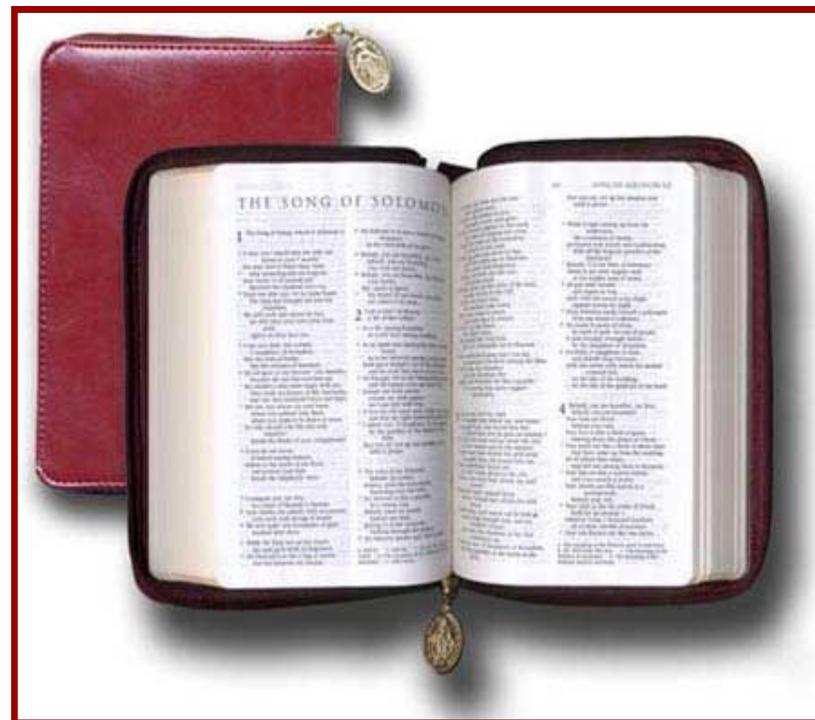




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SONG OF SONGS—14

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***OUR THANKSGIVING
AND
GOD'S GLORY***

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.

Our Thanksgiving and God's Glory

Just as the sea is the ultimate source of wells and rivers, so Christ the Lord is the ultimate source of all virtue and knowledge. For who has power to endow us with virtues if not he who is the King of Glory? And what are we told in the canticle of Anna but that God himself is the Lord of all knowledge? Hence from him as from a well-head comes the power to be pure in body, diligent in affection and upright in will. Nor is this all. From him too come subtlety of intellect, splendor of eloquence, urbanity of bearing; from him, knowledge and words of wisdom. Indeed in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Shall I add still more? Chaste thoughts, just judgments, holy desires -- are they not all streams from that one spring? If the waters that surround us inevitably return to the sea by hidden underground channels, only to gush forth again without fail and without weariness for the refreshing of our sight and the relief of our needs, why should not those spiritual streams return unerringly and without ceasing to their native source, and flow back without interruption to irrigate our souls? Let the rivers of grace circle back to their Fountain-Head that they may run their course anew. Let the torrent that springs in heaven be channeled back to its starting point, and be poured on the earth again with fertilizing power. You ask how this will be done. It will be done in accord with Paul's advice: "In all things give thanks to God." If you can credit yourself with wisdom or with virtue, realize that the credit is due rather to Christ, who is the Power and the Wisdom of God.

O Lord, what will you give to us?

"PEACE I BEQUEATH TO YOU, MY OWN PEACE I GIVE YOU."

9. Finally, the explanation of the little verse that has been the occasion of this prolonged sermon on the abominable vice of ingratitude, must wait for another time and another sermon. Now it suffices to remind you that if the bride would not in the least dare to attribute to herself any virtue or any grace, how much less should we, who are mere youths? Let us therefore imitate this attitude of the bride and say: "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory." Let us assert this not merely in word and in speech but in deed and in truth lest something that I fear very much may be said even of us: "But though they outwardly loved him and used their tongues to lie to him, in their hearts they were not true to him, they were unfaithful to his covenant." Let us cry out therefore with a voice that comes more from the heart than from the lips: "Save us, O Lord, our God, and gather us from among the pagans, that we may praise your holy name rather than our own, and find our happiness in praising you instead of ourselves, for ever and ever."

