

THE SHULAMITE'S CHOICE PRAYER

NO. 364

A SERMON
DELIVERED ON SUNDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 24, 1861
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AT NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL, SOUTHWARK

*“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, which hath a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.”*
Song of Solomon 8:6-7

THIS is the prayer of one who has the present enjoyment of fellowship with Christ, but being apprehensive lest this communion should be interrupted, she avails herself of the opportunity now afforded her to plead for a something which shall be as the abiding token of a covenant between her and her beloved, when His visible presence shall be withdrawn.

You will notice that this is not the cry of a soul that is longing for fellowship, for that cry is, “Tell me O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest.” It is not even the cry of the soul that has some fellowship and needs more, for then it would say, “Oh that you wert as my brother!” Nor is it the cry of a soul that has had fellowship but has lost it, for that is, “Saw ye him, whom my soul loveth?” And she goes “about the streets and in the broad ways,” saying, “I will seek him.”

But this is the prayer of the spouse when she has been coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon His bosom. The thought strikes her, that He that has sustained her is about to go from her, to depart and leave her for a season, because it is expedient and more useful for her. And she prays that since He is no more in the earth, but has entered into the ivory palaces where her God dwells, that He would be pleased to make a covenant with her never to forget her, and that He would give here some sign and mark by which she might be well-assured that she is very near to His heart, and still written upon His arm.

I take it to be the prayer of the church at the present day, now that Christ is before the Father's throne. The Bridegroom is not with us. He has left us. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and He is coming again. We are longing for His coming. We are saying in the language of the last verse of this Song of Songs, “Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of spices.”

Yet ere He went, it seemed as if His church did pray to Him, “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm.” And this is the cry of the church tonight, and I trust your cry too, that while He is not present, but is absent from you, you may be near to Him and have a sweet consciousness of that blessed fact.

Now without further preface, let me first notice, *the prayer*, and secondly, *the reasoning with which the spouse argues her suit*. The prayer is, “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm.” The argument is four-fold. She pleads thus, “Love is strong as death.” She waxes bolder, “Jealousy is cruel as the grave.” She wrestles again, “The coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.” And once again she brings forth her choice words, “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, for many waters cannot quench thy love, neither can the floods drown it.”

I. THE PRAYER, you will notice, is two-fold, although it is so really and essentially one, “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm.”

Now, I think I can perhaps explain this text best by a reference to the high priest of old. You know that when he put on his holy garments—those robes of glory and beauty—he wore the breastplate of cunning work in which four rows of precious stones were set. If you will turn to Exodus, the thirty-ninth chapter and fourteenth verse, you read, “And the stones were according to the names of the children of

Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet, every one with his name, according to the twelve tribes.”

How suggestive of this prayer! “Set me as a seal or as an engraved signet, as a precious stone that has been carved—set my name upon thy breast.” Let it be always glittering there. But beside this breastplate, there was the ephod, and we are told that, “They made shoulder pieces for it, to couple it together; by the two edges was it coupled together.”

Then in the sixth verse we read, “And they wrought onyx stones inclosed in ouches of gold, graven, as signets are graven, with the names of the children of Israel; and he put them on the shoulders of the ephod, that they should be stones for a memorial to the children of Israel; as the LORD commanded Moses.”

So that it was set as a signet upon his shoulder, or upon his arm, as well as upon his heart. I think these were to indicate that the high priest loved the people, for he bore them on his heart. And that he served the people as a consequence of that love, therefore he bore them upon his shoulders. And I think the prayer of the spouse is just this—she would know once for all that Christ's heart is entirely hers, that He loves her with the intensity, and the very vitality of His being—that His inmost heart, the life-spring of His soul, belongs to her.

And she would also know that that love moves His arm. She longs to see herself as supported, sustained, strengthened, defended, preserved, and kept by that same strong arm which put Orion in its place in the sky, and holds the Pleiades that they should give their light for evermore. She longs that she may know the love of His heart and that she may experience the power of His arm.

Can we not, each of us, join the spouse in this prayer tonight? Oh! Lord, let me know that my name is engraven on Your heart—not only let it be there, but let me know it. Write my name not only *in* Your heart, but may it be as a signet *on* Your heart that I may see it.

Doubtless, there are the names of very many written upon Christ's heart, who have not yet been able to see their names there—they are there, but not written as on a signet. Christ has loved them from all eternity. His heart has been set on them from everlasting, but as yet they have never seen the signet. They have never had the seal of the Spirit to witness within that they are born of God. While their names may be in His heart, they have not seen them there as a seal upon His heart.

