

## READING SERMON

### A Sleeping Bride/Church

1. Her Sinful Behavior
2. Its Serious Results
3. Her Subsequent Realization

**Text: Song of Solomon 5:2-9**

**Scripture Reading: Song of Solomon 4:16-6:3**

**Psalms: 264 (1-4), 69 (1-7), 124 (1-4), 204 (1-4)**

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The Song of Solomon is a poetic book, which means that it is not always very easy to understand at first reading. It is a poetic book that contains for us a poetic version of the history of a relationship between Solomon and this woman who is called a Shulamite.

It is important to understand that the book of the Song of Solomon is the inspired Word of God. That is important because we might otherwise want to discredit what is in this book. We might want to exclaim, “Solomon! Isn’t that the man who had a thousand wives? How can we learn from him about the human relationship of a man and a woman?” But, you see, this is what God has done. He has taken this one relationship of Solomon and the Shulamite and He has sanctified it. He has made it holy and He has put it down in Scripture for us. And we can learn from it.

There are two things that we draw from the Song of Solomon, two main things.

One thing that we learn from the Song of Solomon, certainly, is about marriage and the relationship of a man and a woman to each other in marriage. And even about courting and dating—there are some things about that too.

But as we look at the Song of Solomon, we also must, by faith, lift our eyes higher, because this is not only the story of a man and a woman put in Scripture

to serve as an example for Christian men and women today, but it is for us also a picture of Christ and His relationship to His bride, the church. As we look at the Song of Solomon, we must see that it concerns not only the human relationship between Solomon and the Shulamite, but more especially it is about the relationship of Christ and His bride, the church. Only when we see that can we really understand this book, and from it make application to our own marriages, which ought to be patterned after the marriage of Christ and His church.

We have to be careful when we go through the Song of Solomon. We have to be careful because it is poetry. That means that, as we go through it, we must not take every detail of it and try to make something of every detail in the Song of Solomon. That is a mistake that some commentators have made when they come to this book. One thing they do is, they look at it and they say, “Well, this can’t be about an earthly relationship. God wouldn’t stoop so low in the Word to speak about such a thing. And so, it must be *only* about the heavenly relationship of Christ and His bride.” And they try to go through every detail and try to find something analogous to Christ’s relationship with the church.

What we should do as we look at the Song of Solomon is try to isolate sections of it, each of which teaches one main thing. And as we come to a section, we ought not

to go into all the details of that section and try to make something from every detail analogous to Christ's relationship to His church, but instead take the main idea of each section and see what lesson there is for us to learn in it for ourselves, and then also in relation to Christ and His church.

Up until this point in the book of the Song of Solomon, there has been a story of the developing relationship of Solomon and this Shulamite, this woman who becomes his princess and bride.

In chapter 1 we learn about her coming from Ephraim to Jerusalem to be the bride of the king. She is introduced to us in chapter 1 as a woman who was a farm girl and has to adjust to life in the palace. When she comes into the palace, Solomon introduces her to some friends who will help her to adjust to living in the palace. They are called the daughters of Jerusalem.

In chapter 2 there is a description of their courtship, of their developing relationship and their expressions of love to one another. She is now known in the palace and in public as the fiancée, the bride-to-be, of Solomon.

In chapter 3 there is a description for us of the wedding, which includes a wonderful description of the groom, who represents Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4 presents to us the wedding night and the honeymoon.

And now, in chapter 5, the text that we come to, we are presented with early married life. This passage before us is a remarkable one. It is remarkable because it is so real to our experience, so real to the adjustments of early married life for a man and a woman.

But it is also remarkable because it describes to us some glorious truths about Christ's love for His bride, the church. There are great spiritual lessons here for us as the bride of Jesus Christ.

So we are going to look at these verses, chapter 5, verses 2 through 9, under the theme: "The Sleeping Bride," and, of course, by that we mean also the sleeping church, because there is application here to the church, who is the bride of Christ, and then to everyone of us as a part of that church.

Let us notice three things. First, her sinful behavior; second, its serious results; and third, her subsequent realization—she realizes something in the end.

### **Her Sinful Behavior**

In verse 2 of chapter 5, we come upon a change. Something bad has happened. What is it?

