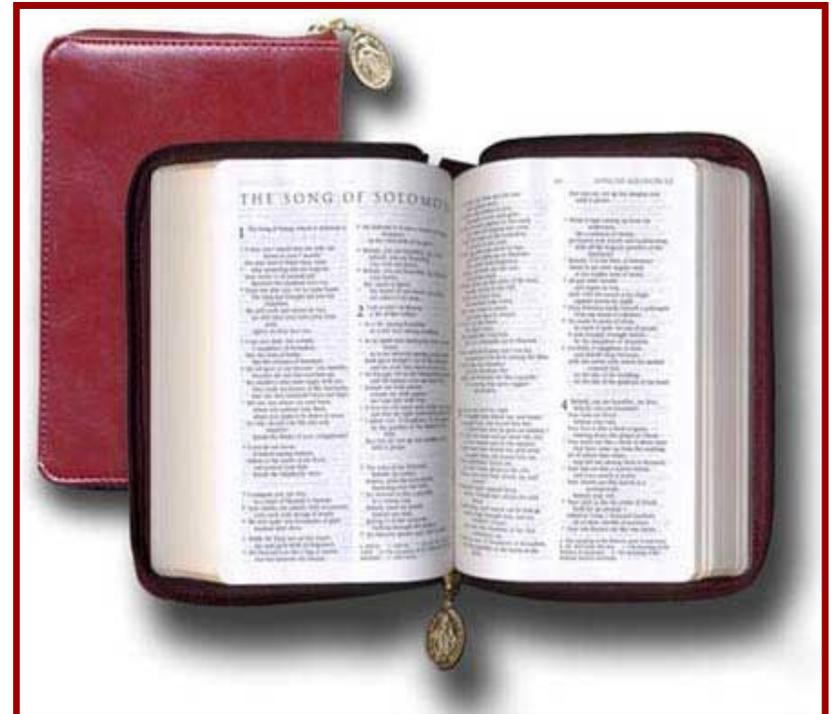




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SONG OF SONGS—8

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***INTIMACIES
OF
THE LOVE OF GOD***

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.

Intimacies of the Love of God

I can see now that I involved myself in more work when I thoughtlessly laid myself open to your questions! After I had introduced the subject of the first kiss I went on to explain, rather protractedly, the spiritual feet of God with their signification and names. Now you proceed to ask about the hand to which the second kiss is given. Well -- I submit! I must try to comply with your wishes; and even more than you wish; I shall treat not only of one hand but of two, each under a particular name. One I shall call liberality because it gives generously; the other fortitude because it powerfully defends whatever it gives. One who will not be found ungrateful must kiss each of these hands, in order to acknowledge and praise God as the giver and conserver of all-good things.

I should think that by now I have said enough about these two kisses, so we shall pass on to the third.

“Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you.”

2. "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," she said. Now who is this "she"? The bride. But why bride? Because she is the soul thirsting for God. In order to clarify for you the characteristics of the bride, I shall deal briefly with the diverse affective relationships between persons. Fear motivates a slave's attitude to his master, gain that of wage-earner to his employer, the learner is attentive to his teacher, the son is respectful to his father. But the one who asks for a kiss, she is a lover. Among all the natural endowments of man love holds first place, especially when it is directed to God, who is the source whence it comes. No sweeter names can be found to embody that sweet interflow of affections between the Word and the soul, than bridegroom and bride. Between these all things are equally shared, there are no selfish reservations, nothing that causes division. They share the same inheritance, the same table, the same home, the same marriage-bed, they are flesh of each other's flesh. "This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body." The bride for her part is bidden to "forget her nation and her ancestral home," so that the bridegroom may fall in love with her beauty. Therefore if a love relationship is the special and outstanding characteristic of the bride and groom, it is not unfitting to call the soul that loves God a bride. Now one who asks for a kiss is in love. It is not for liberty that she asks, nor for an award, not for an inheritance nor even knowledge, but for a kiss. It is obviously the request of a bride who is chaste, who breathes forth a love that is holy, a love whose ardor she cannot entirely disguise. For note how abruptly she bursts into speech. About to ask a great favor from a great personage, she does not resort, as others do, to the arts of seduction, she makes no devious or fawning solicitations for the prize that she covets. There is no preamble, no attempt to conciliate favor. No, but with a spontaneous outburst from the abundance of her heart, direct even to the point of boldness, she says: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."

