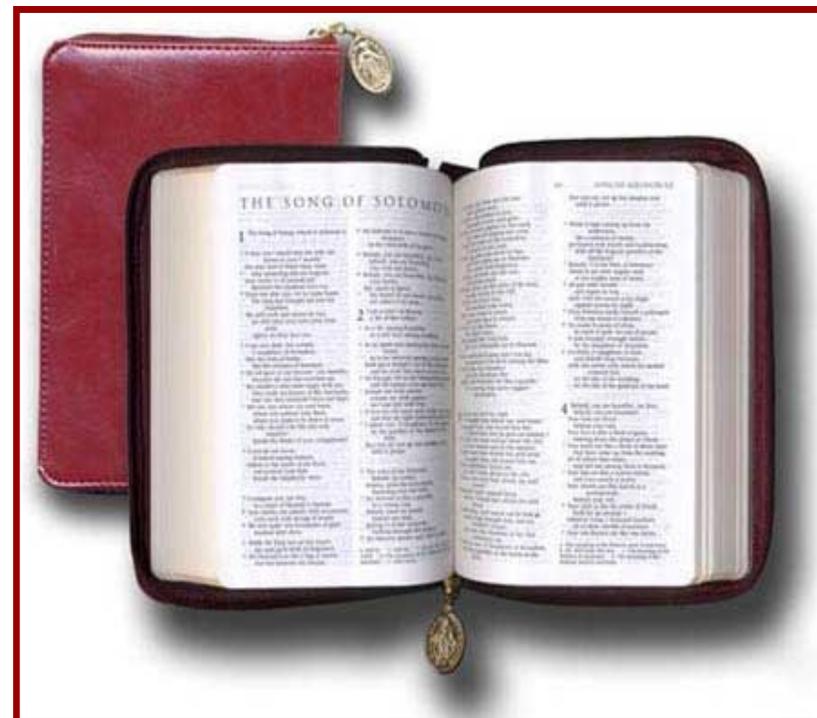




## ***SONG OF SONGS—3***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***VARIOUS MEANINGS  
OF  
THE KISS***

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*The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.*

### **Various Meanings of the Kiss**

During my frequent ponderings on the burning desire with which the patriarchs longed for the incarnation of Christ, I am stung with sorrow and shame. Even now I can scarcely restrain my tears, so filled with shame am I by the lukewarmness, the frigid unconcern of these miserable times. For which of us does the consummation of that event fill with as much joy as the mere promise of it inflamed the desires of the holy men of pre-Christian times? Very soon now there will be great rejoicing as we celebrate the feast of Christ's birth. But how I wish it were inspired by his birth! All the more therefore do I pray that the intense longing of those men of old, their heartfelt expectation, may be enkindled in me by these words: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Many an upright man in those far off times sensed within himself how profuse the graciousness that would be poured upon those lips. And intense desire springing from that perception impelled him to utter: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," hoping with every fiber of his being that he might not be deprived of a share in a pleasure so great.

**It was as if a voice from among the people would challenge the prophets of peace:**

***"HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP US IN SUSPENSE?  
YOU ARE ALWAYS FORETELLING A PEACE  
THAT IS NEVER REALIZED;  
YOU PROMISE A WORLD OF GOOD  
BUT TROUBLE ON TROUBLE COMES."***

2. The conscientious man of those days might repeat to himself: "Of what use to me the wordy effusions of the prophets? Rather let him who is the most handsome of the sons of men, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. No longer am I satisfied to listen to Moses, for he is a slow speaker and not able to speak well. Isaiah is a man of unclean lips, Jeremiah does not know how to speak, he is a child; not one of the prophets makes an impact on me with his words. But he, the one whom they proclaim, let him speak to me, "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." I have no desire that he should approach me in their person, or address me with their words, for they are "a watery darkness, a dense cloud;" rather in his own person "let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth;" let him whose presence is full of love, from whom exquisite doctrines flow in streams, let him become "a spring inside me, welling up to eternal life." Shall I not receive a richer infusion of grace from him whom the Father has anointed with the oil of gladness above all his rivals, provided that he will bestow on me the kiss of his mouth? For his living, active word is to me a kiss, not indeed an adhering of the lips that can sometimes belie a union of hearts, but an unreserved infusion of joys, a revealing of mysteries, a marvelous and indistinguishable mingling of the divine light with the enlightened mind, which, joined in truth to God, is one spirit with him. With good reason then I avoid trucking with visions and dreams; I want no part with parables and figures of speech; even the very beauty of the angels can only leave me wearied. For my Jesus utterly surpasses these in his majesty and splendor. Therefore I ask of him what I ask of neither man nor angel: that he kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.

