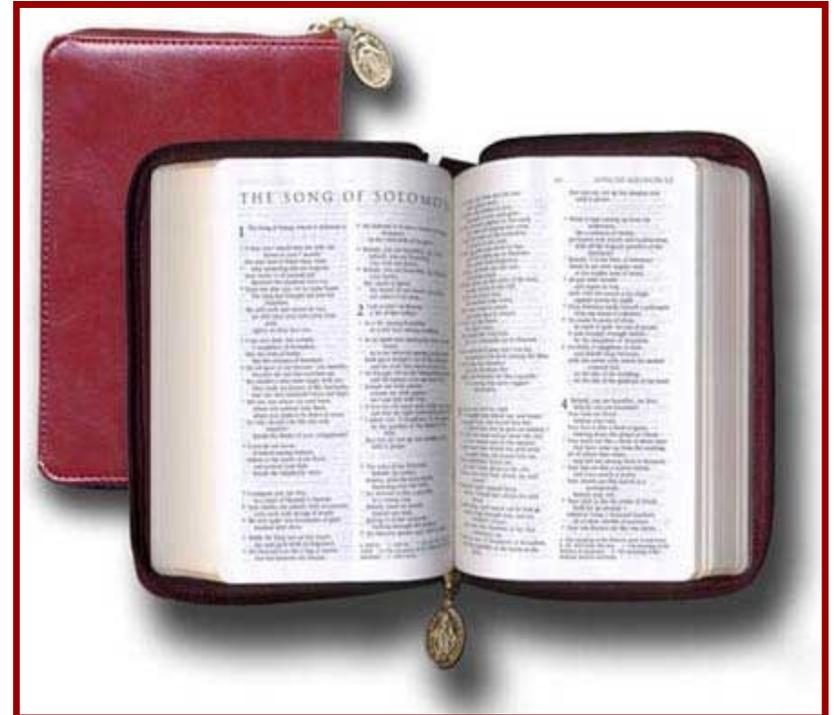




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SONG OF SONGS—61

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE FIG TREE
AND ITS
GREEN FIGS***

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.

The Fig Tree and its Green Figs

'The fig tree has put forth its green figs.' We begin now where we left off. He had said that the time for pruning had come, both because the flowers had appeared and because the turtle dove's voice was heard. He affirms it yet again now by the forming of green figs, for the signs of the seasons are observed not only in the flowers and the turtle dove's voice, but also in the fig tree. The air is never milder than when the fig tree puts forth its green figs. The fig has no flowers, but when other trees flower it puts forth fig buds. And just as flowers bloom and fade, good for nothing but to herald the fruits that follow, so the green figs bud only to fall prematurely, no good themselves to eat, and make room for those that will ripen. Thus therefore, as I said, the Bridegroom takes the signs of the season as an argument to urge the bride not to loiter on the way to the vineyards, lest the task which comes in its proper time be lost. So much for the literal sense.

2. But what of the spiritual sense? Clearly, we are here considering not a fig tree but people: God's concern is for men, not for trees. The fig tree represents people, frail in flesh, limited in intelligence, shallow of mind, whose first fruits to continue the comparison - are green and earthy. For the popular trend is not to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, but, as the apostle says, to be concerned about worldly affairs, about pleasing their wives or the wives their husbands. Those [who marry] will indeed have trials of the flesh ; but we do not deny that on the last day they will attain to the fruits of faith if they shall have made a last good confession, and especially if they compensate by almsgiving for their worldliness. Therefore the first fruits of the people deserve the name fruit no more than do the fig buds of the fig trees. If afterwards they bear fruits that befit repentance—for it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical—it will be said to them: 'what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed?'

**If the vines means souls,
the flower work,
the perfume good reputation,
then what does the fruit mean?**

Martyrdom.

Surely the fruit of the vine is the martyr's blood.