In chapter 4, verse 16, and then chapter 5, verse 1, we have for us a beautiful description of the consummation of the marriage in the physical relationship, described in poetry. The bride speaks, and in verse 16, invites her husband. She says, "Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits." Then, in chapter 5, verse 1, the husband responds and says, "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved."

It describes for us the physical relationship of a man and a woman as something that God has created and ordained, and something that we should not be embarrassed about. It has its proper place in marriage. The Bible speaks of it without embarrassment. This is the high point of a human relationship between a husband and a wife.

And that points us, of course, to the rich union that Christ has with His church, and that the believer has with Christ as the head and husband of the church.

But then in verse 2 the scene changes. The bride says, "I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night."

This is what is happening. She is in bed. Verse 3 tells us she has already taken off her coat, she has washed her feet, she has climbed into bed. And her husband is not home yet. She has bolted the door, and she is sleeping. He comes to the door at the end of a day, after working in the field. He says, at the end of verse 2: "My head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night." We go back to chapter 1 and find out that he is a shepherd. So he has been busy working. This husband (and here it's Solomon), has come home late at night, after a busy day, and she has been waiting for him and waiting for him and longing for him, and he did not come, and finally she gave up. She washed herself, locked the door, and got into bed.

And now, after she is sleeping, she hears the voice of her husband. He speaks with love. He says, "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled." But she refuses to go to the door and open it. She pretends that she is sleeping.

Finally, in verse 5, she does get out of bed. She goes to open the door. And she finds that he is gone.

What we have here is a conflict between the new husband and wife in their early marriage. I think we can understand it because it's so true to our lives. Here the wife is at home and she is somewhat lonely. She has left her family to come and be married to this man. She expects more of him. But he has other responsibilities in life

that take his time. All day she is waiting for him to come home. Maybe there are things in her life now that are demanding on her. I think we can think of it this way: A busy mother in the home, and the husband is out working all day. She wonders, when is he going to come home? She longs for him to be there. And then, when finally he comes, she resents his presence.

That is what is going on here in the text.

This tells us a couple of things about our earthly marriages. The first thing it tells us is this, that the best of marriages will have bad days. It does not matter how compatible the husband and wife are, how deep their relationship. In every marriage there are going to be times of difficulty and conflict.

That is because of what a Christian marriage is. A Christian marriage is two sinners living together. Whenever you put two sinners together, you are going to have conflict. Sin will get in the way. Sin will be a barrier. There will be hurt feelings sometimes and anger. And we have to learn how to handle that in our marriages in a biblical way.

Whose fault is this conflict? Well, the fault here, in this passage, is with the bride. We have to say that because the groom here represents Christ. The groom approaches His bride with great compassion and love. Listen to what He says in verse 2. He calls her "my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled." He does not have any bitterness towards her as He comes in from His responsibilities. The problem here is with her.

This tells us, all of us, husbands and wives, something about ourselves when we come into conflict in our marriages. It tells us this, that if we are going to try to find the source of the conflict, we need to start with ourselves. That is what Jesus says. "Judge not that ye be not judged. With what

measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. Why are you looking at the sliver in your brother's eye, when there is a beam jutting out of your own eye?"

When we come to the table with conflict situations in marriage, it should not be about *our* rights and about what *we* have done that is right, with all the guns pointed at the *other*. We should come to the table with, "My dear, my love, this is where I have caused trouble here," because we are sinners living together. We need to set aside our rights. We need to set aside our righteousness, and out of love, to resolve the conflict that there might be in our relationships.

The cause here is the selfishness of the bride. It is all about herself. She is hurt, she is offended. And she wants him to feel it. She is going to punish him because of her hurt feelings.

We need to deny ourselves in our marriages. We need to deny ourselves in our marriages because this is what Christ has done for us as His bride.

The Scriptures explain that to us very beautifully in Philippians, chapter 2. What did Christ do? Well, Philippians 2 says, that he was equal with God. It was not robbery for Him, He was not taking anything from God, when He called Himself God. If we would call ourselves God, or divine, we would be taking away from the glory of God. But Christ did not do that. It was perfectly legitimate for Him to say, even during His earthly ministry, "I and My Father are one." He took nothing away from God by saying that.