Note how I do not presume that it is with his mouth I shall be kissed, for that constitutes the unique felicity and singular privilege of the human nature he assumed. No, in the consciousness of my lowliness I ask to be kissed with the kiss of his mouth, an experience shared by all who are in a position to say: "Indeed from his fullness we have, all of us, received."

3. I must ask you to try to give your whole attention here. The mouth that kisses signifies the Word who assumes human nature; the nature assumed receives the kiss; the kiss however, that takes its being both from the giver and the receiver, is a person that is formed by both, none other than "the one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus." It is for this reason that none of the saints dared say: "let him kiss me with his mouth," but rather, "with the kiss of his mouth." In this way they paid tribute to that prerogative of Christ, on whom uniquely and in one sole instance the mouth of the word was pressed, that moment when the fullness of the divinity yielded itself to him as the life of his body. A fertile kiss therefore, a marvel of stupendous self-abasement that is not a mere pressing of mouth upon mouth; it is the uniting of God with man. Normally the touch of lip on lip is the sign of the loving embrace of hearts, but this conjoining of natures brings together the human and divine, shows God reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." "For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one." This was the kiss for which just men yearned under the old dispensation, foreseeing as they did that in him they would "find happiness and a crown of rejoicing," because in him were hidden "all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge.' Hence their longing to taste that fullness of his.

4. You seem to be in agreement with this explanation, but I should like you to listen to another.

Even the holy men who lived before the coming of Christ understood that God had in mind plans of peace for the human race. "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets." What he did reveal however was obscure to many. For in those days faith was a rare thing on the earth, and hope but a faint impulse in the heart even of many of those who looked forward to the deliverance of Israel. Those indeed who foreknew also proclaimed that Christ would come as man, and with him, peace. One of them actually said: "He himself will be peace in our land when he comes." Enlightened from above they confidently spread abroad the message that through him men would be restored to the favor of God. John, the fore-runner of the Lord, recognizing the fulfillment of that prophecy in his own time, declared: "Grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ." In our time every Christian can discover by experience that this is true.

9. I must end this sermon. But let me sum up briefly the points we have raised. It would seem that this holy kiss was of necessity bestowed on the world for two reasons. Without it the faith of those who wavered would not have been strengthened, nor the desires of the fervent appeased. Moreover, this kiss is no other than the Mediator between God and man, himself a man, Christ Jesus, who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns as God for ever and ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 3***

8. Oh root of Jesse, that stands as a signal to the peoples, how many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, and never saw it!

Happy above them all is Simeon, by God's mercy still bearing fruit in old age! He rejoiced to think that he would see the long-desired sign. He saw it and was glad; and having received the kiss of peace he is allowed to go in peace, but not before he had told his audience that Jesus was born to be a sign that would be rejected. Time proved how true this was. No sooner had the sign of peace arisen than it was opposed, by those, that is, who hated peace;" for his peace is with men of good-will, but for the evil-minded he is "a stone to stumble over, a rock to bring men down." Herod accordingly was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. Christ "came to his own domain, and his own people did not accept him." Those shepherds, however, who kept watch over their flocks by night, were fortunate for they were gladdened by a vision of this sign. Even in those early days he was hiding these things from the learned and the clever, and revealing them to mere children. Herod, as you know, desired to see him, but because his motive was not genuine he did not succeed. The sign of peace was given only to men of good-will, hence to Herod and others like him was given the sign of the prophet Jonah." The angel said to the shepherds: "Here is a sign for you," you who are humble, obedient, not given to haughtiness, faithful to prayer and meditating day and night on God's law. "This is a sign for you," he said. What sign? The sign promised by the angels, sought after by the people, foretold by the prophets; this is the sign that the Lord Jesus has now brought into existence and revealed to you, a sign by which the incredulous are made believers, the dispirited are made hopeful and the fervent achieve security. This therefore is the sign for you. But as a sign what does it signify? It reveals mercy, grace, peace, the peace that has no end. And finally, the sign is this: "You will find a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." God himself, however, is in this baby, reconciling the world to himself. He will be put to death for your sins and raised to life to justify you, so that made righteous by faith you may be at peace with God. This was the sign of peace that the Prophet once urged King Achez to ask of the Lord his God, "either from the depths of Sheol or from the heights above." But the ungodly king refused. His wretched state blinded him to the belief that in this sign the highest things above would be joined to the lowest things below in peace. This was achieved when Christ, descending into Sheol, saluted its dwellers with a holy kiss, the pledge of peace, and then going up to heaven, enabled the spirits there to share in the same pledge in joy without end.

