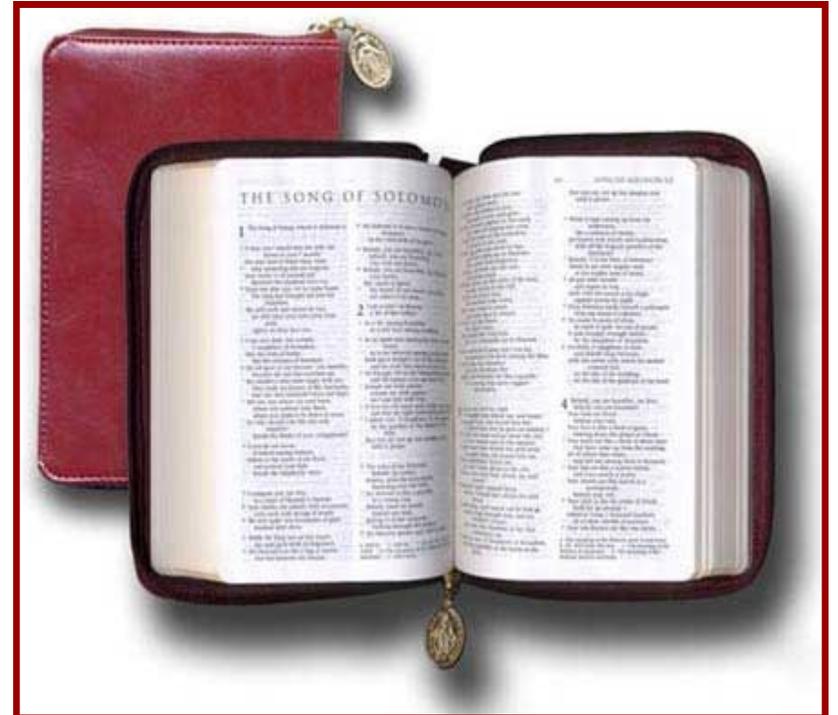




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# ***SONG OF SONGS—31***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***MYSTICAL VINEYARDS  
AND  
THE PRUDENCE OF THE FLESH***

*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.*

## **Mystical Vineyards and the Prudence of the Flesh**

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards." Who are they? Do you mean those opponents to whom you recently referred? Listen and understand. Perhaps she is saying that she has been given this charge by the very people who persecuted her. No need to wonder at this if she was attacked for the purpose of correcting her. Everybody knows that lots of people are frequently opposed in a well-intentioned way for their good. Every day we meet with people whose ideals are purified, who advance to perfection through the friendly corrections of their superiors. Therefore let us rather show, if we can, how her mother's sons fight against the Church with hostile purpose and with a loss that is her gain. This is matter for wonder, that they whose purpose is to harm her, do her good despite themselves. The interpretation just given covers both of these meanings, because the Church has never lacked opponents who were either well disposed or evilly disposed toward her. Though their motives for attacking her differed, each worked to her advantage. And if she rejoiced in what she suffered from her rivals, it is because for the one vineyard of which they seemed to deprive her, she has been compensated by being placed over many. "By fighting against me and my vineyard," she says, "those who cried out: 'Raze it, raze it! down to its foundations!' have given me the opportunity of exchanging one vineyard for many." This is what she implies when she says: "My own vineyard I have not kept," as if explaining why it has happened that she is no longer in charge of one but of several vineyards. This, in effect, is what the text says.

2. But if we follow the text's direct meaning, satisfied with what the words mean as they stand, we shall imagine we are reading in our holy Scripture about those material and earthly vineyards that draw daily nourishment from the dew of heaven and the fertile soil, whence they produce the wine that ministers to wantonness. But by doing this we shall have deduced from writings so holy and divine nothing worthy not merely of the bride of the Lord, but even of any of her companions. For what is there in common between brides and a keeper of vineyards? But if they should seem to have points in common, shall we teach as a consequence that the Church was once commissioned with a duty of this kind? Is it for vineyards that God is concerned? But if, in a spiritual sense, we understand the vineyards to be the churches, to be the peoples who are believers, as the Prophet did when he said: "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel," it will begin to dawn on us that it is by no means unbecoming for the bride to be made a keeper in the vineyards.