And no doubt there are multitudes for whom Christ has fought and conquered, and whom He daily keeps and preserves, who have never seen their names written as a seal upon His arm. Their prayer is that they may see Christ's love visibly, that they may discover it in their experience, that it may be beyond a question, and no more a matter of doubt—that His hand and His heart are engaged for their eternal salvation.

I repeat it, you can all join in this prayer, you people of God—it is a cry that you can put up now, and continue to put up till it is fully answered. Oh! let me know, my Lord, that I am Yours, bound to Your heart, and let me know that I am Yours, protected and preserved by Your arm. This is the prayer. I shall not say more upon it, because I wish to speak more at length upon the arguments with which it is here pleaded.

II. The spouse argues with her Lord thus.

It is to my advantage that You should thus write my name upon Your hand and heart, for I know this concerning Your love, that it is *strong*, that it is *firm*, that it has a wondrous *intensity*, and that it has a sure and unquenchable *eternity*. With these four pleas she backs up her suit.

1. She pleads that He would show her His love, because of *the strength of it*. “Thy love is strong as death.” Some expositors think that this means the church's love. Others say, “No, it means the love of Christ to His church.” I will not try to determine which it means, for they are extremely like each other. Christ's love to His church is the magnificent image—the affection which His people bear to Him is the beautiful miniature.

They are not alike in degree and measure, for the church never loves Christ so much as Christ loves her, but they are as much alike as the father in his strength is to the babe in weakness—there is the same

image and superscription. The love of the church to Christ is the child of Christ's love to the church, and consequently there is something of the same attribute in both, and while it is true that Christ's love to us is so strong that He did defy and endure death for us, it is true also that the love of the church to Him is as strong as death.

Her chosen sons and daughters have endured the pangs of the rack, and the pains of the sword, and have gone through a thousand deaths sooner than be turned aside from their chaste fidelity to their Lord. I shall, however, keep to the first idea, that this is the love of Christ, and shall use it thus, as being the plea of His church, that because His love is strong, she desires to be certified of her interest in it, and to see most visibly the signet and seal of her being really in His heart.

"Love is as strong as death." What a well-chosen emblem this is! What besides love is so strong as death? With steadfast foot Death marches over the world. No mountains can restrain the invasion of this all-conquering king. There is no chalet on the mountain Alp so high that his foot cannot climb to hunt the inhabitant. There is no valley so fair that he does not intrude and stalk—a grim skeleton across the plain. Everywhere and in every place beneath the moon have you sway, O Death!

The lordly lion bows his neck to you. Leviathan yields up his corse which floats many a rood upon the briny waves. You are the great fisher. You have put your hook into his jaw and dragged him from the sea. Master of all you are! You have dominion given unto you. You wear an iron crown, and you dash in pieces as though they were but potter's vessels, the strongest of the sons of men.

None among the sons of Adam can withstand Death's insidious advances. When his hour is come, none can bid him delay. The most clamorous prayers cannot move the flinty bowels of Death. Insatiable, and not to be appeased, he devours and devours ever. That scythe is never blunted, that hourglass never ceases to flow. Mightiest among the mighty are you, O Death. But Christ's love is strong as death.

It too can climb the mountain, and lay hold upon the mountaineer, far removed from the sound of the ministration of the Gospel. It too can march into the valley, and though Popery with all its clouds of darkness should cover it, yet the love of Christ can win its glorious way.

What can stand against it? The stoutest must yield to it, and adamant hearts are dashed to shivers by one blow of its golden hammer. As the sun dissolves the chains of frost, and bids the rill rush on in freedom, though once bound as if it were stone—so does this love of Christ wherever it comes, give life, and joy, and liberty, snap the bonds, and win its way, never being retarded, never being hindered, because it is written, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

Who can measure the strength of Christ's love? Men have defied it, but their defiance has been overcome. They have resisted long, but they have been compelled to throw down their weapons. They have crossed it, but they have found it hard to kick against the pricks. They have gone on caring for none of these things, but thus the eternal counsel has decreed it—Christ must, He shall have that redeemed man, and He has had him. Jesus Christ's love is strong as death.

Sooner might a man live, after God's will had decreed that he should die, than a sinner remain impenitent one hour after God's love had decreed to melt his heart. Sooner might you defy the grave and hurl back upon his haunches the pale horse of Death, than turn back the Holy Spirit when He comes in His divine omnipotence to lay hold upon the heart and soul of man. As all the owls and bats with all their hootings could not scare back the sun when once its hour to rise has come—so all the sins and fears, and troubles of man cannot turn back the light of love when God decrees that it should shine upon the heart.

