

For I Am Black but Comely

by James Durham

The Bride in the Song of Solomon condescends to the level of weak professors, the 'daughters of Jerusalem', to remove their stumbling at the cross and to encourage them to rejoice with her, by conceding what is truth, qualifying it by a distinction, and illustrating it.

Topics: "Spiritual Beauty", "Persevering Faith"

Description

James Durham preaches about the Bride's discourse to the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song of Solomon, where she describes herself as black yet comely, addressing weak and tender believers within the church. The Bride aims to prevent stumbling at the cross and infirmities by explaining her mixed condition of crosses and comforts, corruptions and graces, and the need to acknowledge both. She uses similitudes of the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon to illustrate her blackness and beauty within. The Bride also reveals her sufferings from persecution and her own neglect in keeping her vineyard, emphasizing the importance of believers being watchful over their privileges and duties.

Transcript

Verse 5. I am black, but comely (O ye daughters of Jerusalem) as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. 6. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me, they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.

In the fifth and sixth verses, we have the second piece of the Bride's first discourse, and it is the speech she hath to the 'daughters of Jerusalem:' wherein, verse 5, she gives a description of herself: then verse 6, applies and ears it for some edifying use unto these beginners.

For clearing of this place, let us, 1. See, who these 'daughters of Jerusalem' are. 2. What is the scope of these words. 3. What is their dependence upon, and connexion with, the former. 4. What is more particularly the meaning of them.

By 'daughters of Jerusalem' in common, are certainly understood professors, members of the church; and so born in and belonging unto Jerusalem; but because there are members of several sorts, some strong, some, weak, some sound, some unsound, some tender, some profane; we must inquire a little further who are meant by these 'daughters of Jerusalem,' they being often mentioned in this Song.

First, We look on them as distinct from 'mother's children,' mentioned in the following verse as a party different from the 'daughters' here spoken to; and so they are not to be accounted amongst the profane, bitter heart-enemies of godliness, who yet live in the church: they are not the worst then of them that are in the visible church. 2. We take them also as distinguished from the 'virgins' and 'upright,' who loved and delighted in Christ in the former verse. For, chap. 5:8, 9, and 6:1, we will find them very ignorant of Christ, although they have some affection. In a word, we take them to include two sorts of professors, 1. Such as are weak and scarcely formed, yet are docile, and have respect to outward ordinances' and godliness, in the practice of it: so their respect to the Bride, and the question propounded by them, chap. 5:9 doth clear. 3. They comprehend such as are formed believers, really honest, and who. have some sound beginnings, yet mixed with much weakness, ignorance and infirmity, and so not come up the length of grown Christians; such who need milk, and cannot endure strong meat; so their question and undertaking, chap. 6:1, Both evidence: they were daughters, while yet they were really very ignorant of Christ, and were ready to provoke him before he pleased, (as the often repeated charge the Bride gives them throughout this Song imports) and they were daughters still, even after they were something better taught and engaged.

We find, 1 John 2:13, the apostle speaks of three sorts, 1. 'Fathers,' that are grown a believers, rich in experience, such we esteem to be understood by the Bride in this Song. 2. 'Young men,' who are strong well advanced believers, such were the virgins and upright here made mention of. A third sort are styled 'little children,' that is, some who (as it were) are yet on the breasts, and that in knowledge, practice, or experience, had not come to a consistence, or to have their senses exercised to know good or evil, as it is, Heb. 5:14, such we account these 'daughters of Jerusalem,' and so may comprehend under them professors, who stand not in the way of their own edification, though they be weak.

2. The scope of her discourse to them, is to prevent their stumbling at the cross, or being deterred from godliness, because of any blackness, or spots that were to be seen in her; it being a great stumbling to weak professors, to see sufferings accompanying tenderness (especially when it is persecuted, and pursued by professors of the same truth) as also to see infirmities and sinful blemishes in persons eminently godly; now her scope is, for their edification, to condescend to satisfy them in both.

3. The reason why she breaks in with this discourse upon the back of the former (which shows the connexion) may be twofold, 1. To remove an objection that might be made, if any should say, what needs all this rejoicing? Are ye not both stained with sin, and blackened with sufferings? She answers by a distinction, granting that in part she was black, and that was truth, yet that blackness was not inconsistent with comeliness, which she clears, and that therefore she might in part rejoice also. The other way that this depends on the former, is, that she may further her project of engaging others to rejoice with her, she endeavours to remove these two occasions of stumbling (taken from the failings and sufferings of the godly) out of the way of weak professors, that she may get them along with her: and so it agrees well with the scope.