3. Does not this seem to you to indicate that she wished to say: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you."

Her love is surely chaste when it seeks the person whom she loves, and not some other thing of his. It is a holy love, the impulse of an upright spirit rather than of carnal desire. And it is an ardent love, blinded by its own excess to the majesty of the beloved. For what are the facts? He is the one at whose glance the earth trembles, and does she demand that he give her a kiss? Can she be possibly drunk? Absolutely drunk! And the reason? It seems most probable that when she uttered those passionate words she had just come out from the cellar of wine; afterwards she boasts of having been there. David in his turn cried out to God concerning people such as the bride: "They shall be inebriated with the plenty of your house; and you will make them drink of the torrent of your pleasure." How great this power of love: what great confidence and freedom of spirit! What is more manifest than that fear is driven out by perfect love!

4. There is a certain modesty in the fact that she directs that utterance of hers not to the Bridegroom himself but to others, as if he were absent: "Let him kiss me," she exclaimed, "with the kiss of his mouth." A sublime favor is petitioned, and hence there is need that the petitioner should be commended by a becoming modesty in the manner of the request. One who seeks access to the interior of the home goes round to the intimate friends or members of the household to attain what he desires. In this present instance who might these people be? In my opinion they are the holy angels who wait on us as we pray, who offer to God the petitions and desires of men, at least of those men whose prayer they recognize to be sincere, free from anger and dissension. We find proof of this in the words of the angel to Tobias: "When you prayed with tears and buried the dead, and left your dinner and hid the dead by day in your house, and buried them by night, I offered your prayer to the Lord." I feel that you are fully persuaded of this from many other testimonies of Scripture. That the holy angels do condescend to mingle with us when we praise God in psalmody is very clearly stated by the Psalmist: "The princes went before, joined with the singers, in the midst of young damsels playing on timbrels." He also said: "I will sing praise to you in the sight of the angels."

8. I think, therefore, that it was to these members of the household and her companions, that the bride addressed her request, to these she revealed her heart's desire when she said: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." See the familiar and friendly communication there is between the aspiring soul who is still in the flesh and those powerful heavenly spirits. Her desire is to be kissed, she asks for what she desires; but she doesn't call her lover by name, she is certain that they know him because he has been so often the subject of her conversation with them. Accordingly she does not say: "Let this one or that one kiss me;" but simply: "let him Kiss me." This was the way Mary Magdalen behaved; she did not mention the name of the person she sought when she spoke to the man whom she took to be the gardener: "Sir, if you have taken him away" Who is this "him"? She names no name, she takes for granted that what her own heart could not forget, even for a moment, must be plain to all. And so the bride's words to the Bridegroom's companions imply that they know her secret, that her inward state is manifest to them, and no name passes her lips in that impulsive pleading about her beloved: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Today I shall speak no more to you about this kiss, I shall detain you no longer, but tomorrow you will hear from me whatever your prayers may win from him whose anointing teaches about all things. For flesh and blood do not reveal such a secret, but only he who searches the depths of God, the Holy Spirit who, proceeding from the Father and the Son, lives and reigns equally with them for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 8