Stronger than death, His love is found. Death is but weakness itself when compared with the love of Christ. What a sweet reason why I should have a share in it! What a blessed argument for me to use before the throne of God! Lord, if Your love is so strong, and my heart be so hard, and myself so powerless to break it, oh! let me know Your love, that it may overcome me, that it may enchain me with its sure but soft fetters, and that I may be Your willing captive evermore.

But let me notice here that when the spouse says that Christ's love is strong as death, you must remember that she may in faith have foreseen that it would one day be tried which was the strongest. You know, do you not, that these two once entered into the lists to try their strength? And it was a struggle, sure, upon which angels gazed.

Jesus—I mean incarnate love—at the first seemed to shrink before death. “He sweat as it were, great drops of blood falling to the ground.” You cannot see the brow of His antagonist, but could you have perceived it, Death—the invader—was trembling more than Christ—the invader. Christ had the prophecy of victory, but Death—the fates were against it.

Well do you remember that story of how the Savior's back was ploughed, His hands pierced, and His side opened? Death—methinks I see the flush that crossed his pale face, as he thought that he had gained the victory, but Jesu triumphed. Love reigned while Death lays prostrate at His feet. Strong as Death indeed was Jesu's love, for Jesus swallowed up Death in victory.

Not merely overcame it, but seemed to devour it, to make nothing of it, and put it away once for all. “O Death,” said Love, “I will be your plague! O grave, I will be your destruction!” And Love has kept its word and proved itself to be “strong as Death.”

Well, beloved, we may add to these few remarks this word. Rest assured that as Death will not give up its prey, so neither will Love. How hard and firm does Death hold its captives! Till that resurrection trump shall make him loose their bonds none shall go free. Their ashes he preserves as carefully as a king keeps the jewels of his crown. He will not suffer one of them to escape as did Israel out of the land of Pharaoh. In the house of bondage, there they must lie.

And is not Christ's love as strong as this? He shall keep His own. Those who are His He never will let go. Nay, when the archangel's trump shall dissolve the grasp of death, then shall be heard the cry, “Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am.” And when Death itself is dead, Love shall prove its eternal strength by taking its captives home. Love, then, is strong as Death.

Lord Jesus, let me feel that love. Let me see Your arm nerved with it, and Your heart affected by this strong love which all my enemies cannot defeat, which all my sins cannot overturn, which all my weakness cannot gainsay. I think this is a most sweet and powerful argument to lead you to pray the prayer, and one which you will use when you are pleading before God.

2. Let us now turn to the second plea, “Jealousy is cruel as the grave.” Krummacher, in a sermon upon this passage, following the translation of Luther, quotes it as though it ran thus, “Jealousy is firm as hell.” And I believe that such is the proper translation, at least quite as correct as the present one. “Jealousy is firm as hell.”

Those of you who have Bibles with the margins in them, (and the margins are generally like fine gold) will perceive the words in the corner, “Hebrew, hard”—“Jealousy is hard as the grave,” which is just the idea of firmness, it is as firm as the grave. *Sheol*, I believe the word is here for *grave*, otherwise we translate it “Hades”—the place of separate souls without reference to good or evil—or as Luther translates it—“hell.” “Jealousy is hard as hell.”

The idea is just this—that the love of Christ in the form of jealousy is as hard and as sternly relentless as is the grave and hell. Now hell never looses one of its bond-slaves. Once let the iron gate be shut upon the soul and there is no escape. When the ring of fire has once girdled the immortal spirit, none can dash through the flaming battlements. The dungeon is locked. The key is dashed into the abyss of destiny and never can be found.

*“Fixed is their everlasting state,
Could they repent, 'tis now too late.”*

“Escape for thy life, look not behind thee,” is a cry which may be uttered on earth, but which can never be heard in hell. They who are once there, are there forever and forever. That modern doctrine of the restoration of damned souls has no foundation in the Word of God. It is a dream and they shall find it

so who once come into that place. “Where their worm dieth not, and where their fire is not quenched”—a more perfect picture of an unrelenting seizure could not be found anywhere. The firmness and hardness of the grave and hell are without abatement. When once they have got their hands upon their prey, they hold it with a tenacity which defies resistance.

Well, but such is the love of Christ. If just now we had to speak of its strength, we have now to speak of its tenacity, its hardness, its attachment to those whom it has chosen. You may sooner unlock Hades and let loose the spirits that are in prison there, than you could ever snatch one from the right hand of Christ.