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 14

2. "Who is so mad," you say, "as to presume otherwise?" Actually nobody. Even the Pharisee gives thanks, although his justice merits no praise from God. And if, as the Gospel points out, his act of thanksgiving does not increase his grace, why is this so? Because the pieties that our mouths proclaim will not justify the pride of our heart in the sight of him who is repelled by the arrogant. "God is not mocked, O Pharisee. What do you have that was not given to you?" "Nothing," he says, "and therefore I offer thanks to the giver." "But if there is really nothing, then you had no antecedent merit to warrant your reception of the things of which you boast. And if you admit this, then in the first place it is futile to give yourself airs at the expense of the publican who does not possess as much as you because he has not received as much. Secondly, make sure you realize that God's gifts are entirely his own; if you attribute to yourself some of the glory and honor that are his, you may deservedly be convicted of fraud, of attempting to defraud God. If you brazenly boast of gifts as though they were your own, I should prefer to believe you are deceived, not that you wish to defraud. It is an error I should hope to correct. But when you make thanksgiving, you manifest that you regard nothing as your own, you wisely acknowledge that your merits are really God's gifts. When you despise others, however, you betray the inner reality of your condition, you are speaking from a double heart, with one lending your tongue to a lie, with the other usurping the honor due to truth. Never would you judge the publican more despicable than yourself if you did not consider that you are more honorable than he. But how will you reply to the principle laid down by the Apostle: 'Honor and glory to the only God?' How reply to the angels who in their teaching distinguish between what God reserves for himself and what he is willing to share with men? Their song is: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to men of good-will.' Do you not perceive that the Pharisee, in offering thanks, honors God with his lips but in his heart pays tribute to himself? And so, through force of habit more than by intention or inclination, you will hear people of all sorts pronouncing words of thanks, for even the wickedest persons will offer a perfunctory thanks to God in achieving a sexual conquest, for any kind of crime because things fell out well and prosperous, at least according to their estimation, when their perverse will was fulfilled. For instance, when the thief has bagged the loot for which he has planned, he celebrates in the privacy of his hide-out and says: "Thank God! I have not watched in vain, the night's work has not been wasted." The murderer will brag and express his thanks for the overthrow of a rival, for having had revenge on an enemy. And the adulterer will utter an irreverent "Thank you God," as he capers with delight on having gone to bed at last with the woman he has long pursued.

3. It is clear then that God will listen only to the thanks that spring from a pure and genuine simplicity of heart. I say "pure heart," because when those who boast of their evil conduct presume to thank God for it, they bring him down to the level of their own profligacy and make him share their wicked pleasures. God says to people of this kind: "Do you really think I am like you? I charge, I indict you to your face." I have added the word "genuine" because of the hypocrites who praise God for the goods they possess, but only with their lips; the heart denies what the tongue professes, and since they act deceitfully in God's very sight, their knavery can merit only hatred." The former impiously seek to involve God in their evil doings; the latter, by a fraudulent twist, would make God's gifts their own. The vice of the former is so stupid, so worldly, and even in a sense so brutish, that I do not feel impelled to put you on your guard against it; that of the latter, however, constitutes an habitual temptation in the lives of religious and spiritual persons. Great and rare is the virtue of those who do great things without becoming conscious of their greatness, whose holiness is manifest to all but to themselves. To me there is no virtue like that, when you are universally admired, and remain contemptible in your own eyes. You are indeed a faithful servant if you do not try to grasp for yourself the manifold glory of God, which while not coming from you, nevertheless passes through you. Then, in the words of the Prophet, you reject extortionate profit and wave away bribes from your hands. Then, in accord with the Lord's command, your light shines before men, not for your own glory but for that of your Father in heaven. An imitator of Paul and of all the loyal preachers who would not preach themselves, you seek not your own interests but those of Jesus Christ. Consequently you too will be privileged to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater."

