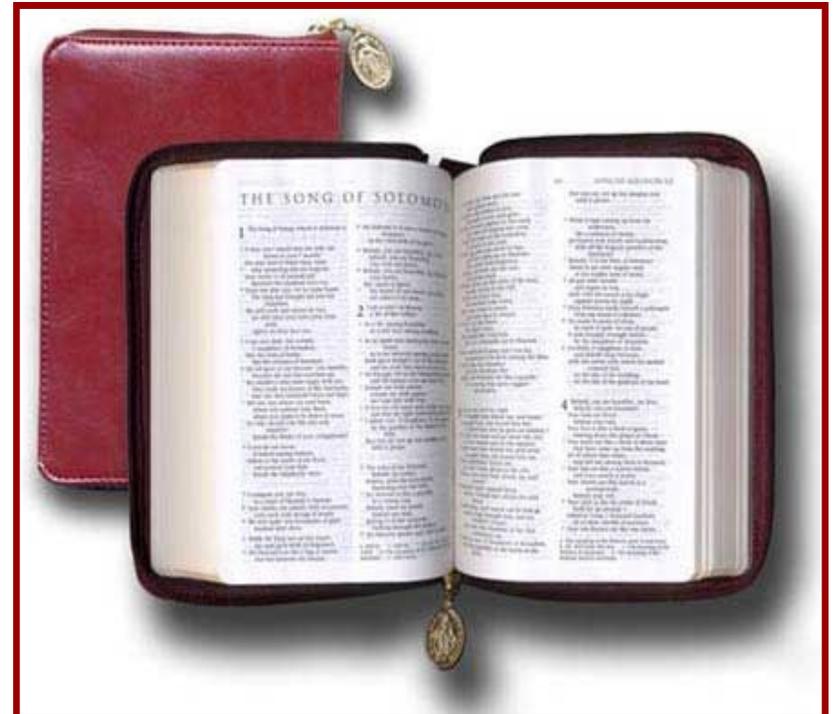




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SONG OF SONGS—41

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE FACE
OF
THE BRIDE***

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.

The Face of the Bride

"Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's." The bride's modesty is a delicate thing; and I feel that at the Bridegroom's reproof a warm flush suffused her face, so heightening her beauty that she immediately was greeted with: "Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's." You must not give an earthbound meaning to this coloring of the corruptible flesh, to this gathering of blood-red liquid that spreads evenly beneath the surface of her pearly skin, quietly mingling with it to enhance her physical beauty by the pink and white loveliness of her cheeks. For the substance of the soul is incorporeal and invisible, possessing neither bodily limbs nor any visible coloring. Try then as best you can to grasp the nature of this spiritual entity by means of a spiritual insight; and to conserve the fittingness of the proposed comparison take note that the mind's intention is the soul's face. The quality of work is evaluated from the intention, just as the body's beauty from the face. We may see in this flush on the cheek an unassuming disposition in which virtue and beauty thrive and grace increases. "Your cheeks then are beautiful as the turtle dove's" When describing her beauty he referred as is customary to her face, for when a person's beauty is praised the normal thing to say is that she has a beautiful or comely face; though I cannot see what was the purpose of speaking of cheeks in the plural except that it cannot have been without a purpose. For the one who speaks is the Spirit of Wisdom, who performs no action, not even the smallest, in vain, nor speaks except according to his nature. Whatever it be, there is a reason why he prefers to speak of cheeks in the plural than of face in the singular. And unless you can offer something better, I shall give you my view of the reason.

**A soul that worries and frets about so many things,
is bound to be stained to some degree
with the grime of worldly affairs.**

5. Apart from that the only solitude prescribed for you is that of the mind and spirit. You enjoy this solitude if you refuse to share in the common gossip, if you shun involvement in the problems of the hour and set no store by the fancies that attract the masses; if you reject what everybody covets, avoid disputes, make light of losses, and pay no heed to injuries. Otherwise you are not alone even when alone. Do you not see that you can be alone when in company and in company when alone? However great the crowds that surround you, you can enjoy the benefits of solitude if you refrain from curiosity about other people's conduct and shun rash judgment. Even if you should see your neighbor doing what is wrong, refuse to pass judgment on him, excuse him instead. Excuse his intention even if you cannot excuse the act, which may be the fruit of ignorance or surprise or chance. Even if you are so certain that to dissemble is impossible, you must still endeavor to convince yourself by saying: "It was an overwhelming temptation; what should become of me if it attacked me with the same force?" Remember too that all this time I have been speaking to the bride, not to the friend of the Bridegroom, who has another reason for keeping careful watch to prevent his charge from sinning, to examine if sin has been committed, and to administer correction when it has. The bride is free from this kind of obligation, she lives alone for the love of him who is her Bridegroom and Lord, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 41