5. In those far-off days however, while the prophets continued to foretell the covenant, and its author continued to delay his coming, the faith of the people never ceased to waver because there was no one who could redeem or save. Hence men grumbled at the postponements of the coming of this Prince of Peace so often proclaimed by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient times. As doubts about the fulfillment of the prophecies began to recur, all the more eagerly did they make demands for the kiss, the sign of the promised reconciliation. It was as if a voice from among the people would challenge the prophets of peace: "How much longer are you going to keep us in suspense? You are always foretelling a peace that is never realized; you promise a world of good but trouble on trouble comes." At various times in the past and in various different ways this same hope was fostered by angels among our ancestors, who in turn have passed the tidings on to us. 'Peace! Peace!' they say, "but there is no peace. If God desires to convince me of that benevolent will of his, so often vouched for by the prophets but not yet revealed by the event, then let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth, and so by this token of peace make my peace secure. For how shall I any longer put my trust in mere words? It is necessary now that words be vindicated by action. If those men are God's envoys let him prove the truth of their words by his own advent, so often the keynote of their predictions, because unless he comes they can do nothing. He sent his servant bearing a staff, but neither voice nor life is forthcoming. I do not rise up, I am not awakened, I am not shaken out of the dust, nor do I breathe in hope, if the Prophet himself does not come down and kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."

6. Here we must add that he who professes to be our mediator with God is God's own Son, and he is God. But what is man that he should take notice of him, the son of man that he should be concerned about him? Where shall such as I am find the confidence, the daring, to entrust myself to him who is so majestic? How shall I, mere dust and ashes, presume that God takes an interest in me? He is entirely taken up with loving his Father, he has no need of me nor of what I possess. How then shall I find assurance that if he is my mediator he will never fail me? If it be really true, as you prophets have said, that God has determined to show mercy, to reveal himself in a more favorable light, "let him establish a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant with me" by the kiss of his mouth. If he will not revoke his given word, let him empty himself, let him humble himself, let him bend to me and kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. If the mediator is to be acceptable to both parties, equally dependable in the eyes of both, then let him who is God's Son become man, let him become the Son of Man, and fill me with assurance by this kiss of his mouth. When I come to recognize that he is truly mine, then I shall feel secure in welcoming the Son of God as mediator. Not even a shadow of mistrust can then exist, for after all he is my brother, and my own flesh. It is impossible that I should be spurned by him who is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh.

7. We should by now have come to understand how the discontent of our ancestors displayed a need for this sacrosanct kiss, that is, the mystery of the incarnate word, for faith, hard-pressed throughout the ages with trouble upon trouble, was ever on the point of failing, and a fickle people, yielding to discouragement, murmured against the promises of God. Is this a mere improvisation on my part? I suggest that you will find it to be the teaching of the Scriptures: for instance, consider the burden of complaint and murmuring in those words: "Order on order, order on order, rule on rule, rule on rule, a little here, a little there." Or those prayerful exclamations, troubled yet loyal: "Give those who wait for you their reward, and let your prophets be proved worthy of belief." Again: "Bring about what has been prophesied in your name." There too you will find those soothing promises of consolation: "Behold the Lord will appear and he will not lie. If he seems slow, wait for him, for he will surely come and he will not delay." Likewise: "His time is close at hand when he will come and his days will not be prolonged." Speaking in the name of him who is promised the prophet announces: "Behold I am coming towards you like a river of peace, and like a stream in spate with the glory of the nations." In all these statements there is evidence both of the urgency of the preachers and of the distrust of those who listened to them. The people murmured, their faith wavered, and in the words of Isaiah: "the ambassadors of peace weep bitterly." Therefore because Christ was late in coming, and the whole human race in danger of being lost in despair, so convinced was it that human weakness was an object of contempt with no hope of the reconciliation with God through a grace so frequently promised, those good men whose faith remained strong eagerly longed for the more powerful assurance that only his human presence could convey. They prayed intensely for a sign that the covenant was about to be restored for the sake of a spiritless, faithless people.