarkably intimate description of their bodies and their lovemaking.

Love-making is all about unity – union – two becoming one.

Mutual possession.

“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”

That’s why Paul says that this mystery is all about Christ and the church.

1. The Beauty of the Bride (4:1-5:1)

a. The Beauty of Her Body (4:1-8)

He

Behold, you are beautiful, my love,

behold, you are beautiful!

You need to hear this.

Jesus says to you – “You are beautiful.”

But, you say, I am a sinner – I am ugly.

Jesus says to you – “You are beautiful, my love.”

How can Jesus say that you are beautiful?

First, because he *made you*.

Insofar as you are created in the image of God

you are beautiful.

God loves all that he has made –

and he made all things beautiful!

But even more, you are beautiful because Jesus redeemed you!

If all you think about is justification,

then God declares you beautiful – even though you are ugly.

But justification never exists by itself!

And God does not lie!

When God declares you righteous in Jesus Christ
he *also* sanctifies you –
he also makes you holy and beautiful!

What is beauty?

I like Robert Jenson's way of putting it:

“Beauty is realized eschatology,
the present glow of the sheer goodness that will be at the end.” (46)
And this is true, not only of the beauty of the natural order –
but also the beauty of art.
Beauty is a product not of technique, but of ‘inspiration’ –
both in the natural beauty of God's making,
and in the products of human fashioning.

As Jenson says,

“And where bodily beauty seems to others not to have been given or to have disappeared,
the lover can find it –
if *God* can find *us* beautiful, that is the least we can do for the one we love.”

There's nothing easy about this.

I'm a sinner married to another sinner.
We have to work at this *every day*.

But the Song of Songs *helps* us work at it.

If this is the way that Christ loves us – then we should love one another this way as well!

The structure of verses 1-8 follows a common middle eastern form of love poetry
which starts either at the head or at the feet,
and gradually surveys the whole body in order.

And there are seven body parts named:
he starts with her eyes and moves down to her hair, her teeth,
her lips, her mouth, her neck, and her breasts.

*Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
leaping down the slopes of Gilead.*

“Your hair is like a flock of goats” generally does not have the same effect today –
but that is only because you have never seen a flock of goats
leaping down the slopes of Gilead!

I have seen a flock of goats leaping down the slopes of a hill in Eritrea,
and I was mesmerized.

The way the flock streamed down the hill, waving and shimmering in the sun,
was one of the most beautiful things I had seen.

² *Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
that have come up from the washing,
all of which bear twins,
and not one among them has lost its young.*

Verse 2 spends a lot of time on her teeth.

When I was in Eritrea I came to appreciate this verse!

Most of the women were missing teeth –

and so the rare young lady who had all her teeth certainly looked more attractive!

³ *Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.*

⁴ *Your neck is like the tower of David,
built in rows of stone;^{1a}
on it hang a thousand shields,
all of them shields of warriors.*

We do not know of a “tower of David”

but the image is clear enough –

a woman’s neck wrapped with bangles would look a lot
like a stone tower decorated with a thousand shields.

⁵ *Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,
that graze among the lilies.*

⁶ *Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
I will go away to the mountain of myrrh
and the hill of frankincense.*

Both the round cheeks of verse 3 and the “mountain of myrrh” in verse 6
highlight the fact that our bride is a little plump!

No one prior to the 20th century valued skinny women.
A flat stomach is an empty stomach.

But the point is that he is delighting in her body!

But there is also a lot of language drawn from the history of redemption.

The “scarlet thread” of verse 3 is the same term used of the scarlet cord
hung in Rahab’s window when Israel conquered Jericho.

The thousand shields around the tower is reminiscent of Ezekiel 27:10-11,
the shields that adorned Tyre – and “made perfect your beauty.”

Frankincense and myrrh are common terms in the temple service –
as well as love poetry.

The connection is no accident.

The Bride connects well to the temple – the city – the Bride of the Lamb.

⁷ *You are altogether beautiful, my love;
there is no flaw in you.*

⁸ *Come with me from Lebanon, my bride;
come with me from Lebanon.*

*Depart^[b] from the peak of Amana,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the dens of lions,
from the mountains of leopards.*

I am taking verse 8 as the conclusion of the poem.

As the Lover proclaims the beauty of his Bride,
he calls her to leave Lebanon and come with him.

Some have tried to connect this to the idolatry of Lebanon
(Jezebel, after all, was from Lebanon),

but everything about Lebanon in the Song of Songs appears positive.

After all, Hiram of Tyre – the king of Lebanon –
was the one who helped Solomon build the temple.

It would be better to consider the connection to Psalm 45:12 –
“The daughter of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts” –
as Lebanon, for a while, was blessed by God
as it came into fellowship with the Son of David.