2. The intention which we have referred to as the face of the soul must have two elements: matter and purpose, what you intend and why. It is from these two that we judge the beauty or deformity of the soul, and hence the person in whom they are found correct and pure may justly and truly be told: "Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's." But she who lacks one of these cannot be complimented that her cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's, because of her partial deformity. Much less can it be suitably said to one who possesses neither of these qualities. But all this will become more clear by giving examples. If, for instance, a person makes up his mind to pursue the truth, and that solely from a love of truth, is it not obvious that for him both matter and motive are equally correct and that he had achieved the right to be told that his cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's, since on neither cheek does an unbecoming blemish appear? But if his reason for pursuing the truth is self-glorification or the attainment of some worldly advantage, then even though one of his cheeks should seem perfectly formed, I feel you would not hesitate to consider him partially deformed because of the baseness of the motive that disfigures the other cheek. But if you discover a man who has no good motives, who is entangled in the net of sensual desire, a glutton and voluptuary like those whose god is the belly, who glory in their shame, whose minds are set on earthly things: what of him? If his intention is vitiated both in matter and motive will you not judge him to be totally repellent?

3. Therefore to direct one's mind completely to worldly pursuits rather than toward God is the sign of a worldly person whose cheeks are totally devoid of beauty. To direct one's mind as it were toward God but not for the sake of God, betrays the attitude of the hypocrite, one of whose cheeks may seem attractive because of a vaunted concern for God, but whose presence nullifies every form of attractiveness and contaminates the whole with its ugliness. Again, if one directs one's mind to God solely or chiefly because of the necessities of the present life, I cannot say that it stinks with the dregs of hypocrisy, but it is so befogged by pettiness of spirit that it cannot merit acceptance. On the contrary, to give one's attention to something other than God, although for God's sake, means to embark on Martha's busy life rather than Mary's way of contemplation. I do not say that this soul is deformed, but it has not attained to perfect beauty, for it worries and frets about so many things, and is bound to be stained to some degree with the grime of worldly affairs. This however is quickly and easily cleansed at the hour of a death made holy by the grace of a pure intention and a good conscience. And therefore, to seek God for his own sake alone, this is to possess two cheeks made most beautiful by the two elements of intention. This is the bride's own special gift, the source of that unique prerogative by which she may be told with all propriety: "Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's. "

4. But why as the turtle dove's? This is a chaste little bird that leads a retired life, content to live with one mate; if it loses this mate it does not seek another but lives alone thence forward. In order that you who hear me may not hear in vain the doctrines that were written for your sake, that now for your sake are being examined and discussed: you I say who are moved by the urgings of the Holy Spirit and long to perform all that is required of one who would be the bride of God, strive to ensure that both elements of your intention are like two beautiful cheeks; then, in imitation of that most chaste of birds, and following the advice of the Prophet, abide in solitude because you have raised yourself above yourself. You are well above yourself when espoused to the Lord of angels; surely you are above yourself when joined to the Lord and become one spirit with him? Live alone therefore like the turtle dove. Avoid the crowds, avoid the places where men assemble; forget even your people and your father's house and the king will desire your beauty. O holy soul, remain alone, so that you might keep yourself for him alone whom you have chosen for yourself out of all that exist. Avoid going abroad, avoid even the members of your household; withdraw from friends and those you love, not excepting the man who provides for your needs. Can you not see how shy your Love is, that he will never come to you when others are present? Therefore you must withdraw, mentally rather than physically, in your intention, in your devotion, in your spirit. For Christ the Lord is a spirit before your face, and he demands solitude of the spirit more than of the body, although physical withdrawal can be of benefit when the opportunity offers, especially in time of prayer. To do this is to follow the advice and example of the Bridegroom, that when you want to pray you should go into your room, shut the door and then pray. And what he said he did. He spent nights alone in prayer, not merely hiding from the crowds but even from his disciples and familiar friends. He did indeed take three of his friends with him when the hour of his death was approaching; but the urge to pray drew him apart even from them. You too must act like this when you wish to pray.