9. It would be strange indeed if neither the fig tree nor the vines had anything to improve our lives. I think that this passage has a moral sense. I say then that by the grace of God which is in us we have both fig trees and vines in our midst. The fig trees are the gentle in character, the vines those aglow with the Spirit. Everyone who lives among us in harmony with the community, who not only mingles with his brothers without complaining, but with a very friendly attitude even makes himself available to all for any occasion of loving service, why should I not very fittingly speak of him as a fig tree? If he first sprouts his green figs it is necessary that he shed them, for instance the fear of judgment that is driven out by perfect love, and the bitterness of sinning which is sure to yield to sincere confession, the infusion of grace and an abundant outpouring of tears. There are other similar things too that like green figs precede sweet fruit, things you can reflect on by yourselves.

10. Let me add just one further remark in connection with this: consider whether even the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, tongues and the like, may be counted among the green figs. Like green figs they must fall away and give place to better things, as the apostle said: knowledge will vanish, prophecies will be swept away, tongues will cease. Understanding will exclude even faith, and vision must follow upon hope. 'For who hopes for what he sees?' Only love never fails, but only that love by which God is loved with all one's heart, all one's mind and all one's strength. Hence I would on no account reckon it among the green figs, nor would I say it pertains to the fig tree at all, but to the vines. Now those who are vines reveal themselves to us as more austere than amiable, they take action in an eager frame of mind, they are zealous for discipline, rigorous in correcting abuses, and thus aptly make their own the psalmist's words: 'Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and loathe those who defy you?' and, 'zeal for your house devours me'. The one seems to me to excel in love of neighbor, the other in love of God, But let us pause here under this vine and this fig tree in the shade of God's love and our neighbor's. Both loves are mine when I love you, Lord Jesus, my neighbor because you are a man and showed mercy to me, and nevertheless you are God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 61

3. I do not think myself free to apply this passage to people in general, however: one person is distinctly referred to. For he did not speak of many trees and say 'they put forth', but of one: 'the fig tree has put forth its green figs', meaning, I think, the Jewish people. How often the Savior uses this image in the Gospel! For example: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard', etc. Also: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees'. And Nathaniel was told: 'When you were under the fig tree I saw you.' Another time he cursed the fig tree because he found no fruit on it. The fig tree is a good image, for though sprouting from the sound patriarchal root it never aimed to reach toward the sky, never aimed at lifting itself from the ground, never responded to the root by putting out branches, by blooming into flower, by an abundance of fruit. O stunted, twisted, knotty tree, how completely ill-suited to you is your root. For the root is holy. Does anything worthy of it appear in your branches? 'The fig tree has put forth its green figs!' Worthless seed, you have not brought these forth from that noble root. What it contains is of the Holy Spirit, and so in every respect refined and sweet. Where then do these green figs come from? And really what does that nation have that is not crude? Neither their actions nor their inclinations nor their understanding; not even the rites with which they worship God. Their actions are summed up in strife, their whole orientation was to wealth, their understanding was darkened in literalism, they worshipped with the blood of sheep and cattle.

4. But someone says: Since that nation never stopped producing these green figs, then the time for pruning was always present, because the two events are contemporaneous. That is not the case. We say that women have begotten children not when they are in labor but when they have given birth. And we say that trees have flowered, not when they begin to flower but when they are full-blown.

Similarly it is said here that the fig tree has put forth its green figs when it has produced not a few but the whole lot, that is, when the production is completed. Do you ask when this climax took place for that people? Their malice was complete when they killed Christ, in accord with his own prediction to them: 'Fill up the measure of your fathers.' So when he was about to yield up his spirit on the gibbet he said: 'It is accomplished.' What an accomplishment this accursed fig tree brought to its green figs, condemned as it was to an endless sterility! How much worse were these last fruits than those before! Worthless in the beginning, they ended up pernicious and poisonous. What a crude and snaky disposition, to hate the man who both heals men's bodies and saves their souls! No less crude and obviously cow-like their understanding, that did not recognize God even in God's works!

