Love Is Stronger than Death: Returning to the First Love

Let us think about the love that Scripture says is strong as death, that fire which not even many waters can quench. It is a fire that God has placed in man, and every one of us has it. What matters is what we love, because wherever we love wholly, that is where we wholly are.

Man makes decisions and is capable of a great many things. But when very heavy trials come upon him, if he is not firmly anchored in what he ought to be anchored in, he falls, grows weak and begins to think differently. Then he asks himself, 'Why must I be so stubborn?' Man's resolutions, legalism and conservatism do not stand firm before these great waters. Only love can withstand them.

The Lord Jesus places a particular emphasis on this love. It is the engine that keeps us on our feet, a fire that does not go out. To understand what it is, let us look at the Song of Songs, chapter 8.

In Song of Solomon 8:6-7 we read: 'Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.'

Love is strong as death. We understand this expression as far as we are able. Death is truly strong: no one ever comes back from it. Nothing is stronger than death, and love is just as strong as death.

The text then says that the coals of love are 'the very flame of the Lord'. So it is something the Lord has placed in man, even in the natural man, a capacity that God has planted in us and that we are called to use.

Why does the verse speak of waters and of quenching? Because love is a fire, a fire that cannot be put out. Nor can it be bought: the man who would give all the substance of his house to buy it would receive nothing but contempt. Love cannot be bought. It has to be kindled.

Thou Hast Left Thy First Love

The Lord Jesus dwells on this love in Revelation, chapter 2. Here I confess my shame: for a long time I did not know the truth about it. All of us must, at some point, be ashamed and humble ourselves because of this.

The church in Ephesus is a church that the Lord Jesus commends. In Revelation 2:2-3 He says to it: 'I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast

found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.' These are not small things, but very great ones. To suffer for the sake of the Name of the Lord Jesus means a great deal.

In verse 4, however, the rebuke follows: 'Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.' It seems a small thing compared with the great deeds we are so ready to do: hunting for false apostles, finding them, declaring that the churches are Babylon. We are very good at that. The Lord also acknowledges what is good, in verse 6: 'But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.'

Even so, in verse 5 His word is very serious: 'Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.' It is a grave matter when the Lord takes away our light. To be left without light is the gravest thing possible.

What Did the Believers in Ephesus Lose?

In my religious youth, almost every Sunday I sang a hymn that began something like this: 'Spotless first love…' We were one hundred per cent religious people, but we understood nothing of that hymn. What was the word 'spotless' doing next to 'first love'? We sang it because it sounded lovely, but when I wanted to find out what the first love was, there was no one to tell me.

The usual answer was that the first love is the zeal you have when you come to God, and that this zeal can be left and lost. When I began my religious life I had zeal, and those who had been converted for years told me, 'You're in your first love. You'll lose it, don't worry, we lost it too; we haven't been there for a long time.' But I could see how badly off we were, and I said to myself: if that is the first love, then things are serious.

But how can it be left? If it is left, there is no more light. Love is strong as death, and the believers in Ephesus lost precisely love, nothing else. Apart from that, they lost nothing: they still had their works, their labour, their patience and their suffering for the Name of the Lord.

The foundation of this church was laid by the apostle Paul. As we learn from Acts 20, he stayed with them for three years, wept for them, kept watch through the nights, laboured with them and told them, 'I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.' It seems that this is exactly what happened: something took place there.

We want to discover this love, the fire that the Song of Songs writes about and without which life does not begin. It is the first love. We were taught that love comes nearer the end, but that is a different love, the love of God. The first love is something else: it is our love towards God. The Lord Jesus says that we must love Him. What love is this? What fire, what coals must be kindled in us and become our engine? And for what are they kindled? What did these people in Ephesus lose? We look for the answer in Matthew, chapter 10.

Is Not Worthy of Me

The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 10:37-39: “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”

This is the love that the Lord Jesus asks of us. Those to whom He was speaking were not spiritual people. They were the Jewish people: He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. Yet to these people the Lord Jesus sets a very great condition: 'He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.'

To love the Lord Jesus more than father and mother, you must know something about Him. You cannot love someone you do not know with a love stronger than death. This is the love to which He calls us, not a half-hearted love. Someone may say, 'Yes, I love Him too. I go to the meetings, I meet with the brethren, I serve a bit, I sing a bit, I pray.' And that is more or less all his love for Christ amounts to. But the Lord says: 'is not worthy of me.'

The Love of the Light, Placed in All People

What does it mean to be worthy of the Lord Jesus? In 2 Corinthians 11 we see what kind of love He asks of us. This love is possible, because God has placed something in us. This thing exists in all people, in natural people too, not only in spiritual ones.

The natural man is called to love the light more than the darkness. When the light came into the world, people loved the darkness more. They were not spiritual; they were natural people. Yet the light came precisely to give people light, to shine in the darkness.

