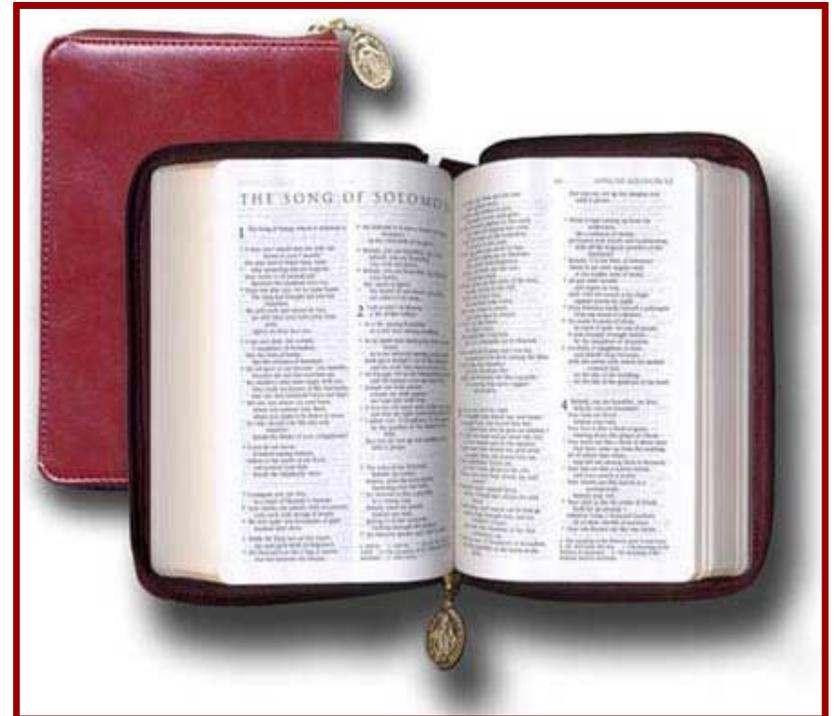




SONG OF SONGS—62

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***'MY DOVE
IN THE CLEFTS
OF THE ROCK'***

FOR MORE PAMPHLETS ON BOOKS OF THE BIBLE
PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE: www.pamphletstoinpire.com

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.

'My Dove in the Clefts of the Rock'

'Arise my love, my bride, and come.' The bridegroom draws attention to the greatness of his love by repeating words of love. Now repetition is the sign of affection, and since he again invites his beloved to work on the vines, he shows his concern for the salvation of souls. Now you have heard that the vines mean souls. But let us not pause to no purpose on what has been explained. Look at what follows. Never yet, as far as I recall, has he mentioned the bride openly in this whole work, except when she goes to the vineyards and draws near the wine of love. When she will have attained to it and become perfect she will celebrate a spiritual marriage; and they shall be two, not in one flesh but in one spirit, as the apostle says: 'He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.'

2. [The bridegroom] continues: 'My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the wall, show me your face, let your voice sound in my ears.' He loves and goes on speaking the language of love. A second time he affectionately calls her dove, his dove, and claims her as his own; and what she was wont to ask so earnestly of him he now in his turn requests of her—to see her and to hear her voice. He acts like a bridegroom, but as one who is shy, who shrinks from public view and wants to enjoy his pleasures in an out of the way spot, 'in the clefts of the rock and the crannies of the wall'. Imagine the bridegroom therefore saying: 'Don't be afraid, my love, that this work in the vineyard to which we are urging you will prevent or interrupt the business of love. It will surely provide opportunities for that, which we both equally desire. The vineyards have walls, of course, and these are welcome shelters for the shy.' This is a word play. Why shouldn't I call it play? For where is the seriousness in all these words? The external sound is not worth hearing unless the Spirit within helps our weak understanding. Therefore let us not dally outside, lest we seem pre-occupied with the allurements of lust, but listen with modest ears to the sermon on love that is at hand. And when you consider the lovers themselves, think not of a man and a woman but of the Word and the soul. And if I should say Christ and the Church the same applies, except that the word Church signifies not one soul but the unity or rather unanimity of many. Nor must you think of the 'clefts of the rock' and 'the crannies of the wall' as hiding places for wicked carryings-on, or else some suspicion from the powers of darkness will straightway take hold of you.

