

Sermon preached by Mr. F.L. Gosden at Galeed Chapel, Brighton, on
Wednesday Evening, 17 Jan., 1962

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Text: Song of Solomon ii.14.

I expect some of you feel, as I certainly feel myself, that this Song of songs is too great for us to intrude into it. In singing the Hymn I wondered if it would strike a discordant note (232); but there is no real discord in the experience of the Lord's people. You take the history of David and his confessions in the 51st and 38th Psalms, and then the 103rd Psalm. You can hardly believe that it is the same character. But we would preach the Word of God with reverence. The church did confess in the first chapter, "I am black, but comely". If we are taught of the Spirit, we shall be brought to know that our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and there is no description of sinnership, and pollution, and depravity in the Word of God, but what we feel it in our own nature. But we cannot live upon it.

Therefore we would come, as enabled, to look at this word, and what the Lord says to His church and the esteem He has for her. "O My dove!" The dove throughout the Word of God signifies a clean creature. The dove is a lovebird too, and cannot live upon carrion. You remember when Noah sent the dove out from the Ark, it could find no rest for the sole of its foot, because the water covered the whole earth. Have we this evidence of this character, the dove? Can we live upon those things which once we lived upon? Can we find rest in this sin-polluted world? It is a mercy if it is true of us that we are "weary of earth, myself, and sin". All those who have been brought safely to heaven were sinners.

"Of that mighty multitude,
Who of life were winners,
This we safely may conclude,
All were wretched sinners."

So that it is a great blessing if we can trace any features in our experience that give us to hope that we are in the text - "O My dove!"

Our opening Hymn concerning the church of God (359), the habitation of His house - "How amiable are Thy tabernacles", is another feature of the dove. It loves its home. It is of the same nature as a pigeon. You take a pigeon miles away from its home and give it its liberty; it will fly back to its own home. We read of those of old that "being let go, they went to their own company". Can you say, "Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, the place where Thine honour dwelleth"? It is the feature of a dove.

"O My dove, that art in the clefts of the rock!" It is as though the Lord looks down and sees His people in complete safety in the Rock; and His people at times look to the Rock and are enabled to say, "God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble". It is a mercy if we are in the clefts of the rock, that is in union with the Lord Jesus Christ and sheltered in His wounded side, if His sin-atoning sacrifice is ours, through His love and grace, in all the saving benefits of it. We sing sometimes, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me"; but there is another rendering in some of the books: "Rock of Ages, shelter me". "Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as doves to the window?" Have we that feature of being a dove? To love the windows of His grace, and to find nothing in this waste howling wilderness that can sustain our souls or satisfy our desires. Have we that fea-

ture of a dove flying to the windows of His grace, that all the responsibilities, and cares, and depressions, and oppressions, and afflictions are used to drive us to His breast? Have you ever felt an attraction to the house of God, not because you felt so worthy, or so spiritual, but felt an inward desire, a deep need, to believe that in Zion there is a provision which alone can satisfy your immortal soul, and that you long for Christ, not as He is in the mere letter of the Word of God and history, but you come to see Jesus, to taste that He is gracious, to receive from His fulness, to fill your empty soul, to be clothed in His righteousness, and if He would, according to this chapter, "show Himself through the lattices" of His Word and ordinances? You want God, and nothing here can satisfy. If these things are the feelings, movements, desires of faith, then you have a hope that you are in the text. "O My dove, that art in the cleft of the rock!" Interested in Christ, in His great salvation, that work of salvation that culminated in His blessed, precious, agonizing death. All His people were sheltered in that cleft of the Rock. Yet in every case it is a path of tribulation to the kingdom.

"O My dove! that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs." In all vital religion there is a secret, and it is a vital point to take notice of: "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him". It is a secret which is hidden from the wise and prudent. Therefore all right knowledge of Christ and the truth must be revealed. By wisdom man knows not God. By searching the greatest scientists cannot find Him out. They seem to find out almost everything else, but cannot find God. They seem to know about nearly everything else, but cannot know God. Do we? Secret - and I am thankful it is a secret. Have you got it? The secret really was in Jehovah. The election of God was a secret election; it was according to His foreknowledge. Nobody else knows who His people are. "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His"; and only He knows infallibly. It is a secret people.