So this is who He is in His person, the eternal Son of God, possessing all the glories and the riches of the godhead. But what does He do? He sets aside His own rights. He sets aside His own claims to glory. Philippians, chapter 2 says: He became a servant. He humbled Himself. Literally, He emptied Himself of those

things. It was not that He stopped being God, but in His human nature the glory of His divinity was clouded. It was not accessible to Him for Himself—why?—because He loved His bride and He gave Himself, He humbled Himself, not only to become a human, and not only to take on the guilt of our sin, but also to suffer the bitter and shameful death of the cross. He gave Himself totally in love for His bride. He did not hold on to His rights. He set them aside out of love for His bride.

That is the pattern that is set down here in the Word of God for us in our marriages.

But we need to see, as we look at this, not only our relationship to each other in our marriage. We need to see here especially the relationship of the church, as bride, to Jesus Christ. When we look at that, then we see another very important point of application. The sleeping bride here represents a church, a people, who are lethargic in spiritual things. They are spiritually dull and complacent. There are times in the experience of every child of God and in the church when we are just like this bride.

In verse 2 she says, "I sleep, but my heart waketh." Something causes her to stir in her sleep. "It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh." What is she saying? She is saying, "Well, I'm asleep, but I know better. I know better because even in my sleep I hear the stirrings and the noise that my husband is making. I know what I ought to be doing. But I'm going to keep on sleeping."

We have the same in verse 4. She knows what is going on. It says there, "My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him." Her bowels, that is, her emotions were moved. She yearned for him. She still has a love for this man. But she continues lethargically in her sleep.

This shows us something of the greatness of the preserving grace of God, because, even though in her sleeping she was being complacent, still the love of God was kept alive in her heart. This is the preserving grace of God. Where God has put in us, by the Holy Spirit, in regeneration, a love for and an interest in Him, that never dies. God may allow His people to slip into moments of spiritual complacency. But He never leaves them there. He preserves in them the seed of regeneration.

But here the wife's self-interest, her feeling of resentment towards her husband, stands in the way. She is not concerned about her husband, even though she knows his love and she knows what she ought to do. Instead she makes excuses. She says, "But I've already taken off my coat. If I get out of bed, I'll be cold." She says, "I have already washed my feet. If I take my feet out of the bed and put them on the floor, they are going to get dirty again. I can't get out of bed. This is about *me*. And not about him." Her interest in herself overrides what she knows is right and what she ought to do in love for her husband.

As we look at this, we need to ask ourselves: How true is this of us sometimes? With regard to spiritual things, with regard to the church, with regard to Christ, with regard to our personal, spiritual activity in drawing near to God, are we awake? Are we alive? Are we enthusiastic? Are we zealous? Are we dedicated?

Or are we complacent? Like the bride here, indifferent? Too tired? Are we one of those Christians who says, "Well, yes, I know how things ought to be in my life and how I ought to be living and what I ought to be doing as a Christian. I know that I ought to pray more. I know that I should read the Scriptures. I know I should be more faithful in spiritual activities in relation to the church. I know I should make more effort. But I'm tired. And besides,

there are things that I'm busy with in my own life. There is too much going on in my life. I don't have time for these spiritual things." Is that not what we say sometimes? "Well, I've worked a hard day and I come home and I've taken off my coat and I've taken off my shoes and I'm not going to put them back on for church activities." And so we bolt the door.

If we look at these things honestly, we see that they are just excuses. It is a matter of priorities and of where our heart really is, what really should receive the emphasis in our lives.

Maybe we could look at it another way. Sometimes we find in ourselves the resources and the energy to become very enthused about something—vacation, an outing, a sporting event. Do we have that same kind of energy and enthusiasm and love for the things of the kingdom of heaven? The wife in our text would not open the door for her husband. But she may very well have done it for something else that would serve her own interests. We are willing to juggle our schedules to fit other things into our lives. But so often we find the life of the church, to be an intrusion into our lives. Or, even, just the spiritual activities of our day-to-day life in the home. Reading the Bible with our children. Prayer. Personal devotions. How much time do we have for *these* things?

You see, it is very much a matter of the heart, of priorities. We need to examine our priorities, our love. Christ warns the church in the book of Revelation against losing her first love. That is really what this is about. This bride has, in a sense, lost her first love for Solomon. Before the marriage, and in the courtship, she was burning with love for her husband. But now, as she gets into marriage, she finds out that it is a lot of work. And really that is what it is like as the Christian life goes on too. There is a lot of work involved in living as a Christian in the

home and in the church. We can lose our first zeal and our first love, just as the bride here lost it in her marriage.