More particularly consider the words, wherein she endeavours to satisfy these doubts, and ye will find these things in them, 1. She concedes what is truth. 2. Qualifies it by a distinction. 3. Illustrates it. And these three in the 5th verse. 4. In verse 6, she applies it. And 5, more particularly explicates it. 1. then (saith she) I answer, by conceding what is truth, 'I am black,' both with crosses and corruptions; that cannot be denied. 2. She qualifies her concession, though I be black yet I am comely, that is, I am not universally, or altogether unlovely, mine estate is mixed, being made up of crosses and comforts, corruptions and graces, beauty and blackness. 3. She illustrates this description of herself, or her mixed

condition, by two similitudes, both tending to one thing, or one of them tending to set forth her blackness, the other her beauty, I am (saith she) like 'the tents of Kedar' which were blackish and of no great value, being, by those who lived in them, so frequently transported in such hot countries; this sets forth her blackness.

The second similitude is, that she was like the 'curtains of Solomon:' he built glorious dwellings, and being a rich king, no question had rich hangings; this sets forth her beauty; as if she would say, Ye must not judge of my worth from one side, especially my outside, or upon one consideration, for I have in me both to humble and comfort me. It may be also, though these tents of Kedar were not outwardly beautiful, yet they were within well furnished; and that the curtains of Solomon which were most rich, had outer-coverings of smaller value, as the tabernacle had of badgers' skins; and so the similitudes illustrate her condition, and set out the thing more to the life. As Kedar's tents (saith she) look poor and base like, yet if ye look within, they are glorious; so think not strange, if I appear without beauty to the eye, there may be, yea, there is comeliness within, if ye could discern it, for 'within the king's daughter is all glorious,' Psalm 45:13, which way of distinguishing, is a notable piece of spiritual wisdom and learning, and a great means of peace in ourselves; when what is true of infirmities is acknowledged, and yet the conclusion that temptation would infer is denied. Here observe, 1. The conditions of believers, even the best of them are mixed of good and ill, sin and grace, comfortable privileges and sad sufferings. 2. There is a mixture of blackness in believers' beauty even in their best frame and condition, for she is now in the king's chamber, and yet we find her saying, 'I am black.' 3. Believers, if they would consider what they are rightly, would look on themselves as having contraries in them. 4. Where challenges are just and well grounded, they should be acknowledged and taken with. 5. It is wisdom so to acknowledge our sin, as we may difference it from any work of God's grace in us. 6. Believers, their observing of their sinfulness, should not make them deny their grace; and their observing their grace, should not make them forget their sinfulness. 7. The cross that follows godliness, or the stain and spot that is on a godly person, is sooner taken notice of by onlookers, than either the advantages that follow holiness, or the graces and spiritual beauty of holy persons; this makes it needful to remove this offence. 8. When it may be edifying, believers should assert the worth and beauty of holiness, and their own comeliness thereby, as well as confess their own infirmities; and Christian communion will require both.

Having illustrated her answer, in the fourth place she applies it, verse 6, 'Look not upon me' (saith she) 'because I am black,' seeing I am comely as well as black; look not on me only as such, and think it not strange that I am so: looking here, implieth indignation and disdain. And so, 'look not,' is here to be taken, 1. As being a caveat against indignation or disdain: 'look not,' &c., that is, disdain me not as if nothing desirable were in me; for sin often waiting on the affliction of God's people, obscures the beauty of grace, and makes them to be disdained and undervalued in the world. 2. This 'look not,' is a caution to dissuade them from gazing, or curious wondering at any cross that was on her, or sin that was in her: it should not be the object of their curiosity, much less of their delight or contentment to see it so, Obadiah 12. It is condemned in Edom, 'thou shouldst not have looked upon the day of thy brother.' Next, while she saith, 'look not upon me, because I am black,' she doth not dissuade them from looking on her blackness simply, but from looking only on it; that should not be the alone ground of their search into their condition, but they should take notice of what good was in her as well as what was wrong: so then her blackness should not be the only cause of their looking on her, it should not be their work to ask after her crosses and infirmities, and no more; this she supposes may affright and terrify them and so it is implied here, that onlookers often pore more on believers' infirmities, than on their graces; and this is the fruit which follows, they procure a stumbling and a fall to themselves.