The first secret place was in the covenant of grace. There their names were written in a secret, the Lamb's book of life. That was the secret of secrets, and every vital secret of religion is consequent upon that first secret decree of Jehovah. It is a solemn and blessed point, because everything that is living in religion, everything that will be owned of God at last - and all else will be burnt up - proceeds from the eternal purposes of God. It is all "according as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world". Do you feel these blessed truths? They are immutable; nothing can frustrate these purposes. It often appears to us, as we are passing through the storms, and furnaces, devouring troubles, anxieties, persecutions, that everything is out of control; but the Lord sees His people in the clefts of the rock.

"In the secret places of the stairs." Look then, my friends, for the secret of the Lord in your profession, your religion. The kingdom of heaven cometh without observation, without outward show. The secret of the Lord is when the Holy Ghost implants that secret life in the soul with an incorruptible seed. And as the seed is cast into the earth and there is a secret germination, so there is in the soul. We read of it in Ecclesiastes: "Thou knowest not what is the way of the Spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all". Well, are

we in that secret? Have you any evidence that there is within you a life distinct from your natural life? That is when the root is rooted, in the new birth. How are we to know whether we have this first essential secret of religion by being born again? Well, if we have, our religion is an involuntary influence in our hearts - spontaneous would perhaps be the best word; but I like ^{voluntary} better. That is whether you possess a secret life that lives in spite of yourself. Natural life is an illustration - a poor but real illustration of spiritual life. It is involuntary, spontaneous. You cannot just be hungry automatically. You cannot feel in your natural heart a longing for anything that your nature dislikes; you cannot command it. You cannot say, "Well, I shall be tired at a certain hour". Life is ~~an~~ involuntary and goes on in our being in spite of ourselves; and if you possess the life of God in your souls, it will assert itself. You won't have to manipulate it like an automatic machine. Have we then that inward hunger and thirst for God? Have we a secret sorrow, secret desires, and things that once we had not? Could you be among those people who went back and walked no more with Him? They had no secret, were never in the secret place of the Most High.

"In the secret places of the stairs." Well, another secret place of the stairs is in the Lord Jesus Himself. He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life". He is the way from sin to grace. He is the way from hell to heaven in experience. He is the way to God. He is a foundation. The doctrines of salvation are the secret places of the stairs, and it is a mercy if we have any evidence that we are joined unto Christ in the doctrines of the Gospel. To my mind, I feel there is no more blessed interpretation of the Spirit's intention in this place than that in the Romans. These are the stairs: "Whom He did foreknow, them He also did predestinate; and whom He predestinated, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified". Oh those blessed stairs, those eternal decrees and purposes of God into which He puts His people! Indeed, they are made on their behalf, and what a wonderful and beautiful experience salvation is, that the very condition of our body of sin and death, and of the ruin of the Fall, God in His infinite wisdom used such a condition to display the secret of His amazing grace, His love, His wisdom, and His justice. It is a mercy if we are indeed, in the first place, in the clefts of the rock, and therefore in the secret places of the stairs.

"Let Me see thy countenance; let Me hear thy voice." Now the countenance of His people differs according to the experience through which they are passing. As for instance, it may be, and for the most part is, a pathway of tribulation, and of mourning, of confession of sin. But oh what music is a confessing sinner's voice, and how the Lord does delight to see the countenance of a repenting coming sinner! He puts their tears in His bottle. David believed this in all his wanderings in the wilderness, even when pursued by Saul and under reproaches and persecutions, he said: "Thou tellest my wanderings; are not my tears in Thy bottle?"

"Let Me see thy countenance; let Me hear thy voice." The two things go together. It would indeed be a comely sight to see a sinner in secret, bowed before the Lord, dissolved at His feet in godly sorrow, and repentance, and confession of sin. I should like to be brought

there, dissolved at His feet as was Mary when she washed the Lord's feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Oh the love that filled His heart when He saw her countenance and heard her voice! Has He seen us? It is all secret; it will be in the secret place of the stairs. How you plead His precious Word that He has spoken! It does honour Him. Do you ever take a word of God and remind Him of it, and ask Him to do as He has said?

"Let Me see thy countenance; let Me hear thy voice." It is amazing that the infinite God has such a particular and intimate, loving interest in every individual that belongs to Him; and that is why there is such particular exercise of individual cases. David said: "I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me". Oh what beauty there is in the language of faith at the throne of grace! A consideration of this may make us very sad as we consider how little we know of this divine, sacred, reverent intimacy with the Lord Jesus. We are so carnal, so many worldly interests; have so much time for everything, but little if any for the Lord Jesus. Have room for everything, but little room for Him. And when you come to look at this Song, it may be very salutary. It may be used to cover us with shame, and then to come before Him with our countenance covered with shame, and sitting in sackcloth.