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:4: “For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.” So someone has to preach the Lord Jesus to us, to show Him to us as He is. When someone comes with another Jesus, people receive him gladly. That is why the Jesus who is preached must be the true Jesus.

In verse 3 Paul adds: 'But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.' Christ is set before us in all His beauty, and we must love Him with all our heart and with all our mind, otherwise we are not worthy of Him. And even when we do love Him, Paul fears that, over time, what happened to the church in Ephesus may happen: that our minds may be corrupted from the purity and faithfulness that are towards Christ.

The Bride and Her Bridegroom

Verse 2 shows who Christ is to us: "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." The Song of Songs also speaks of jealousy. Christ is our Bridegroom, our future Bridegroom, the One to whom

we are betrothed. Paul, or someone else, presented Him to us so that we might be betrothed to Him. What the apostle is really saying is this: "I am betrothing you to Him, and I fear that in this betrothal your minds may be corrupted and lose the purity of a betrothed woman towards the one she is promised to."

What does a betrothed woman do? She loves the one she is promised to. That is the engine. This love is stronger than death; it is a fire. The Word of God shows us that this flame comes from Him and that it has been placed in every human being. It only needs to be awakened, and what awakens it is the beauty of the Lord Jesus.

But to most people, what is the Lord Jesus like? In Isaiah 53 we read that He was despised and rejected of men, and that we esteemed Him not. He came, He spoke to us, He showed us who He is, and we esteemed Him not. Contempt is one thing; the fire of love is quite another.

When the Engine Goes Cold

It was precisely this fire of love that those in Ephesus had lost. They had a great many things, but their love had grown cold. When the engine goes cold, the car no longer runs; only the outward shape remains. And when only the outward shape remains, you no longer grow to be like Christ. This is the problem: we have lost our first love.

Someone might say, "It isn't really that serious. We have suffered for the Name of Christ, we have overcome, look at everything we are doing." But if we have lost what is essential, we have lost Christ, we have lost our purity and our faithfulness towards our Bridegroom, and the fire has gone out. This is how it begins and this is how it ends: it begins in fire, and when the fire goes out, it ends.

The relationship breaks down and we are left with the institution, with the form: we serve, we do things, we come to Christ. Someone once testified that, while preparing for her driving test, she said to God, "Lord, if You help me pass my test, I'll give up wearing trousers and put on a headscarf." She passed the test and kept her word. You might think there is a fire burning there, glowing embers. But what is it really? It is blackmail, a bargain struck with God.

A Bargain with God

The prayer "Lord, if You heal me, I will repent" sounds just the same. I have heard many testimonies of this kind: "I asked the Lord to heal me, He healed me, and here I am. I repented." But where is Christ? Where is the love for Him? Where are the embers?

In order to see Christ and to examine ourselves, so that we do not live a counterfeit, let us return to the Song of Songs. In Song of Solomon 1:16, the bride says, "Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant!" Christ is shown to us in this way so that we too may, at some point, speak these words.

The Lord Jesus says in John 12:32: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” With what does He draw us? To put it in human terms: with what can a girl attract me?

With her beauty. I must see something beautiful in her. It is the same here: "Thou art fair, my beloved!"

In Song of Solomon 2:16 we read, "My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies." These things must be true in our lives too, and we must be able to say them. If we cannot say them, all that remains is a transaction: I give Him something, He gives me something. And there is not a single verse here about such a transaction.

Also in chapter 2, at verse 7, the bride says, "I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till it please." Love, then, must come in its own time. This is the fire the Song of Songs speaks of: love that is strong as death, which many waters cannot quench. And beside it stands a word: "jealousy is cruel as the grave".

Jealousy as Cruel as the Grave

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:2: “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” What does it mean that jealousy is "cruel as the grave"? Has anyone ever escaped the grave? Has anyone ever been able to plead with it not to take him? No one.

That is why we must take great care of our love. God is jealous and wants us for Himself alone, not divided between the world and Him. My Beloved is One, not two. Yet we want to love two. Can it be like that with the Lord Jesus? His jealousy is cruel as the grave. We must understand to Whom we have come.

The Song of Songs, in chapter 5, shows us what kind of relationship we must have with our Beloved, the One to whom we are betrothed, and why we fall in love with Him. Psalm 50:2 says, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined." His beauty shines upon us. David writes in Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.”

Sick of Love

This is what David longed for: to dwell in the Lord's presence all his life. He had eyes to see the beauty of the Lord. Should we not have the same desire? The Lord is the fairest of all. In chapter 5, at verse 6, the bride says, "My soul failed when he spake." This is love that is strong as death.

