



The Dance

The voice of my beloved!

Behold, he comes

Leaping upon the mountains,

Skiping upon the hills.

My beloved is mine, and I am his.

He feeds his flock among the lilies.

Until the day breaks

And the shadows flee away,

Turn, my beloved,

And be like a gazelle

Or a young stag

Upon the mountains of Bether.

(Song of Solomon 2:8,16-17 nkjv)

MY FIRST OFFICIAL DANCE, with real music and real girls, was in junior high—eighth grade, to be exact. I can't imagine a more treacherous, high-wire age at which to take such a traumatic first step. It was a school band picnic, you see, an end-of-year party that included swimming, food, and, gulp, a dance.

At the close of that school year in 1965 I was all of thirteen, a brand new teenager in every sense of the word. Every nightmare ever visited upon the pubescent boy was visited upon me: raging hormones and racing corpuscles, quaking demeanor and explosive facial skin. I was scared of my own shadow and I was utterly, debilitatingly, petrified of girls.

The band picnic was, back in that simpler era of the mid-sixties in the heartland, a wholesome, well-chaperoned affair. Activities and intentions were reasonably

pure. Swimsuits were modest by today's standards, and even the shorts the girls wore reached almost to their knees. And when it came time for the dance, we all changed into the better clothes we had brought—the boys into slacks, and the girls into dresses.

I can't speak for anyone else—especially the older, more sophisticated ninth-graders—but to this young lad the girls were nothing less than fascinating aliens. I was at once drawn to and repelled by them. I couldn't take my eyes off them,

but approaching them ignited primal vibrations that threatened to tear my body apart limb from limb. I wanted to talk to them, to carry on witty, urbane conversations, but all that came out were stumbling, stupid stutterings that, I was sure, made me the butt of every joke told behind my back. The girls—even those younger than I—were cool, calm, and maddeningly mature. They didn't seem the least bit affected by the same churning and misgivings that plagued me.

But as the afternoon wore on, and the tunes spun on the record changer switched to a tempo I could master with two left feet, I sucked in my courage and asked Bonnie Smith for the next dance. Bonnie was cute, and popular, and I don't know where I found the nerve to imagine she would ever condescend to dance with me. But, to my surprise, she did.

Hands have never been so clammy as those I clumsily used to draw her close. One hand to hers, the other to the small of her back—and I didn't know whether to shout or faint. I held her like a fragile china doll, not daring to breach the hallowed distance between our two shuffling bodies. The title of the song being played is forever gone; the names of anyone else in the room have long since been forgotten; the day of the week, the condition of the weather, and what we ate at our picnic—all now gone from the memory.

But the magical and mysterious moment when my hand dared to make contact with the back of that pretty pastel blue dress and take her small hand in mine, and the delightful surprise that Bonnie smiled at me, and actually seemed to enjoy herself, well, those memories are forever etched into the dusty halls of my now middle-aged brain.

The Life-Dance

How uneasily, even fearfully we approach the Life-Dance we are invited to have with the Lord—our holy Groom. There comes that sweet moment when we accept His unconditional love in the form of our eternal salvation. We reach out and take it—often in the abstract: the invisible God's love extended by grace, words of coaxing proffered often by a preacher. It is so easy that once we grasp that ease, we think that that is all there is. A done deal. Finis.

*Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.*

*Nor voice can sing, nor heart can frame,
Nor can the memory find
A sweeter sound than Thy blest name,
O Saviour of mankind!*

But then we come to realize that instead of taking up residence we've only cracked open the door—that though our eternity is secured, there has yet to occur the full-flowering of our salvation. We must step out and take the hand of our new Savior, we must risk our reputation and safety to conduct the rest of our lives in His company.

It is a dance—an exquisite, breathtaking dance with the dearest object of our affection. He is, in every sense of the word, our lover: tender, understanding, intimate. He stands before us with outstretched arms, saying, "Take my hand. Come into my arms, and I will show you things you've never dared to dream. Trust me to lead you through every step, every turn that would have been too much for you alone. I love you with all my heart; with all my body I gave myself for you. Come into my arms."

But we stand there with knees knocking and palms sweating. *We've never done this before! Can't we just admire from afar?*

"You may," He says, so full and rich with grace. "But then you'll never become what I have planned for you. You will never reach that full potential unless you risk it all to come dance with Me."

So with clammy hands and a lump in our throat, we step forward, take His hand... and begin the Dance.

The Dance Begins with a Longing

Our invitation to the Dance comes from the cross. Everything begins there. The cross is the navel of all eternity: everything before the cross accelerates toward it—everything after looks back to it as its source.

The Christian's deep, visceral longing to be with the Lord is based—at least in part—on what Christ did at Calvary.

*O Hope of every contrite heart,
O Joy of all the meek,
To those who fall, how kind Thou art!
How good to those who seek!*

*But what to those who find? Ah! this
Nor tongue nor pen can show,
The love of Jesus, what it is
None but His loved ones know.*

(Bernard of Clairvaux)

Our love for Him is based on the Spiritual and historical truth that He loved us first, with a love so profound and complete as to cast into shadow any similar expression of man.

"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

(John 15:13)

The longing is also a part of how we are made; there lies within every person a God-space—a space in which the Lord of heaven will perfectly fit, if only asked to come in. Since the Garden—since the first man created from dust, and the first woman created from him—man has been made with a God-space. In these first two the space came filled, but since their Fall, man and woman have been made with it vacant. Every person is made with the hunger, but only some fill it with its intended guest.

Five years after that junior high dance in the cafeteria, I was on the other side of the world, spending the last six months before my wedding on a ship off the coast of Vietnam. Not since Odysseus pined for Penelope has a sailor longed so for his love. In the cold ugliness of life with men on a small steel prison, thoughts of my intended kept me grounded; lost in the insanity of war, she remained my beacon of hope. Her letters were my lifeline, her picture my escape.

Just so, our longing for the Savior keeps us rooted in hope. Our thoughts of Him remind us of a better place. In the ugliness of life among the lost, in the cold brutality of this earthward sink, our thoughts of the Lord Jesus hold our sanity like a sturdy raft for a shipwrecked sailor. The world may not see it; those foundering in the depths may imagine us grasping at air. But the believer knows his lifeline is sure, and tied fast to a rock.

Our longing to spend time with the Lord, our thoughts of His beauty and grace, may be only a beginning, but they sustain us through those times when we are swirling through the sucking whirlpool of life's tempest. Stuck for awhile upon this temporal plane, the longing for our Groom is a ready reminder that we are no longer of this place. The longing is the steady hum emanating from our God-space, now inhabited by the Lord Himself.