You may sooner rob death of its prey, than Jesus of His purchased ones. You may spoil the lion's den, but shall the lion of the tribe of Judah be spoiled? Shall the prey be taken from the mighty and the lawful captive delivered? Ere one child of God shall be lost, you shall go first and make death relax his grasp, and then next you shall make hell with all its fury give up its prey.

As soon as ever it can be proved that one child of God perishes, it can be proved that the fires of hell can be put out, but until then, there shall never be a shadow of a fear of that. As certainly as lost souls are lost, so certainly believing souls are saved.

Oh! little do they know the love of Christ, who think that He loves today and hates tomorrow. He is no such lover as that—even earthly worms would despise such affection. Is Christ's affection a play of fast and loose? Does He choose and then refuse? Does He justify and then condemn? Does He press to His bosom and afterwards reject with distaste? It is not so.

If you have seen Niagara in its tremendous strength, leaping from its rock into the depth beneath, you might conceive some hand bidding it leap back or stopping it in its mid-current. Some mighty imagination might conceive that stream changed in its course, and made to ascend and climb the hills, instead of leaping downwards in its strength. But even then, no imagination can conceive the love of Christ retracing its eternal pathway. The divine fury which is in it, drives it on, and on it must go as it has begun.

The love of Christ is like an arrow which had been shot from the bow of destiny. It flies, it flies, and heaven itself cannot change its course. Christ has decreed it—such men shall be His, and His they shall be, nor will He turn away one of them, or make a new election, or plan a new redemption, or bring those to heaven whom He never intended to bring, or lose those whom He ordained to save.

He has said and He will do it. He has commanded His covenant forever and it shall stand fast. He will have compassion on whom He will have compassion, and He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

You have then, here, another reason why you should pray that your name may be upon Christ and upon His arm—once there, it is there forever. So surely there, so jealously there, so hardly there, so fixedly there, that it can never be removed, come what may. Christ is jealous of His people. He will not let another have His spouse. He will not sit still and see the prince of darkness walking off with her whom He espoused unto Himself in the eternal ages.

The supposition is absurd. That cruel jealousy of His would make Him start up from His heavenly repose to snatch His chosen spouse from him who would seek to lead her to the hellish altar. She shall not be divorced from Him. She must not be married to another.

***“Stronger His love than death or hell,
Its riches are unsearchable;
The firstborn sons of light
Desire in vain its depths to see,
They cannot reach the mystery,
The length, the breadth, the height.”***

3. If the love of Christ is strong as death, if it be such that it can never be moved from its object, yet the question still arises, may not the love itself die out? Even should it abide the same in its purpose, yet may not its intensity be diminished?

“No,” says the Shulamite, “it is an attribute of Christ’s love that ‘the coals thereof are coals of fire which hath a most vehement flame.’” More forcible is the language of the original, “The coals thereof are the coals of God”—a Hebrew idiom to express the most glowing of all flames, “The coals of God!” as though it were no earthly flame, but something far superior to the most vehement affection among men.

Some who look carefully at it, think there is an allusion in this sentence to the fire which always burnt at the altar and which never went out. You remember there were coals of fire which were always kept burning under the Levitical dispensation. The flame was originally kindled by fire from heaven and it was the business of the priest to perpetually feed it with the sacred fuel. You will remember too, that one of the cherubims flew and took a live coal from off this very altar and said to Isaiah, “Lo, this has touched thy lips.”

Now, the love of Christ is like the coals upon the altar which never went out. But the spouse has brought out a fuller idea than this. She seems to say, “Its vehemence never decreases. It is always burning to its utmost intensity.” Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace was heated seven times hotter, but no doubt it grew cool. Christ’s love is like the furnace, but it is always at the seven-fold heat, and it always has within itself its own fuel.

It is not like fire merely, but like coals of fire, always having that within itself which supports it. Why did Christ love the spouse? What lit the fire at first? He kindled it Himself. There was no reason whatever why Christ should love any of us, except the love of His own heart. And what is the fuel that feeds the fire? Your works and mine? No, brethren, no, no, a thousand times no. All the fuel comes from the same place—it is all from His heart.

Now, if the flame of Christ’s love depended upon anything we did—if it were fed with our fuel—it would either die out, or else it would sometimes dwindle as the smoking flax, and then again it might kindle to a vehement heat. But since it depends on itself, and has the pure attributes of divinity, it is a self-existent love, absolute and independent of the creature. Well, then, may we understand that it never shall grow less, but always be as a vehement flame.

Now, I do not want to preach about this, but I wish you would think of it a little. Christian, turn it over in your mind—Christ loves you, not a little. Not a little as a man may love his friend, not even as a mother may love her child, for she *may* forget the infant of her womb. He loves you with the highest degree of love that is possible. And what more can I say, except I add, He loves you with a degree of love that is utterly impossible to man. No finite mind could, if it should seek to measure it, get any idea whatever of the love of Christ towards us.