Psalm 119 has many verses about this same thing. One of them is Psalm 119:131: “I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments.” What does it mean to pant and to long like this? It means yearning to hear the Lord Jesus and thirsting for His commandments from the depths of your being. In the same psalm, in verse 127, the psalmist says, "Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold." Psalm 119 is full of testimonies to the worth the Lord's words had in the psalmist's eyes. What worth do they have in our eyes? They ought to have the same.

In Song of Solomon 5:8-9 we read, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love. What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? what is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?" We have all heard of people who, in this life, have become lovesick over a young man or a young woman. The bride's plea is very earnest.

Her gaze is fixed on her Beloved alone. In the same way, our gaze must remain on the Lord Jesus alone, not on religion. We are very easily led astray if someone comes and preaches another gospel to us. How easy it seems, and how good! It has rightly been said that such a gospel is comfortable for the flesh. But the flesh must be put to death, crucified. We owe it nothing, because the Lord Jesus has paid for this. Paul writes in Romans 8:12-13: “Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

Then the bride answers the question "What is thy beloved?" and describes Him, in Song of Solomon 5:10: “My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand.” The Lord Jesus must stand out in our eyes too, so that this love stronger than death may be awakened in us. Can we also say that we have such a love? This is love, as God shows it to us.

Love Comes First

The order of things can be seen in John 14:15, where the Lord Jesus says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." For a long time I did not understand that love comes before everything else. I had probably been befuddled by the teachings I had heard: you cannot love until you are born again, because you are dead, and a dead man is dead. It sounds very fine. This is the teaching connected with predestination: a dead man cannot love God.

According to this teaching, man cannot even love the light. First God must cause him to be born again, before he loves and before he makes any decision, and after that man merely perseveres in what God has done. It sounds fine and seems to rest on something: man is dead. But here the Lord Jesus says, "If ye love me."

We Loved the Light

So can we love Him? Of course we can. John 3:19 says that men loved darkness rather than light. This means they could have loved the light, and indeed there are some who love it when it comes before them. Some of us, if not all of us, have loved the light: when it came upon us, we loved it more than the darkness. That is why we are here.

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Love is the power that makes us keep His commandments. Whoever loves Christ is able to fulfil what He asks. How beautiful He is! Like the bride in the Song of Songs, I too was beside myself when He spoke to me. And what does the Lord Jesus tell us? His commandments. What else could He tell us? He calls us to come and learn from Him, as He says in Matthew 11. We listen to His voice and learn from Him so that we may become like Him. This is the purpose of the Lord Jesus.

For us to be able to do this, the love that those in Ephesus lost must be awakened in us, and we must keep it always burning. We read about this love in Song of Solomon 8:7: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.” This is a guarantee: if we abide in this love, it will abide with us.

What Do We Show When We Reject the Word?

Elsewhere we are told that His commandments are not burdensome. In 1 John 5:3 we read: "For the love of God lies in keeping His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." But if we do not love Him, we begin to ask: "Is this necessary too? Why? Nobody does that any more these days." What are we showing when we reject something in His Word? Is that love? If we do not love Him, we are not worthy of Him. He tells us this very clearly, so let us not deceive ourselves.

A few years ago I was somewhere with the brethren, and we spoke about this love. Someone jumped up, very heated: "It is not possible to love! We came out of fear of hell; that is why we are here." He was not a young man but an elderly one, and he said that until then he had never met anyone who came to God out of love. And it was true that he had not, because such people are few, very rare. For the brethren there, what I was saying was heresy, something new, unheard of. And yet, without love there is nothing.

In John 14:24, the Lord Jesus says: "He who does not love Me does not keep My words." It is simple and clear; it is a definition. And in verse 23 He says: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him; We will come to him and make Our home with him."

How does the Lord Jesus dwell with me? As the Bridegroom of my soul, not as a business partner, by the rule "I give to you, you give to me". And if the heavenly Father comes to dwell with me, how must I, as the betrothed bride, live? Surely as He lived? Can I remain unsubmissive, without humility, without making myself a servant? The Father would answer me: "Wait, My Son made Himself like this. Why do you love My Son? What do you love about Him? His rings, His clothes?"

What we love about the Lord Jesus is His character. In 1 John 2:6 it is written: "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to live as Jesus lived." And why does he live like that? Because the fire within him, the love of Christ, makes him like Him. Love is stronger than death.

The Time of Love

This love leads us into covenant with Him. In Ezekiel 16:8, the Lord says: "I passed by you and looked upon you, and behold, your time had come, the time of love." When God speaks of the time of love, let us think of the love in the Song of Songs, not the love people have taught us: "Repeat this prayer after me. There, you're saved." How easy that would be!

The love to which God calls us is stronger than death. It makes us keep His commandments, enter into covenant with Him and live as Jesus lived. Without it we are not worthy of Him.

May the Lord awaken this love in all of us and help us to understand what we are called to.

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