**Sinners' tears are wine to them;  
their sorrow has the flavor of grace,  
the relish of pardon,  
the delight of reconciliation,  
the wholesomeness of returning innocence,  
the gratification of a peaceful conscience.**

12. I earnestly request that you remember you are a monk, not a physician, and that you will be judged not on the quality of your constitution but on your profession. I beg of you to be concerned first of all for your own peace, then for the hardship you cause to those who serve you; beware of being a burden on the community, and take conscience into account. I do not mean your conscience but your neighbor's; that of the man who because of you, while he sits and eats what is placed before him, murmurs about your strange fasting. For he is scandalized by either your unwarrantable superstition or what seems the hard-heartedness of the person whose duty it is to provide for you. Your brother, I repeat, is scandalized by your strange behavior, this insistence on getting special foods that to him seems superstitious; or he will accuse me of harshness for not endeavoring to supply the nourishment you need. There are some who flatter themselves, but to no purpose, that they may follow the example of Paul who advised his disciple to give up drinking only water, and to take a little wine for the sake of his digestion and frequent bouts of illness. These ought to remember first of all that the Apostle did not prescribe such a drink for himself, and that his disciple did not ask for it. In the second place, this advice was given, not to a monk but to a bishop whose life was very necessary to the Church in its tender infancy. This was Timothy. Give me another Timothy and if it should please you I will offer him gold to eat and balsam to drink. But it is self-pity that makes you arrange for your own diet. Making your own arrangements like this seems to me suspect, I fear it is worldly wisdom masquerading in the dress and name of discretion. But let me at least remind you that if you decide to drink wine on the authority of the Apostle, you should not overlook the word "little" with which he qualified it. And so enough on that subject. But let us return to the bride and learn from her how to lose our own vineyards to our benefit, especially we who seem to be appointed keepers in the vineyards of the Bridegroom of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

3. It seems to me that here we encounter a significant prerogative. Note in a special way how the Church extended her boundaries into vineyards of this kind all over the world, from that day on which she was attacked by her mother's sons in Jerusalem, and banished from it along with her first new plantation - that company of believers who were described as "of one heart and soul." This is the vineyard which she now says she has not kept, but not to her discredit. For during the persecution it had not been so uprooted that it could not be elsewhere replanted and leased "to other tenants who will deliver the produce to her when the season arrives."

No indeed, it did not perish, it changed to a new location; it even increased and spread further afield under the blessing of the Lord. So lift up your eyes round about and see if the mountains were not covered with its shade, the cedars of God with its branches; if its tendrils did not extend to the sea and its offshoots all the way to the river. No matter for wonder this: it is God's building, God's farm. He waters it, he propagates it, prunes and cleanses it that it may bear more fruit. When did he ever deprive of his care and labor that which his right hand planted? There can be no question of neglect where the apostles are the branches, the Lord is the vine, and his Father is the vine dresser. Planted in faith, its roots are grounded in love, dug in with the hoe of discipline, fertilized with penitential tears, watered with the words of preachers, and so it abounds with the wine that inspires joy rather than debauchery, wine full of the pleasure that is never licentious. This is the wine that gladdens man's heart, the wine that even the angels drink with gladness. In their thirst for men's salvation they rejoice in the conversion and repentance of sinners. Sinners' tears are wine to them; their sorrow has the flavor of grace, the relish of pardon, the delight of reconciliation, the wholesomeness of returning innocence, the gratification of a peaceful conscience.

4. And so, from one vineyard, that seemed to have been destroyed by the storm of savage persecution, what a vast number have been propagated and flourish all over the world! And over all these the bride has been appointed keeper, that she may not be saddened for having failed to keep her first vineyard. Be consoled, daughter of Zion: if one section of Israel has become blind, what is your loss? Yours is to wonder at the mystery rather than bewail the harm; let your heart be expanded to gather together the fullness of the pagans. "Say to the towns of Judah:" "we had to proclaim the word of God to you first, but since you have rejected it, since you do not think yourselves worthy of eternal life, we must turn to the pagans." God made an offer to Moses that if he were willing to abandon a people grown disloyal, and expose them to the divine vengeance, he himself would be made the father of a great nation. But Moses refused. Why? Because of the all-surpassing love that bound him irresistibly to them and because he would not pursue his own interests but the honor of God, nor seek his own advantage but that of many. That's the sort of man Moses was.

