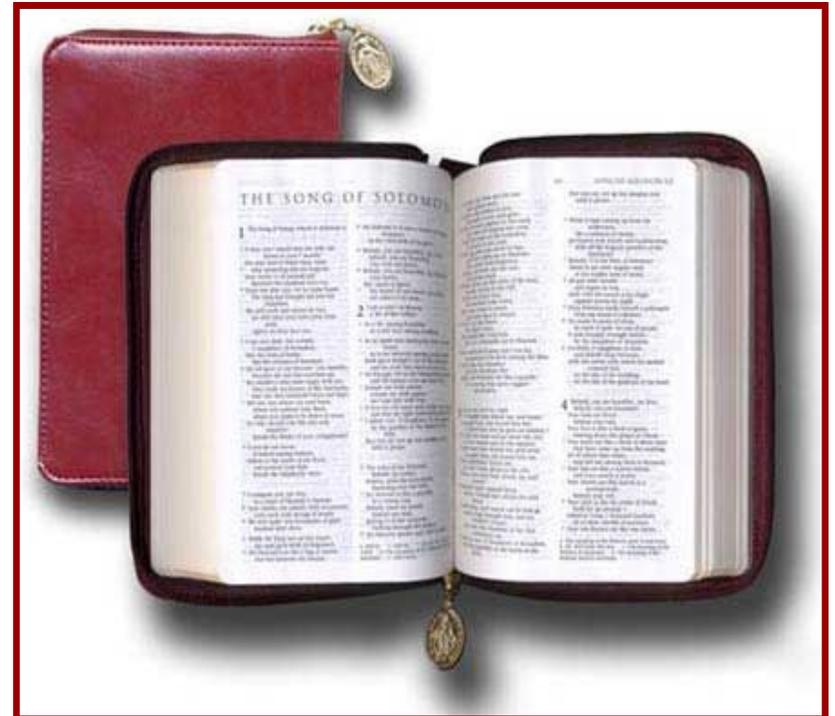




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SONG OF SONGS—79

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***HOW GOD,
THE ANGELIC HOST,
AND
MAN WORK TOGETHER***

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.

How God, the Angelic Host, and Man Work Together

We stopped, if I remember right, at the consideration of the word 'found,' hearing, with some reservations, that the Bride stated she had been found by the watchmen. Also we gave the reasons for our reservations and caution, and decided to discuss the question a little. But we could not undertake this when we were approaching the end of the sermon. Now therefore we must complete what we began. In treating of this great mystery, which the teacher of the Gentiles interpreted as the holy and chaste union of Christ and his Church, the very work of our salvation, find three agents cooperating together: God, an angel, and man. Surely God cannot but be actively concerned in the nuptials of his beloved Son? He must be, with his whole will. He could indeed accomplish it of himself, without any other help; but they without him can do nothing. When he gave them a part in this ministry, therefore, it was not for his sake but for theirs. For he has set merit for men through work as he said, 'The laborer is worthy of his hire,' and, 'Every man shall receive his reward according to his own labor,' whether he plants or waters what has been planted. When he uses the ministry of angels for the salvation of the human race, is it not so that the angels may be loved by men? For it is clear that men are loved by the angels because they are not unaware that the losses in their ranks will be made up by men. Indeed, it would not be right that the kingdom of charity, which men and angels are to rule together, should be governed by other laws than those of mutual love and pure affection for each other and for God.

2. There is, however, a great difference in the ways in which these agents work, for each plays his part according to his dignity. God accomplishes what he wills by the simple act of willing, without irresolution, without change, free from considerations of time and place, motives or persons. For he is the Lord of hosts, who judges all things in tranquility. He is Wisdom, graciously ordering all things. The angels likewise work without irresolution, but they are not free from variations of time and place. But man, for his part, is subject both to mental irresolution and to mental and physical change. He is bidden to work out his salvation with fear and trembling, and to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow.

**'I John,
saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,
coming down from the hand of God in heaven,
like a bride adorned for her husband.'**

3. After that explanation, I should like you to consider with me three elements in the glorious work of our salvation which God, its Author, reserves to himself, and in which he forestalls all his helpers and fellow-workers: predestination, creation, and inspiration. Of these, predestination had its beginning not with the birth of the Church, not even with the beginning of the world; it was before all time. Then creation came into being with time, and inspiration within time, where and when God wills. In accordance with predestination there was never a time when the Church of the Elect was not before God's face. If the unbeliever wonders at this, let him hear something even more wonderful: there was never a time when she was not loved and delighted in. Why should I not proclaim boldly the mystery in the heart of God, made known to me by one who could reveal heavenly designs. I mean Paul, who did not scruple to divulge this hidden saying as he did many others which came to him from the riches of divine goodness. 'He has blessed us,' he said, 'with every spiritual blessing in Christ in the heavenly kingdom; in Christ he chose us before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish in his sight in love'; and he added, 'he has predestined us to be his adopted sons through Jesus Christ, according to his pleasure, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he has bestowed upon us in his beloved Son.' And there is no doubt that these words are spoken with the voice of all the elect - they are the Church. But who, even among the blessed spirits, would ever have been able to find the Church, hidden in the deep womb of eternity, unless God, to whom eternity belongs, had chosen to reveal it?