You know, when we come to measure a drop with an ocean, there *is* a comparison. A comparison I say there is, though we should hardly be able to get at it. But when you attempt to measure our love with Christ’s—the finite with the infinite—there is no comparison at all. Though we loved Christ ten thousand times as well as we do, there would even then be no comparison between our love to Him and His love to us.

Can you believe this now, “Jesus loves me”? Why to be loved by others here often brings the tear to one’s eye. It is sweet to have the affection of one’s fellow. But to be loved of God, and to be loved to an intense degree—so loved that you have to leave it as a mystery the soul cannot fathom—you cannot tell how much!

Be silent, O my soul! and be you silent too before your God, and lift up your soul in prayer thus, “Jesus, take me into this sea of love, and let me be ravished by a sweet and heavenly contentment in a sure confidence that You have loved me and given Yourself for me.”

4. We shall now turn to the last argument of this choice prayer, which is equally precious. It is the *unquenchable eternity of this love*. There is that in its very essence which defies any opposite quality to extinguish it.

The argument seems to me to run thus, "Yes, but if Christ's love do not die out of itself—if it have such intensity that it never would of itself fail, yet may not you and I put it out?" No, says the text, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." Christ has endured many waters already—the waters of bodily affliction, the waters of soul travail, the waters of spiritual desertion.

Christ was in this world like Noah's ark—the depths that came up from beneath. Hell troubled Him. The great water-floods came from above. It pleased the Father to bruise Him. The cataracts leaped on Him from either side. He was betrayed by His friends. He was hunted by His foes.

But the many waters could no more destroy His love than it could drown the ark of gopher wood. Just as that ark mounted higher, and higher, and higher, the more the floods prevailed, so then that love of Christ seemed to rise higher, and higher, and higher, just in proportion to the floods of agony which sought to put it out.

Fixed and resolved to bring His ransomed home, the Captain of our salvation becomes perfect through suffering, plunges into the thick of the battle, and comes out of it more than conqueror. And oh! since then, my beloved, what floods has Christ's love endured! There have been the floods of our sins, the many waters of our blasphemy and ungodliness. Since conversion, there have been the many waters of our backslidings and the floods of our unbelief. What crime on crime, what transgression on transgression have we been guilty of. Yet He has never failed us up to this moment.

"By the grace of God we are what we are. And we are persuaded that neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." What if we should be tried in circumstances? "Neither famine, nor persecution, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword, shall separate from the love of Christ."

What if we backslide and wander from His ways? "Though we believe not, he abideth faithful." And what if in the last black hour we should have bitter sufferings on the dying bed? Still He shall be with us in the last moment, for it is written, "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death." So you see he is to be destroyed, and we are to be victors over him.

Gather up then all the thoughts of how we have tried, and how we shall try the Master, and let us set to our seal tonight our own solemn, "Yea and Amen" to this most precious declaration of the Shulamite, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." Then, Lord, write my name on Your heart, engrave my name as a signet on Your arm that I may have a share in this unfailing and undying affection, and be Yours now, and Yours forever.

Poor sinner! I know you have been saying while I have been preaching thus, "I wish I had a share in that love." Well, this prayer you may pray tonight, "Set me—it is a black name—set me as a seal upon Your heart, as a seal upon Your arm. Love me, Lord. Help me, Lord. Let Your heart move towards me. Let Your arm move for me too. Think of me, Lord. Set me on Your heart. Work for me, Lord, set me on Your arm. Lord, I long to have Your love, for I hear it is strong as death, and You know I am chained by Satan, and am his bond-slave. Come and deliver me—You are more than a match for my cruel tyrant.

"Come with Your strong love and set me free. I hear that Your love is firm too as hell itself. Lord, that is such a love as I want. Though I know I shall vex You, and wander from You, come and love me with a love that is firm and everlasting.

"O Lord, I feel there is nothing in me that can make You love me. Come and love me, then, with that love which finds its own fuel. Love me with those coals of fire which have a 'vehement flame.' And since many waters cannot quench Your love, prove that in me, for there are many waters of sin in me, but Lord, help me to believe that Your love is not quenched by them. There are many corruptions in me, but Lord, love me with that love which my corruptions cannot quench. Here, Lord, I give myself away—take me. Make me what You would have me to be, and keep and preserve me even to the end."

May the Lord help you to pray that prayer and then may He answer it for His mercy's sake.

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.