8. But perchance one of you will say to me: "What you say is good, but your words ought to be relevant to your theme." Just wait a little while; I am not unmindful. Have I not undertaken to expound that text: "Your name is oil poured out"? This is my set task, at this I must toil. Whether what I have so far said is necessary you will see; my purpose now is to explain to you briefly that it is not irrelevant. Do you not remember that the last commendation of the breasts of the bride concerned the sweet-smell of the ointments? Is it not becoming then that the bride should acknowledge this fragrance to be the Bridegroom's gift rather than claim it as her own? It is along these lines that all I have hitherto said must be understood. "If my breasts exhale this sweet perfume," she says, "if they are so attractive, it is not because of any art or merit of mine, O my Bridegroom, but because of your generosity, because the oil of your name has been poured out." So much for the relevance of my text.

7. Dear brothers, if you can grasp these truths none of you will hanker after praise in this life, because if you win any favor here below and fail to thank God for it, you are defrauding him. How is it possible for you to glory, you who are but stinking dust? Will you dare glory in holiness of life? But it is the Spirit who makes holy; that Spirit who is God's, not yours. Even if you are resplendent with prodigies and miracles it is still God's power working through your hands. Or have you made an elegant speech that wins the plaudits of the crowd? But it is Christ who has given you the eloquence and wisdom. For what is your tongue but the pen of a writer? And it is yours only on loan, a talent committed to you, to be demanded again with interest. If you work willingly and persevere in producing results, you will receive the reward of your labor. If you do otherwise your talent will be taken from you, but the interest will still be demanded, and you will suffer the fate of a dishonest and lazy workman. All praise, therefore, for the manifold gifts of grace with which you are endowed, must be given to him who is the author and giver of all that is praiseworthy. Make sure your thanks are not the pious cant of the hypocrite, nor the empty gesture of the worldling, nor yet the constraint imposed on beasts of burden; but, as one has a right to expect of dedicated men, let it be full of confident sincerity, of meaningful devotion and of becoming, well-regulated cheerfulness. Therefore, while offering up the sacrifice of praise and fulfilling our vows from day to day, let us make every endeavor to put meaning into our observance, to fill the meaning with love, our love with joy and our joy with realism; let that realism be tempered with humility and our humility be buoyant with liberty. Then we shall advance toward our goal with the untrammelled passions of a purified mind. We may even find ourselves at times living beyond our normal powers through the great intensity of our affections and our spiritual joy, in jubilant encounters, in the light of God, in sweetness, in the Holy Spirit, all showing that we are among those envisioned by the Prophet when he said: "Lord, they will walk in the light of your favor; they will rejoice in your name all day and exult in your righteousness."

4. Although Joseph knew that he was entrusted with the care of his Egyptian master's home and all its goods, he was also aware that its mistress was an exception, and he refused to have relations with her. "My master," he said, "has handed over all his possession to me. He has withheld nothing from me except yourself, because you are his wife." He knew that woman is the reflection of man's glory, and that it would be base ingratitude on his part to tarnish the honor of the man by whose will he had been raised to honor. Gifted with the wisdom of God, he perceived that a husband is extremely concerned about his wife's honor because identified with his own; so much his own that he will not entrust her to another. Hence he would not presume to tamper with what was outside his control.

What then? Shall a man be jealous of his own glory and yet dare to wish to defraud God of his, as if God were indifferent? But God says otherwise: "I will not yield my glory to another." But what will you give to us, O Lord, what will you give to us?" "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you." "It is enough for me; I accept gratefully what you give and I give up what you keep for yourself. This contents me, I do not doubt that it is for my advantage. I renounce all claim to glory lest by usurping what you do not permit, I may deservedly lose what you offer. I wish for peace, I yearn for it and for nothing more. The man who is not satisfied with peace is not satisfied with you. For you are our peace, you have made us both one. To be reconciled with you, to be reconciled with myself, this is necessary for me, and it suffices. For whenever you set me in opposition to you I become a burden to myself. I am on my guard, and will neither be ungrateful for the gift of peace nor intrude sacrilegiously on your glory. May your glory remain yours, O Lord, in undiminished splendor; all will be well with me if I shall have your peace."