4. But when, at the Creator's bidding, the Church appeared and was seen in visible and material form, she was not immediately perceived by any angels or men, because she was not recognized, being overshadowed by the earthly appearance of men, and covered with the shadow of death. But none of the sons of men have entered this life without the veil of disorder, except he who came without sin, Emmanuel, who although he was one of us and for our sakes put on the garment of our curse and the likeness of our sins, yet had no share in its reality. For you must know that he appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh that by sin he might condemn sin in the flesh. Apart from him, all men have come into the world in the same condition, whether they are elect or wicked. There is no distinction; all have sinned, and all bear the badge of their shame. Therefore even if the Church had already been created and had its being among created things, she could not have been found or recognized by any creature, but in a strange manner lay hidden for a time, both in the bosom of predestination and in the accursed lump of our pitiable condition.

5. But the Church, who was concealed from all eternity by the wisdom of predestination, and had not been fully revealed by the power of creation, was in due course manifested in visible form by grace, working in the way I have described before as inspiration. It was breathed into the human spirit by the Bridegroom, for the preparation of the gospel of peace, that is, to prepare the way for the Lord and for the Gospel of his glory in the hearts of all who have been predestined for life. Now the watchmen would have labored in vain in their preaching if they had not been forestalled by grace. But when they saw the word running swiftly, the people of all nations turning readily to the Lord, all tribes and tongues united in the faith, and all the ends of the earth gathered into the one mother, the Church, they recognized the riches of grace which had been kept hidden in the secret of eternal predestination and rejoiced to have found her whom the Lord had chosen for his Bride before time began.

6. It is clearly not without significance, I think, that the Bride says she was found by them, for she recognizes that she was gathered in by them, not chosen; they found her, they did not convert her.

The conversion of anyone must be ascribed alone to him to whom all men must say, in the words of the Psalm, 'Convert us, O God our salvation.' But I cannot apply to them as fitly the term 'finding' as 'conversion.' It would be truer to say that the Lord does not find a soul so much as forestall it and make a way for it. Forestalling renders finding unnecessary. What need has he to find anything when there is nothing he has not always known? It has been said, 'The Lord knows those who are his.' And what does he say himself? 'I know whom I have chosen from the beginning.' Clearly he has foreknown from all eternity him whom he has chosen, loved and established, and we cannot rightly say that she was found by him. I think one may truthfully say that he prepared her to be found by him. We have the record of a witness and we know that his record is true. 'I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from the hand of God in heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband.' This is the record of one of the watchmen, one of those who guard the city. Now hear the words of him who prepared her, pointing her out as it were with his finger to the watchmen, but using another metaphor: 'Lift up your eyes and look on the fields; they are already white' - that is, ready for harvesting. When the head of the household knows that everything is ready, he summons his laborers to work, so that without great labor on their part they can exult and say, 'We are fellow-workers with God.' What is left for them to do? Only to look for the Bride, and when they have found her, to give her tidings of her beloved. They are friends of the Bridegroom. Therefore it is the Bridegroom's glory, not their own, which they seek. And they will not have a heavy task, for she is here, and already seeks him with her whole heart, because her will has been made ready by the Lord.

7. Now although they have not yet spoken to her, she asks them about her beloved, and she who has herself been forestalled forestalls her guides, and says, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' She was right to say that she had been found by those who guard the city, for she knew that she had been already known and forestalled by the Lord of the city. This was not their action; they found her so. It was thus that Cornelius was found by Peter, and Paul by Ananias. Both had been forestalled and prepared by the Lord. Who could have been more fully prepared than Saul, who he cried out with heart and voice, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' So also Cornelius who, through the almsgiving and prayers which God inspired, was found worthy to come to the faith. Thus also Philip found Nathanael, but the Lord had already seen him under the fig-tree. That was surely his preparation. In the same way Andrew is said to have found his brother Simon, but the Lord had seen him before, and had known that he would be called Cephas, the man with faith like a rock.

8. We read also that Mary was found with child by the Holy Spirit. I think that the Lord's Bride is like his Mother in this. For if she had not been found filled with the Holy Spirit, she would not have questioned in so familiar a fashion those who found her, asking them about him in whom the Spirit has his being. But she, speaking out of the fulness of her heart, said, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' She knew how blessed are those who have seen him, and she asked them wonderingly, 'Are you those to whom it has been granted to see him whom kings and prophets desired in vain to see? Are you they who were found worthy to see wisdom in the flesh, truth in bodily form, God in man? Men say, "Here he is," or "there he is," but I think it safer to put my trust in you who ate and drank with him after he arose from the dead.'

I think enough has been said of the Bride's question to the watchmen. If not, I will say more in another sermon. But it must have been made quite clear that the Bride, the Church, was forestalled by the Holy Spirit and predestined by God before all ages, and that he prepared her for his beloved son to be an everlasting joy throughout all ages, holy and without blemish in his sight, growing like a lily and blossoming for ever before the Lord, the father of my Lord Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church, he who is God, blessed above all for ever. Amen.