7. Now if praise is unseemly in a sinner's mouth, do you not see how entirely necessary is the virtue of continence, if you are not to let sin reign in your mortal bodies? Nevertheless, continence will gain you no credit before God if you flaunt it for the praises of men. Consequently there is the greatest need too for that uprightness of intention by which you will both strive to please God alone and find the strength to adhere to him. This adherence to God is nothing less than that vision of God granted as a unique favor only to the pure in heart. That David had this clean heart is evident from his words: "My soul clings close to you"; and again: "My joy lies in being close to God." His vision of God brought him close to God, his closeness assured the vision. The man who lives in this state habitually will have the angels for his frequent and familiar guests, especially if they frequently find him in prayer. How I desire, O benign princes, that through you my requests may be made known to God! I do not refer here to God's normal knowledge, for the very thought of man is known to him, but rather that they be apprehended in the actual presence of God, by those who abide with God, both the holy angels and the glorified souls of men. Who will raise me up, in my poverty, from the dust, in my indigence from the dunghill, that I may share a place with the princes and be assigned a seat of honor? I am convinced that they will welcome with joy into their mansions him whom it pleased them to visit on the dunghill. Is it possible that we should be snubbed in heaven by those whom our conversion here below made so happy?

For this reason it makes me sad to see some of you deep in the throes of sleep during the night office, to see that instead of showing reverence for those princely citizens of heaven you appear like corpses. When you are fervent they respond with eagerness and are filled with delight in participating in your solemn offices. What I fear is that one day, repelled by our sloth, they will angrily depart. Too late then shall we remorsefully cry out to God: "You have turned my friends away from me and made me repulsive to them;" or again: "You have turned my friends and neighbors from me, my acquaintances from my misery;" or yet again: "They that were near me stood afar off, and they that sought my soul used violence." It is certain indeed that if the good spirits withdraw from us, we shall not easily withstand the obsessions of the evil ones. And so I must warn the slothful: "Cursed be he who does the work of God half-heartedly." It is not I but the Lord who says: "Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, I will spew you out of my mouth." Be mindful then of these angelic princes when you go to pray or to sing the psalms; stand with disciplined reverence and be proud that your angels continuously see the face of the Father. Since they are all spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation, they bear our prayers to God in heaven and return laden with graces for us. Let us make use of the service of those in whose company our lot is cast, that by the mouths of children and babes in arms praise may be made perfect. Let us invite them: "Sing praises to God, sing praises!" And let us hear them in turn responding: "Sing praises to our king, sing praises!"

5. Joined therefore as you are in songs of praise with heaven's own singers, since you too are citizens like all the saints, and part of God's household, sing wisely. As food is sweet to the palate, so does a psalm delight the heart. But the soul that is sincere and wise will not fail to chew the psalm with the teeth as it were of the mind, because if he swallows it in a lump, without proper mastication, the palate will be cheated of the delicious flavor, sweeter even than honey that drips from the comb. Let us with the Apostles offer a honey-comb at the table of the Lord in the heavenly banquet. As honey flows from the comb so should devotion flow from the words; otherwise if one attempts to assimilate them without the condiment of the Spirit "the written letters bring death." But if like St. Paul you sing praises not only with the spirit but with the mind as well, you too will experience the truth of Jesus' statement: "The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life;" the truth too of the words of Wisdom: "My spirit is sweet above honey."

6. Doing this your soul shall be delighted in fatness, you will find your holocaust acceptable; you will conciliate the king, give pleasure to his princes and win the favor of the whole assembly above. And when they smell this sweet fragrance in the heavens, they will surely say of you too: "What is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, breathing of myrrh and frankincense and every perfume the merchant knows?"

"The princes of Judah," the Psalmist exclaimed, "are their leaders, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali;" the angelic princes are the leaders of those whose work is the praise of God; who live lives of continence, lives of contemplation. Our angelic princes know how pleasing to their King are the praises of psalmody, the fortitude of chaste souls, the singleness of purpose of contemplatives; and they are eager to discover in us these and other first-fruits of the Spirit, which are none other than the first and purest fruits of wisdom. You are not unaware that in Hebrew the word Judah means one who praises or makes acknowledgment, the word Zebulun, a fortified dwelling, and Naphtali, a swift hind, whose powers of agile leaping signify the ecstatic ardors of the contemplative mind. As the hind penetrates the wood's dark avenues, so does the contemplative spirit penetrate the obscure meanings of things. And finally we have God's own words: "Whoever offers praise, his sacrifice honors me."