4. In the rest of the 6th verse, she doth more fully explicate her answer, in so far as concerned her blackness, (for so the words run in this 6th verse) two ways, 1. In setting out her sufferings in general. 2. In a more particular distribution of the kind and occasions of her seeming an loveliness. Generally her sad condition is expressed in these words, 'the sun hath looked upon me.' The sun in those countries had great heat, as we see in Jonah 4:8, where the beating of the sun upon him did sore vex him; Jacob also says, it burnt him in the day-time, Gen. 31:40. Therefore, Matt. 13:6 and 21, the Lord expresseth persecution under the similitude of the scorching heat of the sun. Here the meaning is (as if she had said) it's no marvel I be black, I have been made obnoxious to all sorts of persecution, and therefore can have no outward beauty, but must be in the eyes of the world contemptible, even as one cannot endure the hot sun-beams and not be blackened. So there are in this expression these things imported, 1. Persecution. 2. Vehement persecution. 3. Visible effects following it, she is thereby made black. 4. A continuance under it. So the sun's looking on her, till she be made black imports. 5. There is her patient enduring of it. 6. There is her sense of it. Yet, 7. She is not ashamed of it, while she shews this her suffering to be no cause, why others should stumble at her.

Afterward, she proceeds more particularly, to describe, first her sufferings, then her infirmities. She describes her sufferings, 1. In the instruments of them. 2. The cause of them. 3. The nature of them. The actors are not heathens, but, 'mother's children;' the visible church is the common mother, who hath children born after the flesh, as well as after the Spirit; these children are professors of the same truth, but really not only strangers, but heart-enemies to godliness, and true tenderness; such was Ishmael, and such are all unrenewed persons, who are children of the flesh, and such there will be (Gal. 4:29) so long as there is a church visible: such instruments the apostle complains of, 2 Cor. 11:26, that he had perils from false brethren within, as well as from strangers without. This is not only mentioned to shew there are such enemies, but to set out more fully the church's strait; she is often more bitterly, and more subtilly persecuted by those who are called Christians or professors of the gospel, than by heathens themselves.

2. The cause of her sufferings, as from men, is 'they were angry with me,' (saith she;) she had not done them any personal wrong (as David often asserts of himself, in the like case) though she was not free of sin against God; but it proceeded from a malicious, malignant disposition of the natural men of the world, who, as they hate Christ, so do they hate all that are his, John 15:18,19, accounting them as the off-scourings of all men, and troublers of the world continually, upon no other ground, but because they are not such themselves, and because God hath chosen them out of the world.

This shews both the causelessness of their persecution, as also the degree of bitterness that it did proceed from. From which, Observe. 1. There are no such bitter enemies unto a godly person, as a graceless malignant professor: see Isa. 66:5. 2. No sort of persecution doth blacken, or obscure the beauty of an honest believer so much, as the foul, bitter reproaches of malignant professors. Yet, 3. Believers are often even under that cross. And, 4. The best-beloved believer, even Christ's Bride, will not in the world eschew it; innocency will be no guard, but to the conscience within.

And if the Bridegroom himself, while he was in the world, did not escape it, the Bride cannot think to go free. 3. The nature of her sufferings is expressed thus, 'they made me the keeper of the vineyards.' That this implies suffering, and no trust put on her, the scope and her complaint make it clear: besides that it is given as the evidence of the hatred and malice of these persecutors. This general expression then, being compared with other scriptures, will import these ingredients in her suffering, which occasioned her blackness. 1.

That her suffering was heavy and painful; for it was a great drudgery, to be put to keep the vineyards; to be made keeper, was to watch both night and day, and so no wonder she was scorched. Matt. 20:11. The bearing burdens in the vineyard, in 'the heat of the day,' is spoken of as the greatest weight, and heaviest piece of their work. 2. That her suffering was reproachful; for, the keeping of the vineyards was a base and contemptible service, therefore it is said. Jer. 52:16, that the poor, who were not taken notice of, were left to dress the vines; and it's a promise, Isa. 61:5, that his people should have freedom from that drudgery, and strangers should be employed in it for them. 3.