5. The idea strikes me however, that by a secret design of Providence, this magnificent project was reserved for the bride: she, and not Moses, would beget a mighty race. It was not fitting that the friend of the Bridegroom should seize in advance what was the bride's prerogative; hence not Moses but the new bride received the command: "Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole creation." It was she who obviously received the mission to found a mighty race. What more could she achieve than to spread over the whole world? And the whole world readily yielded to one who was a bearer of peace, who came offering grace. But what a difference between grace and the law! What a contrast of features as they present themselves to the conscience, the one so pleasant, the other so austere! Who can look with equal regard on one who condemns and one who counsels, one who holds to account and one who pardons, one who punishes and one who embraces? One does not welcome with equal ardor the darkness and the light, anger and peace, judgment and mercy, the shadow and the substance, the rod and the reward, the curb and the kiss. The hands of Moses were heavy, as Aaron and Hur well knew; the yoke of the law was heavy, as witnessed by the Apostles themselves who proclaimed that neither they nor their ancestors could carry it; the yoke was heavy, the reward paltry: the land was but a thing of promise. Moses, therefore, was not destined to produce a mighty race. But you, the Church who is our mother, holding out the reward of life here and now and of the future life as well, will find ready welcome everywhere because of the twofold grace you bring: a yoke that is easy to bear a kingdom that is sublime. Expelled from Jerusalem, you are received all over the world, wherever your promises attract men so that your laws do not alarm them. Why then still lament the loss of one vineyard when you have been so abundantly compensated? "No longer will you be deserted, a wife hated and unvisited; I will make you an eternal pride and a never-ending joy. You shall suck the milk of nations, and be suckled at the breasts of kings. So you shall know that I the Lord am your deliverer, your ransom the mighty one of Jacob." This then is what the bride means when she says she was made keeper of the vineyards, and that she had failed to keep her own.

11. Is not this the message that pounded in your ears from the school of Christ when just now it was proclaimed: "He who loves his life loses it"? He loses it, he said, either by dying as a martyr or by chastising himself as a penitent. Certainly, it is a kind of martyrdom to put to death the deeds of the body by the power of the Spirit, less horrifying indeed than that in which the limbs are severed by the sword, but more grueling because more prolonged. Do you not see how these words of my Master condemn that wisdom of the flesh whereby a man either abandons himself to sensual indulgence or pays excessive attention to the body's health? You have heard from the Sage that true wisdom does not dissipate itself by living voluptuously; it is not found in the land of those who live for pleasure. But the one who does find it can say: "I loved wisdom more than health or beauty." If more than health or beauty, far more still than sensuality and debauchery. But why should a man bother to abstain from sensual pleasures if he spends so much time every day probing into the mysteries of the human constitution and devising ways of procuring variety in foods? "Beans," he says, "produce flatulency, cheese causes dyspepsia, milk gives me headache, water is bad for my heart, cabbages bring on melancholy, I feel choleric after onions, fish from the pond or from muddy water does not agree with my constitution." Are you not actually saying that food to your taste is not available in all the rivers, the fields, the gardens and the cellars?

10. You too, if you abandon your own will, if you fully renounce the pleasures of the body, if you crucify your lower nature with its passions and desires, and if you "put to death those parts of you which belong to the earth," will be truly doing as Paul did, since you will not account your life as more precious than yourself; by this loss that saves, you will prove yourself a follower of Christ. It is wiser to lose it in order to save it, than by saving it to lose it. "For anyone who wants to save his life, will lose it."

What have you to say to this, you who are so particular about your food, so unconcerned about your behavior? Hippocrates and his followers teach us to save our lives in this world, Christ and his followers teach us to lose them. Which of the two do you choose as master? But the man who complains: "This is bad for my eyes, that gives me headache, this affects my heart, that upsets my stomach" -- he shows clearly who his master is. Each of us holds forth in the style of the master he has learned from. It was not from the Gospel, nor from the prophets, nor from the letters of the apostles, that you learned to pick and choose like this. It was flesh and blood, not the Spirit of the Father, that revealed this wisdom to you, for it is the wisdom of the flesh. But listen to what our physicians think of this kind of wisdom: "To set one's mind on the flesh," they say, "is death;" and "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God." Would you have me preach to you the doctrine of Hippocrates or Galenus, or even of the school of Epicurus? But I, a follower of Christ, am speaking to Christ's followers: if I should introduce strange doctrines here, I should be in sin. The ideal of Epicurus was the body's sensual pleasure, of Hippocrates to promote its good health, but my Master preaches contempt of these two pursuits. What each of those philosophers seeks, and teaches us to seek with all diligence -- in one case how to sustain the body's life, in the other how to pander to its enjoyment -- the Savior advises us to lose.

6. I scarcely ever read these words without finding fault with myself for having undertaken the care of souls, I who am not fit to take care of my own soul: here I speak of souls as vineyards. If you approve of this interpretation may we not consequently and appropriately call faith the vine, the virtues the branches, good works the cluster of grapes, and devotion the wine. Without the vine there is no wine; without faith there is no virtue. "Without faith it is impossible to please God," perhaps one cannot help but displease him, for "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." Those people therefore who made me keeper of the vineyards should have taken into account how I had kept my own. For how long a time was it uncultivated and abandoned, reduced to a wilderness! It had failed completely to produce wine, its branches withered without the fruit of virtue because its faith was sterile. Faith was there but it was dead. Without good works how could it be otherwise? That was my life as a layman. On my conversion to the Lord I began to improve, though very little, not as much as I should have. But then, what man is fit to do this? Certainly not the holy Prophet who said: "Unless the Lord keeps watch over a city, in vain the watchman stands on guard." What attacks I remember being exposed to from him who shoots arrows at the innocent from cover! O my vineyard, what an amount of produce was robbed from me by subtle trickery, at the very time when I was growing more vigilant in my care of you! How many and how precious the clusters of good works either blighted by anger, or snatched away by boasting, or defiled by vainglory! What temptations did I not endure from gluttony, from mental slothfulness, from pusillanimity of spirit and the storm of passion! Such was my state; and yet they made me the keeper of the vineyards, failing to consider what I was doing or had done with my own; nor listening to the voice of the teacher who said: "If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's Church?"