Job says, "Behold, I am vile!" The Lord heard it, and said of him that he was a man that feared God and eschewed evil. When there is real honest confession of what we feel and are, our countenance will be like Hannah's. She said, "I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit". Very sweet is that voice, and that countenance is comely. So it is too when we can come before Him with songs of deliverance. Yes, it is the same voice, the same exercise of faith really. David said to the Lord, "My wounds stink and are corrupt, because of my foolishness". He also said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul! and all that is within me, bless His holy name!". It was the same faith that expressed both. We are apt to think that when we are brought into darkness and trouble, and bring ourselves there and mourn before the Lord, that it is not the same faith as when we are enabled to rejoice in Him; but it is.

"For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely." There will be this too in the exercise of faith in providence, when faith responds to those beautiful verses in the 37th Psalm. "Trust in the Lord, and so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed." The Lord knows them that trust in Him. You bring your burdens and cast your cares upon Him. It honours Him. So also when you humble yourselves under His mighty hand and bow down before Him. You look at those pilgrims that were thus exercised and tried through the 107th Psalm. They were secret exercises in outward providence. The world have their troubles. You will find the world in hospitals, and they have adversity and losses; but there is no secret. That is the thing in the text. This secret runs through everything. And I am warranted to say that if we should go home and find some unexpected calamity, that sooner or later there would be that inward secret life assert itself, and we should find in that calamitous providence the secret of the Lord, and realize that He is too wise to err, and too good to be unkind. It is this secret that I have felt with respect to this text. If you are in Christ, in the clefts of the Rock, then throughout your experience in your soul, and in all the exercises,

and trials, conflicts, difficulties, and afflictions of life, there will be an inward secret in it all. And it is good to observe this when we visit the Lord's afflicted people. You may have some neighbours, upright people, but if you were to visit them in deep affliction, there would be no secret. It would be difficult to say anything to them. They would be strangers and foreigners to all the inward workings of grace, even in the midst of afflictions. But when you visit one that has grace and faith, how blessed it is to detect and feel that inward living secret of the Lord which is such a stay in the most painful cases. It just comes to the mind with regard to our late friend, Mrs. Anscombe. She had the secret of the Lord's presence and knew very well that she was facing death and the grave. "In Thy presence", she said, "I am happy", "In Thy presence I'm secure; In Thy presence all afflictions, I can easily endure". It is the same secret of the soul.

Have you ever seen the countenance of a afflicted chastened child of God? We sing - but it refers to the Lord Jesus: "What beauty e'en in grief appears"; and there is a beauty in a gracious soul in the midst of afflictions and calamities, when this secret presence of the Lord sustains them, and there is a secret interpretation too. It may be that the Lord is pleased to hide the purposes of His grace, but eventually it will be to make them better known. "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." What a remarkable thing it is for the Lord to speak! Everything in the Word of God that is declared is spoken to men, not to beasts, nor to angels, but to sinners. And His voice is a secret voice. Elijah knew this. It was not the mighty rushing wind, it was not the earthquake, it was not the fire; but it was an inward, still, small voice.

"Let Me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely." Therefore how comely are His people as they appear before Him at the throne of grace! Oh my friends, I have desired, I feel to deeply need, the secret of the Lord in my own heart, and that we as a people may have that secret work of the Holy Ghost, first in our souls as we have feebly traced out; then it will be in all our providences. Do you see that point, and can you trace it? Take that simple word in the 17th Psalm: "Hold up my goings in Thy paths". They are paths that the vultures eye hath not seen; hidden paths. But hold up all my goings. Some of them are full of sorrow; some of them have a terror in them; but "hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not". Oh to have the secret of the Lord in our hearts! The vital point is His secret life, and then every other secret will be there. Circumstances will bring it out. Yes, in prison, the secret of the Lord will be there. If you are distressed in mind, and the blessed secret of the Lord in the covenant of grace is made known to you - "He will show them His covenant", so that you feel the security of being in all things conducted through life to heaven, under the shelter of the covenant of grace.

Oh may the Lord help us to cleave more closely to Him! Solomon's Song is a very sacred place, and yet, my friends, it is well for us; and if we do desire and pray for a closer walk with God, we shall be brought into a reverent and blessed familiarity and acquaintance with Him in our souls at all times, under all circumstances, among all people, and in all places, and heaven will be the end. And that is a secret place. Sometimes when you get a little of heaven let down into your heart, you have a secret there. Amen.