'He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.'

8. While gazing on the Lord's wounds he will indeed not feel his own. The martyr remains jubilant and triumphant though his whole body is mangled; even while the steel is gashing his sides he looks around with courage and elation at the holy blood pouring from his flesh. Where then is the soul of the martyr? In a safe place, of course; in the rock, of course; in the heart of Jesus, of course, in wounds open for it to enter. Left to its own strength it would surely have felt the penetrating steel; it would not endure the pain; it would be overpowered and reject the faith. But now that it dwells in the rock is it any wonder if it endures as rock does? Nor should we wonder if, exiled from the body, it does not feel bodily pains. Insensibility does not bring this about, love does. For the feelings are not lost, they are leashed. And pain is not absent, it is scorned. From the rock therefore comes the courage of the martyr, from it obviously his power to drink the Lord's cup. And this intoxicating cup—how wonderful it is! Wonderful, I say, and sweet, no less to the commander looking on than to the conquering soldier. 'For the joy of the Lord is our strength.' Why shouldn't he be joyful to hear so brave a testimony? He even longs for it with eagerness, and says: 'Let me hear your voice.' Nor will he be slow to repay the favor, in accord with his promise: no sooner does a man acknowledge him in the presence of men than he acknowledges him in the presence of his Father. We must cut short this sermon. It cannot be finished today without running overtime if I wish to include in this one discourse everything that is left of the text I am expounding. I shall deal with it at another time, that both in word and deed I may please the Church's bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 62

3. Another writer glosses this passage differently, seeing in the clefts of the rock the wounds of Christ. And quite correctly, for Christ is the rock. Good the clefts that strengthen our faith in the resurrection and the divinity of Christ. [The apostle] exclaimed: 'My Lord and my God'. What was the source of these inspired words if not the clefts of the rock? Within them 'the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young'; in them the dove finds safety and fearlessly watches the circling hawk. This is why he says: 'My dove is the clefts of the rock.' The dove's reply: 'He has set me high upon a rock'; and again: 'He set my feet upon a rock.'

The wise man builds his house upon a rock, because there he will fear the violence neither of storms nor of floods. Is on the rock not good? Set high on the rock, secure on the rock, I stand on the rock firmly. I am secure from the enemy, buttressed against a fall, all because I am raised up from the earth. For everything earthly is uncertain and perishable. Our homeland is in heaven, and we are not afraid of falling or being thrown down. The rock, with its durability and security, is in heaven. 'The rock is a refuge for the hedgehog.' And really where is there safe, sure rest for the weak except in the Savior's wounds? There the security of my dwelling depends on the greatness of his saving power. The world rages, the body oppresses, the devil lays his snares: I do not fall because I am founded on a rock. I have sinned gravely, my conscience is disturbed but not confounded, because I shall remember the wounds of the Lord. For 'he was wounded for our transgressions'. What sin is so deadly as not to be forgiven in the death of Christ? If therefore a medicine so powerful and efficacious finds entrance to my mind, no disease, however virulent, can frighten me.

4. It is clear then that [Cain] erred when he said: 'My wickedness is too great for me to hope for pardon,' unless he was not one of Christ's members, and had no share in the merits of Christ, so as to assume as his own, to claim as his own, what was his own, as a member shares what belongs to the head. But as for me, whatever is lacking in my own resources I appropriate for myself from the heart of the Lord, which overflows with mercy. And there is no lack of clefts by which they are poured out. They pierced his hands and his feet, they gored his side with a lance, and through these fissures I can suck honey from the rock and oil from the flinty stone—I can taste and see that the Lord is good. He was thinking thoughts of peace and I did not know it. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' But the nail that pierced him has become for me a key unlocking the sight of the Lord's will. Why should I not gaze through the cleft? The nail cries out, the wound cries out that God is truly in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. 'The iron pierced his soul' and his heart has drawn near, so that he is no longer one who cannot sympathize with my weaknesses. The secret of his heart is laid open through the clefts of his body; that mighty mystery of loving is laid open, laid open too the tender mercies of our God, in which the morning sun from on high has risen upon us. Surely his heart is laid open through his wounds! Where more clearly than in your wounds does the evidence shine that you, Lord, 'are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love'? No one shows greater mercy than he who lays down his life for those who are judged and condemned.