5. After the overthrow of Goliath the people were happy to have peace restored; David alone basked in the glory of it. Joshua, Jephthah, Gideon, Samson, and even Judith who was but a woman, had glorious victories over their enemies in their day; and though their people enjoyed the hard-won peace, they did not share in the heroes' glory. Judas Maccabaeus too was renowned for the many triumphs by which his bravery in battle gained peace for a jubilant people, but were they privileged to participate in his glory? Scripture says there was very great joy, not glory, among the people. Now I ask: has the Creator of all things achieved less than these heroes, that he should not be allowed his unique glory? Alone he made all things, alone he conquered the enemy, alone he freed the captives, and then in his glory is he to be saddled with a colleague? "My own arm then was my mainstay." he said; and again: "I have trodden the wine-press alone. Of the men of my people not one was with me." What right have I to share in the triumph if I stood outside the battle? It would be sheer impertinence on my part to lay claim to glory without victory, or to victory without a fight. But let the mountains bring a message of peace for the people, a message of peace for us rather than glory. To him who alone both fought and conquered is glory reserved. This is how I desire it to be: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to men of good-will." But an evil will rather than a good one characterizes the man who refuses to be content with peace, whose haughty looks and proud heart are bent on grasping at the glory that is God's. He is therefore ever devoid of peace, never within reach of glory.

Who would believe the wall if it said it produced the ray of light that falls on it through the window? Or if the clouds should proclaim that they create the showers, what would they merit but ridicule? It is utterly clear to me that the channels do not beget the rivers that run between their banks, nor lips and teeth the words of wisdom that proceed from them, although my bodily senses may tell me that and no more.

6. If I discern in the saints something that is worthy of praise and admiration, and proceed to examine it in the clear light of truth, I become aware that what makes them appear praiseworthy and admirable really belongs to another, and I praise God in his saints. Both Elisha and the great Elijah raised the dead to life, but not by any power of their own. They were the ministers of a power that became manifest to us in these new and wonderful deeds, the power of God who lived in them. By his own nature invisible and inaccessible, he becomes somehow visible and a source of wonder in the lives of those who love him. But he alone is worthy of admiration, for he alone performs the marvels that merit it. We do not praise the pen or the brush when we judge a script or painting, nor do we attribute fame for eloquence to the lips and tongue of the orator. Listen for a moment to the Prophet: "Does the axe claim more credit than the man who wields it, or the saw more strength than the man who handles it? It would be like the cudgel controlling the man who raises it, or the club moving what is not made of wood!" Thus everybody who boasts is against the Lord unless his boasting is in the Lord. If I am to boast, then I learn from Paul why and in what: "Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience."

I may boast securely if my conscience tells me that I in no way detract from the glory of my Creator, because I shall be speaking in the Lord rather than against him. Not only are we not forbidden to boast in this fashion, we are even encouraged by the words: "You seek glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God." This ability to glory in God alone can come solely from God. Nor is this glory a small thing; it is as real as the truth which is its object, and is a truth so rare, that only an exceptional few even of the perfect can glory in perfectly possessing it. Off with them then, those men who are but a breath, men who are but a delusion; let them deceive each other in their vanity. For the man who makes a wise boast will put his work to the test, he will carefully scrutinize it in the light of the truth, and then his reason for boasting will be in himself and not in the patronage of his neighbor. I am but a fool if I entrust my reputation to the casket of your lips, and then begin to beg it of you when I feel the need for it. Am I not simply putting myself in your power, to be praised or blamed as you please? But I am determined to be responsible for myself, I shall be loyal in my own regard. And yet not entirely to myself; rather have I put my trust in him who can take care of all that I have committed to him until that Day. It is safe in his hands, it will be given back in full. Then all those who set no store by the praise of men will receive the sure praise of God. For those whose glory is in earthly loves will find confusion at the end," even as David said: "Those who please men are confounded, because God has rejected them."