7. What amazes me is the audacity of those who seem to harvest only brambles and thistles from their own vineyards, and yet are not afraid to intrude themselves on the vineyards of the Lord. These are not keepers and vine-dressers but thieves and robbers. Enough said. But woe to me even now because of the danger to my own vineyard, and now more than ever, when I am involved in so many concerns and forced to be less attentive to the one, less careful about it. I have no opportunity to fence it round or dig a winepress there. Alas! its wall is broken down so and every passer-by can pluck its fruit! There is nothing to shelter it from sorrow; anger and impatience make it their thoroughfare. Pressing needs like little foxes steadily destroy it; anxieties, suspicions, cares, charge in from all sides; rare is the hour when bickering groups with their tiresome quarrels are missing from my door. I have no power to prevent them, no means of evading them, not even time for prayer. Will a flood of tears be enough to fertilize the barrenness of my soul? I meant to say "of my vineyard," but quoted the Psalm through habit; it means the same thing. I do not regret a mistake that draws attention to the metaphor, for the sermon concerns the soul, not a vineyard. So when vineyard is mentioned let the soul be remembered: its barrenness deplored under the former's figure and name. Hence I ask what amount of tears will irrigate the barrenness of my vineyard. All its boughs have withered through neglect: they remain fruitless because they have no moisture. O good Jesus, well you know how they are gathered in bundles of twigs and consumed daily in your sacrifice by the burning fire of sorrow in my heart. Let the broken spirit, I implore, be a sacrifice to you: "You will not scorn this crushed and broken heart, O God."

8. On account of my imperfection then, I apply the present text in this way to myself. But a man who is perfect" will be able to give another meaning to the words: "My own vineyard I have not kept," the meaning intended by the Savior when he said in the Gospel: "Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it." It is clear that a man is fit and worthy to be in charge of vineyards when he can painstakingly apply himself to the care of the ones committed to him without let or hindrance in caring for his own, provided he does not concentrate on selfish interest, nor on what is profitable to himself, but to others. Hence Peter was made keeper of so many vineyards that were of the circumcision, because he was ready to go to prison and to death; love of his own vineyard, of his own life that is, prevented him in no way from concentrating on the care of those committed to him. Paul too was rightly entrusted with a vast forest of vineyards, because so little was he worried by concern for his own vineyard that he was ready not only to be put in bonds but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. "I dread none of these things," he said, "nor do I account my life more precious than myself." How excellent a discernment of values, when he judges that nothing he owns is to be preferred to himself.

9. Yet how many have preferred to their own salvation a pittance of worthless money. Paul preferred not even his life. "I do not account my life more precious than myself," he said. Do you make a distinction between yourself and your life, then? You do well in seeing more worth in your self than in anything you possess. But how is it that your life is not your self? I feel that because Paul was then guided by the Spirit, and had a self that acknowledges that the Law is good, he thought it more becoming to designate this self as the principal and supreme entity in himself, rather than anything else that was his. The remaining part of his soul being clearly of an inferior nature, and therefore belonging to a lower and baser form of being, namely the body, not only because its function is to impart life and feeling to it but also to preserve and nourish it: this sensual and carnal thing is regarded by the spiritual man as unworthy to be called self. He judged it better to see it as something belonging to him rather than as adequately equipped to represent his personality. "When I say me," he said, "understand it to mean what is most excellent in me, that in which I exist by favor of God, my mind and reason. When I speak of my soul, think of that lower principle whose purpose as you see is to animate the body, and even share in its concupiscence. I once lived at that level, but not now, because I no longer walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.' Not in the flesh but in this spirit is my true self to be found. What if the soul still experiences carnal lusts? 'The thing behaving that way is not my true self but sin living in me.' And therefore I do not regard this carnal instinct as my real self, but as something possessed by my self: in other words, my sensitive soul." To express carnal love is a function of that soul, as is the life it communicates to the body. This is the life that Paul spurned for the sake of his true self, being ready not only to be put in bonds but even to die in Jerusalem" on behalf of the Lord, and in this manner to lose his life as the Lord had counseled.