5. My merit therefore is the mercy of the Lord. Surely I am not devoid of merit as long as he is not of mercy. And if the Lord abounds in mercy, I too must abound in merits. But what if I am aware of my many failings? Then, where failings abounded, grace abounded all the more. And if the mercies of the Lord are from eternity to eternity, I for my part will chant the mercies of the Lord forever. But would this be my own righteousness? 'Lord, I will be mindful of your righteousness only.' For that is also mine, since God has made you my righteousness. Ought I to be afraid that the one will not be enough for us both? No, this is not the short cloak to which the prophet referred, that cannot cover two. 'Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness.' What is longer than eternity? A righteousness that is ample and everlasting will amply cover both you and me. In me indeed it covers a multitude of sins, but in you, Lord, a treasury of loving-kindness, a wealth of goodness. These are stored up for me in the clefts of the rock. How vast in them the store of your abounding goodness, hidden certainly, but only from those who perish! Why should what is holy be given to dogs, or pearls to pigs? To us however God has revealed them by his Spirit, and has even led us by the open clefts into the holy place. What an abundance of goodness is here, what fullness of grace, what perfection of virtue!

6. I will go then to these storerooms so richly endowed; taking the prophet's advice I shall leave the cities and dwell in the rock. I shall be as the dove nesting in the highest point of the cleft, so that like Moses in his cleft of the rock I may be able to see at least the back of the Lord as he passes by. For who can look on his face as he stands, on the glory of the unchangeable God, but he who is introduced not only to the holy place but to the holy of holies.

This contemplation of his back is no small favor, not to be despised. Let Herod despise him; but the more despicable he shows himself to Herod, the less I shall despise him. For this view of the Lord's back holds something that delights. Who knows whether God will turn and forgive, and leave a blessing behind him? There will be a time when he will show his face and we shall be saved. But meantime may he meet us with choicest blessings," with those he is accustomed to leave behind himself. One day he will show his face in its dignity and glory, now let him show 'the back' of his gracious concern. He is great in his kingdom, but so gentle on the cross. In this vision may he come to meet me, in the other may he fill me full. 'In your presence', says the psalmist, 'you shall fill me with joy'. Each is a saving vision, each is amiable; but the one in greatness, the other in lowliness: the one in splendor, the other in pale shadow.

7. [The psalmist] says next: the back of his back is like pale gold. Why should he not grow pale in death? Better pale gold than glittering brass; 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men.' Gold is the Word, gold is wisdom. This gold discolored itself, concealing the form of God and displaying the form of a servant. It also discolored the Church, which says: 'Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me.' So then, her back is like pale gold, because she did blush at the swarthy of the cross, she was not terrified by the bitterness of the passion, she did not flee from the ugliness of the wounds. She even takes joy in them, and hopes that her last end may bear their likeness. Accordingly she hears [the words]: 'My dove in the clefts of the rock', because all her affections are preoccupied with the wounds of Christ; she abides in them by constant meditation. From this comes endurance for martyrdom, for this her immense trust in the Most High. The martyr need not be afraid of raising his bloodless and bruised face to him by whose wounds he is healed, to present to him a glorious likeness of his death, even in the paleness of gold. Why should he fear, since the Lord himself says to him: 'show me your face'? And why? It seems to me he wishes to reveal himself; he wants to be seen rather than to see. What is there that he does not see? He by whom nothing is unseen, not even if someone hides himself - he does not require a person to show himself He wants to be seen, then. The kindly captain wants the faithful soldier to lift up face and eyes to His own wounds, so as to strengthen his purpose, and by his own example to give him greater courage to endure.