That her sufferings occasioned sad distractions to her in the worship and service of God; for, in scripture sometimes, vine-dressing is opposed to the worshipping of God, as a distracting, diverting exercise, which is very afflicting to God's people: therefore when they have a promise of more immediate access to God's worship, it is said, they shall be liberated from such diverting employments, Isa. 61:5,6, and instead of these, they shall get another task, to wit, to 'be priests to the Lord, and ministers of our God,' as if these exercises were somewhat inconsistent together, and so she opposeth her own proper duty to this, in the next words; in a word, these malignant brethren procured her pain, shame, and distraction from the service of God, as much as they could, and in a great part prevailed.

Observe. 1. Malice in rotten professors against godliness, will sometimes come to a great height. 2. Malice in wicked men thinks nothing of true tenderness, or of those who truly are so; but esteems them, and useth them as if they were base and vile. 3. Often in outward things, the profanest members of the church have the pre-eminence; and the most godly, as to these things, are in the meanest and basest condition; so as sometimes, they appoint the godly as their slaves, to their work. 4. Often while wicked professors are in power, the truly godly are under affliction.

Though this suffering was sharp, yet she resents her sinful infirmities much more sadly, in the words following, 'But' (saith she heavily) 'mine own vineyard have I not kept:' and this her slothfulness and unwatchfulness made her black, and also procured the blackness that was on her by her sufferings. This part of the verse implies, 1. The Bride's privilege. 2. Her duty. 3. Her sin. 4. Her sense of it. Her privilege is, she hath a vineyard of her own, besides these she was put to keep: The similitude of a vineyard here, is to be taken in another sense than in the former expression: neither are we to think strange of this, seeing similitudes are to be interpreted according to the different scope of expressions, and places in which they are used. By 'vineyard' then here, is to be understood the particular privileges, graces and talents of any sort, which are given of God to a believer: these are the things she should have watched over; the neglecting thereof, brings blackness on her, and procures heavy challenges, called a 'vineyard' here; and also, chap. 8:13, partly, because there are many several graces to be found in believers, as plants planted in them; partly, because these will furnish them matter of continual exercise and labour; and partly, because what they have, they are to improve, that there may be fruit on them, and rent brought in to the master that intrusted them, chap. 8:12, 13. This vineyard is called 'hers,' because the special oversight and charge of it was committed to her. 2. Her duty is to keep and watch over this vineyard, that is, to improve the talents she hath gotten, to see that no plants be unfruitful, and that no hurt from any cause inward, or outward annoy them: Christianity or godliness, is no idle talk, every privilege hath a duty waiting on it. 3. Her sin is, that what with other diversions, and what from her own unwatchfulness, she had neglected the keeping of this vine-yard; so that this one task which was put in her hand, she had not discharged; but laziness came on, and the vineyard was not dressed, thorns and nettles grew, and tentations brake in, and this marred her fruitfulness: in a word, she was no way answerable to the trust that was put on her by Christ. 4. She resents this: where these things may be taken notice of, 1. She sees it,

and observes it. 2. She acknowledges it. 3. She is sensible of it, and weighted with it, as the greatest piece of her affliction. It is ill to be unwatchful, for that may draw on both fruitlessness and heaviness on a believer; but it is good to observe and be affected with it, and to be walking under the sense of it, even in our most joyful frame, such as hers was here.

Here then, Observe, 1. Believers have a painful laborious task of duty committed to them. 2. They may much neglect this work and task wherewith they are intrusted. 3. Neglect and sloth make the weeds to grow in their vineyard, and the building which they ought to keep up, to drop thorough. 4. It is not unsuitable, or unprofitable for believers, in their most refreshing conditions and frames, sadly to remember their former unwatchfulness, and to be suitably affected therewith. 5. Believers should be well acquainted at home, how it stands with them as to their own condition and state. 6. They who are best versed in their own condition, will find most clearly the cause of all their hurt to be in themselves; whatever is wrong in their case, themselves have the only guilty hand in it.

If any should ask, how makes this last part of the verse for her scope, in removing the offence before these weak beginners? I answer, it doth it well: for, saith she, there is no reason ye should stumble, or be troubled because of my afflictions, they were without cause, as to men, though I am under much sin and guilt before God: neither scare at godliness or joy in Christ, because of my infirmities; for, these spots came from mine own unwatchfulness, and not from godliness in itself (which is the soul's special beauty) therefore take warning from my slips, and study to prevent the bringing on of such a stain and blot upon your profession, by security and negligence; but esteem not the less, but the more of Christ, his people and ways, and the beauty of holiness, which is to be seen in them, because by my unwatchfulness and untenderness, I have marred this beauty in myself, and that is the reason I look so deformed-like.

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