### **Its Serious Results**

We need to be warned. We need to be warned because this kind of apathy, this kind of complacency, can bring serious consequences into the life of the child of God. If we let our love for Christ grow cold, as this bride did, there will be serious results. Two of them are mentioned here in the passage.

You have the first, in verse 5, “I rose up to open to my beloved; and [then this beautiful part of verse 5] my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock.” Earlier in the chapter her husband had reached in through the door. Maybe as she was in bed and heard him reach in through the door she thought, “Oh, he is reaching in through the hole in the door to try to get in.” But she had it bolted, so that even though he reached in the door, he could not get in. She was going to punish him. But in fact, when he reached in through the door, he was leaving another emblem of his love by putting myrrh (sweet-smelling myrrh) on the door handle. And when she finally gets up to open the door, her hands are given this beautiful fragrance that is another symbol of her husband’s love.

And then verse 6: “I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.” Here is one of the results of her apathy. It is this: She comes to the door; she opens it; and he is gone.

What does that mean? Well, it means this. Not that he had abandoned her, not that he had forsaken her or divorced her or something like that. But this, that she now, because of her apathy and

complacency, has lost the sense of his felt presence and fellowship. Her own sin has caused the sense and experience of his presence to be gone.

You see, it is not that he stopped loving her. But she did not open. She was not interested. As a result of that, she lost the sense of his felt presence. The security of the love of her relationship to her husband was gone.

It was not that he abandoned her. Later she finds him and he greets her with comfort and love. But meanwhile, she goes through this painful period and this painful experience in her life when she could not find him. And, of course, the whole time that she is going through this it is the guilt of what she had done, the guilt of her apathy, that made this period so painful to her. That is the pain. She realized what she had done. She realized that she deserved this for what she had done.

That is exactly the experience of the child of God when, in his apathy, he is not interested in God. Then he loses the sense of the felt presence of God. Because, you see, God is a righteous God. Intimacy with the Lord can be experienced by the child of God only when he walks in the way of the Lord, in the way of repentance, in the way of love, in the way of commitment.

James tells us: Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. And James does not mean that God will otherwise not be there. He means that when you are not daily walking with the Lord, you will lose the sense of the felt presence of God, the experience of the love of God and communion with God. When we go away from the Lord, when we walk in sin, we will not have the joy of the children of God. It will seem sometimes, then, that heaven is closed to us.

So, again, this brings home the urgency of this passage before us. It is true for the believer, and sometimes this is the

most painful thing. It is the most painful thing in human relationships, in marriage too, when you know that something that you have done puts a barrier and a rift between you and your spouse. Maybe your husband is gone for the day and there is no way to communicate. But you know what offense you caused before he went to work. Or you know what offense you caused to your wife before you left for the day. That is a painful experience.

That is what the wife has here. When she goes out to look for him, she knows that what she has done has caused him to withdraw from her.

That is true for the church. The church must walk with the Lord, she must walk according to the Word of God in truth, in order for the Lord and His presence to be known in the church. The church that walks away from the Lord, that departs from truth, will find that the Lord is far off. It is in the way of obedience, in the way of love for God, in the way of repentance, in the way of confessing the truth, that we know the presence of God. That is one of the serious results, here, that comes into her relationship.

The other serious result we have in verse 7. She says, "The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me."

What has happened? This:

Finally she had gone to the door. She unlocked it. She poked her head out into the night, into the dark street. She looked to the left and to the right. She called out his name. And he was not there.

So, what did she do? She pursues him in the dark night, in her gown and bare feet. She is out in the street looking for her husband. And what happens? The watchmen, or the policemen in the city, see this woman dressed in a robe, and hear her calling out the name of the king! What do

you think they think of her? How do you think they identify her? Well, they think of her as a woman of the street—a harlot. And so they punish her for a crime. They beat her and leave her in the street.

What has happened?

Well, her spiritual apathy, her disinterest in her husband, has now put her in the company of those that have taken her so far away from her husband so that she is not even recognizable anymore.