And so verse 8 also works as the transition to verse 9,
as the Lover calls his Bride to come with him –
and he praises her beauty:

b. The Beauty of Her Love (4:9-5:1)

⁹ *You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride;
you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.*

¹⁰ *How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!*

¹¹ *Your lips drip nectar, my bride;
honey and milk are under your tongue;
the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.*

In verses 12-15 then he describes his bride as a locked garden:

- ¹² *A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a spring locked, a fountain sealed.*
- ¹³ *Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits,
henna with nard,*
- ¹⁴ *nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes,
with all choice spices—*
- ¹⁵ *a garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon.*

A locked garden was of great value –
especially one that had its own spring – its own source of water!
The point of the Bride being a locked garden is *not* that she is a virgin –
after all, she is his *Bride!* –
rather, she is *only for him*.

Now, this is a garden that the poet certainly had never seen!
Indeed, not since Eden could there have been such a garden –
because these products come from all over the world.

Pomegranates are the only local product in the whole list.
henna, nard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, myrrh, aloes –
all were foreign imports.

Likewise, only the pomegranates are for eating –
everything else is valued for its aroma!

And that's why *she* calls upon the north wind and the south wind
to blow upon her garden and let its spices flow!
The north wind and the south wind come together in her garden
to stir up the aromas into a fragrant garden of paradise!

- ¹⁶ *Awake, O north wind,
and come, O south wind!
Blow upon my garden,
let its spices flow.*

But the purpose of all this exotic, delightful blend of smells
is so that he might come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits!

*Let my beloved come to his garden,
and eat its choicest fruits.*

4:16 and 5:1 are at the very center of the Song.

(There are 111 lines before verse 16, and 111 lines after 5:1).

And at the very center of the song is the most glorious love-making in the book.

Love-making is all about unity –
about two becoming one flesh.

As Douglas O'Donnell puts it,

“the world says, ‘Sex means nothing. It’s recreational.

It’s like sipping a caramel frappuccino, eating a hamburger,
or going to the bathroom.

It’s no different than any other biological function.

But the Word says, ‘Sex means unity.’

It’s an inexplicable act of mutual passion, possession, and submission:

I give my total self to you, and you give your total self to me.

You eat me up and drink me in, and I eat you up and drink you in.

You become a part of me, and I become a part of you.” (81)

And so the Beloved replies:

He

5 I came to my garden, my sister, my bride,

I gathered my myrrh with my spice,

I ate my honeycomb with my honey,

I drank my wine with my milk.

The Beloved rejoices in his Bride.

Our Lord Jesus rejoices in *you*.

He delights in *you* body and soul!

In the OT, the temple was designed to be a picture of Eden –
the place where God and his people met together.

The Targum paraphrased Song of Songs this way:

“On the north side was the table of the show bread.

On the south was the lamp....

On the altar the priests...caused the incense of spices to ascend.

And the assembly of Israel said, ‘Let my God, my Beloved, come into his Temple
and favorably receive the offerings of his people....

[and] the Holy One, blessed be he, said to his people....

‘I have come to my Temple that you have built for me,
my sister, assembly of Israel....

I have caused my *Shekinah* to reside among you.” (quoted in Jenson, 51)

The union of God and his people has brought about something that once was not.

In the incarnation of Christ, God has joined himself to his people forever.
And so the virgin daughters of Zion call out:

Others

*Eat, friends, drink,
and be drunk with love!*

It's at this moment, if not before, that the modern reader gets a little embarrassed.
The Bride and her Beloved have been busy with their lovemaking –
and yet it appears that we have a great cloud of witnesses!

There's no reason to believe that the witnesses have been watching the whole scene.
If this was used as a wedding song –
there are references to a wedding tent –
and the bride and groom would disappear into the tent for the proper solemnities.

But it's entirely appropriate to celebrate in this way even as old married folk!

Let me put it this way.

I want you to know that I love my wife –
that she has an amazing body –
the way she looks at me ...
her kisses melt me ...
and... well, since I don't think our culture can handle much more, I'll stop there!
But you should rejoice with me in her beauty!

But also, my wife's beauty is *for me!*

And I want you to celebrate that as well!
And I will celebrate with you the beauty of your wife.

The Beloved describes his Bride in such a way that we see her glorious beauty –
we smell her seductive aroma –
but the seduction and the beauty is *not for us!*
We've become so obsessed with sex in our culture
that we have lost the ability to appreciate beauty!

Brother, your wife is beautiful.
Enjoy and delight in her beauty!

And the men around you have beautiful wives –
rejoice with them – and delight in their beauty!

There is only a problem *if you desire their beauty for yourself!*

We are called to rejoice that the Beloved has such a Bride!

And likewise, in chapter 5, we are to rejoice that the Bride has such a Beloved!

2. The Beauty of the Beloved (5:2-16)

a. Knocking, Seeking, Asking (5:2-8)

It is at least curious that this poem begins with knocking,
moves to seeking,
and concludes with asking.
Jesus will follow the same pattern in the Sermon on the Mount.

She
² *I slept, but my heart was awake.*
A sound! My beloved is knocking.
“Open to me, my sister, my love,
my dove, my perfect one,
for my head is wet with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.”

In verse 2, the Beloved comes to his Bride, knocking on her locked door –
calling her to let him in from the cold and damp.

But she is slow to respond:

³ *I had put off my garment;*
how could I put it on?
I had bathed my feet;
how could I soil them?

How often has this been true for us?

Jesus stands at the door and knocks.

Sometimes this image is used of Jesus knocking at the door of the unbeliever –
but plainly in the book of Revelation this is *not* the case!

In Revelation 3:20-21 Jesus says to the *church* of Laodicea,

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,

I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne,

as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”

Jesus is knocking at the door of the church – at the door of his Bride.

And too often we have been slow to respond.

We know that Jesus wants to make love to us –

but we are selfish and tired and his timing does not at all fit what we want...

Verses 4-5 are clear enough to allow the double-meanings to speak for themselves!

⁴ *My beloved put his hand to the latch,
and my heart was thrilled within me.*

⁵ *I arose to open to my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
on the handles of the bolt.*

Thus aroused, she opens to her beloved – but now he is gone!

⁶ *I opened to my beloved,
but my beloved had turned and gone.*

Indeed, Israel had failed to open in a timely fashion –
and so when Israel sought the LORD,
it was too late.

God tells Josiah that there was nothing he could do to make up for the sin of Manasseh.

*My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.*

⁷ *The watchmen found me
as they went about in the city;
they beat me, they bruised me,
they took away my veil,
those watchmen of the walls.*

The same watchmen (the prophets) who pointed the Bride to her God in chapter 3
now beat up the Bride – think of what Jeremiah and Ezekiel do,
as they *verbally bruise* God's people in their rebukes,
leaving the people of God stripped bare of their pretences.

This time, when the watchmen find her alone wandering the streets at night,
they take her for a prostitute,
and they beat her.

And so the Bride calls out:

⁸ *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you find my beloved,
that you tell him
I am sick with love.*

The Bride's lovesickness is a little perplexing.

A few minutes or hours ago she didn't want to spend time with him –
but now she longs for him,
and pleads with her friends to intercede for her!

Of course, a moment's thought will remind us that this is not nearly so odd!

We do this to each other all the time!

And even worse, we do it Jesus!

As Jenson says it so well:

“if the outcome of Israel's religious vagaries is uncertain except for the grace of Christ, the outcome of the world's sad random quests for ‘fulfillment,’ ‘intimacy,’ and the like is all too certain, except again for the grace of a true lover, who may indeed find us even as we careen about.

We must welcome our love when he or she knocks, ready or not.

For that very reason, we must not pursue love at random.” (56)

Sometimes we need the daughters of Jerusalem to remind us –

to ask us, in effect, “What's so special about your Beloved?”:

b. Delighting in His Body (v9-16)

Others

⁹ *What is your beloved more than another beloved,
O most beautiful among women?*

*What is your beloved more than another beloved,
that you thus adjure us?*

Peter admonishes us to always be ready with an answer for the hope that is in us.

And the Bride is ready!

And she uses the same genre of poetry to describe and delight in his body that he had used of her in the previous chapter.

In our culture, we are not as used to such an emphasis on *male beauty* –

but perhaps we should thank the feminist movement for reminding us that women should also enjoy and delight in a man's good looks!

She

¹⁰ *My beloved is radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.*

¹¹ *His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.*

¹² *His eyes are like doves
beside streams of water,*

*bathed in milk,
sitting beside a full pool.^[c]*

¹³ *His cheeks are like beds of spices,
mounds of sweet-smelling herbs.*

His lips are lilies,

dripping liquid myrrh.
¹⁴ *His arms are rods of gold,
set with jewels.*
*His body is polished ivory,^[d]
bedecked with sapphires.^[e]*
¹⁵ *His legs are alabaster columns,
set on bases of gold.*
*His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars.*
¹⁶ *His mouth^[f] is most sweet,
and he is altogether desirable.*
*This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.*

There's a lot of temple imagery here –
not to mention Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the golden image.

Indeed, the idea of a statue is encouraged by the “alabaster columns set on bases of gold.”
Think of Michelangelo's marvelous statue of David.
The Bride now says, “That is my Beloved!”

In verse 16, when it says “mouth” it is the word for “palate” and refers to that which tastes.
If you consider the theme of tasting in the Song of Songs,
and consider where we are as she descends down his body,
then you will appreciate the euphemism!

But there is another reason for the image of the image!
Man was created in the image of God.

Conclusion: Grazing once More (6:1-3)

The Daughters of Zion ask:

*6:1 Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women?
Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you?*

In 5:6, the Bride lamented that he had “turned and gone” –
now the Daughters of Zion use the same language,
showing that this is the conclusion of their discussion with the Bride.

And in a shocking surprise,
we suddenly discover that the Beloved is with his Bride:

*2 My beloved has gone down to his garden to the beds of spices,
to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies.*
*3 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine;
he grazes among the lilies.*

Chapters 4-5 belong together,
because they remind us that beauty exists in the middle of brokenness.

We hear the Beloved describing his Bride in all her beauty.
But we also hear the Bride telling of her frustration at her Beloved.

But then she repents and longs for him – and seeks for him –
and as she remembers him and *his beauty* –
he comes to her and grazes among the lilies.

When we humble ourselves and seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
our Lord Jesus Christ comes and grazes in the gardens among the lilies.