The exact same thing can happen in the life of the child of God as a result of spiritual indifference. Soon it looks as if we are walking with the world. The world looks at us and says, "Well, there is no difference. You have lost your distinctiveness as people in the church of God." As a result, we bring shame to the name of God and to the church of God, to the name of Jesus Christ. The world looks on and says, "Well, you're not that interested in spiritual things. You're not that interested in your husband, Jesus Christ. You look much more like the world. And yet you say you are religious. You say you belong to the church and that you are part of the bride of Christ. But we don't see it." That brings shame to the name of Jesus Christ. It is really the sin of hypocrisy. Spiritual apathy is detectable. And it looks just like hypocrisy.

So we need to be warned against spiritual indifference. We need to be warned against apathy towards the things of the church and the kingdom of God because, you see, there are terrible results that can come. We lose the felt presence of Christ. We start to look like the world. And we bring shame to the name of Jesus Christ.

### **Her Subsequent Realization**

But the story does not end here. That is the beauty of it. The wife was not interested in her husband. As a result of her sin, she lost the felt presence of her husband.

And in her guilt she thought that, because of her sin, what she justly deserved was this, that he abandon her. But what is beautiful in the story is this: his love for her never changed and never died.

God does not leave when we fall into sin. Sometimes He does let us experience the loss of His felt presence in order to awaken within us again true spiritual desires. It is sad when that must happen. Sometimes we have to deal with terrible consequences in our life. But God never abandons His own. Christ never forsakes His bride for whom He has given Himself. The loss of His felt presence will bring us back to Him by His chastening hand.

That is what you have here in the passage as well, in verses 8 and 9. The daughters of Jerusalem have found her in the street beaten by the watchmen. But she is not so concerned about the fact that she has been beaten. She is still looking for her husband. These daughters of Jerusalem—perhaps they saw her go out into the dark night on her own, or they found her gone and they thought, Well, we'll have to go and find her and help her. They find her in the street.

And the first thing she says to them is this: “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love.” She means by this that her love for him is strong and burning again. The chastisement that she has gone through has awakened her love and her longing for him. That is why she is out looking for him.

In verse 9, they put a question to her. And this is the important thing that I want to emphasize here. This is the question that we should take home with us. There is a kind of sarcasm in this question. The daughters of Jerusalem obviously know about the relationship of Solomon and the Shulamite and their deep love for one another. But with a kind of sarcastic question they say to

her: “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?” They say to her, what is so special about this man? Why are you out in the night looking for him? Why is your longing and love for him so strong? Why are you sick for him in your love?

And she responds in the verses that follow in a kind of defensive way. She becomes indignant. What do you mean, what is so special about him? She says, “He’s the fairest among ten thousand.” She says in verse 16: “He is altogether lovely.” This answer to the daughters of Jerusalem shows that her love for him has awakened again. And it was really this question that was put to her that brought this out: What is so special to you about your beloved?

As a believer, as a church, what is so special to you about Christ, the husband of the church? That is the question that the spiritually dull, the complacent, the lethargic Christian needs to answer.

What is so special about Christ to you? Is He better and more special than some other husband, some other object of worship, some other thing that takes your interest in your life? What is so special about Him to you?

And the true child of God who is faced with that question and thinks about it like the Shulamite, responds: “He is the fairest among ten thousand! This is my beloved, and this is my friend.” The child of God who knows the love of Christ, who knows what Christ has done in His self-sacrificial love for him as a believer and for the church as the bride of Christ, says, “Yes,” in a kind of indignant way, “Yes, He is special. There is no one else like Him! This is the one I love, this is the one I serve.”



The withdrawn presence of Christ, and then this question, brings the child of God to repentance and true love in Jesus Christ.

Tonight as you go home, and tomorrow, and this week, let that be the question that you ask yourself: What is Christ to me? What is so special about Him

over another? What is He more than another? Let this be our answer: "He's altogether lovely. This is my beloved. This is my friend."

Amen.

Father in heaven, we thank Thee for this remarkable passage in the Word of God that describes for us not only the experience of the child of God who sometimes in his sin and weakness loses interest in spiritual things and in Jesus Christ, but also a passage that describes to us the commitment of Jesus Christ to His bride and the awakening of love and repentance that comes through the Word and the chastening that Christ sometimes gives to us. Lord, we pray that in the week that is before us we may consider these things, and as we consider ourselves may our love for Christ increase and our commitment to spiritual things and the life of the kingdom of heaven become more solid. We pray this in Jesus' name, and for His sake, Amen.