5. Perhaps a Jew will complain that I have gone to excess in insulting him by calling his understanding cow-like. But let him read Isaiah and he will hear something even less flattering: 'The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know me, my people does not understand.' See, Jew, I am kinder to you than your own prophet. I have put you on a level with beasts, he sets you below them. Yet the prophet did not speak here in his own person but in that of God, who proclaims by his very works that he is God: 'Even though you do not believe me', he said, 'believe the works'; 'and if I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me.' Even this did not wake them up to understanding. Neither the expulsion of devils nor the obedience of the elements nor the raising of the dead could banish from them this bestial and more than bestial stupidity. Out of this blindness no less monstrous than miserable they rushed into that horrifying and incredibly crude crime of laying sacrilegious hands on the majestic Lord. From that moment it could be said that the fig tree had put forth its green figs, for the institutions of the Jewish law were drawing to a close, so that, in accord with the old prophecy, as the new was coming on the old would be cleared away. Surely these are not unlike: the green figs fall and give place to the good figs that sprout after them. To the bride he said: as long as the fig tree continued to produce its green figs I did not call you, knowing it could not at the same time produce the best figs. Now that those which had to come first are already produced it is no longer untimely for me to invite you, for the good and wholesome fruits are known to come on as the bad ones are discarded.

6. And now he says: 'The vines in flower yield their sweet perfume', which is a good sign that the fruit is forming. This perfume drives away snakes. They say that when vines are flowering every poisonous reptile leaves the place, being unable to endure the perfume of fresh flowers. I want our novices to take note of this, and to act with confidence, reflecting on the spirit they have received, whose first fruits the devils cannot tolerate. If initial fervor can achieve this what will finished perfection do? The fruit depends on the flower, and the quality of the taste is judged from how strong the thing smells. 'The vines in flower yield their sweet perfume.' This is how it was in the beginning: new life ensued from the preaching, new grace for those who believed; they lived virtuously among the pagans and bore the good perfume of Christ wherever they went. Good perfume means good witness. It comes from right behavior as perfume comes from the flower. And since in the early days of the infant church faithful souls, like so many spiritual vines, seemed laden with this kind of flower and perfume, being well thought of even by outsiders, I think it not unfitting to apply this phrase to them. To what end? That those who had not believed might find in it a challenge, and reflecting on the believers' upright conduct, would themselves glorify God, and thus for them the perfume of life would lead to life. Not undeservedly then are they said to have given off a perfume if they have sought in their own good reputation not glory for themselves but other men's salvation. Otherwise, as some did, they could have made godliness a means of gain, for instance by ostentation or avarice. This however would be not to give but to sell the perfume. But because everything they did was done in love, they surely did not sell the perfume, but gave it as a gift.

7. If the vines mean souls, the flower work, the perfume good reputation, then what does the fruit mean? Martyrdom. Surely the fruit of the vine is the martyr's blood. [The psalmist] says: 'When he shall give sleep to his beloved: behold the inheritance of the Lord are children; the reward, the fruit of the womb.' I almost said 'the fruit of the vine'. Why should I not speak of the blood of the innocent, the blood of the righteous, as the purest blood of the grape? Is it not new red must, tested and precious, from the vineyard of Sorek, trodden out in the wine-press of suffering? For 'precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints'. This is how I interpret the words: 'The vines in flower yield their sweet perfume.'

8. If we choose to apply this text to the seasons of grace, this is how. But if we prefer to refer it to the Fathers - for 'the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel'—the meaning will be: the prophets and patriarchs inhaled the perfume of Christ, who was to be born and to die as man, but they did not then give off that same perfume because they did not reveal in the flesh him whom they perceived in advance in their minds. They did not give off their perfume or publish their secret, but awaited its revelation in due time. Who then could understand the wisdom hidden in a mystery and not as yet shown forth in bodily form? So indeed the vines did not then give off their perfume. But they gave it off later, when after many generations they gave to the world the Christ sprung from them in the flesh by a virginal birth. Then indeed these spiritual vines gave off their perfume 'when the kindness and the humanness of God our Saviour appeared', and the world began to enjoy the presence of one whom in his absence few had anticipated. There was, for example, the man who in touching Jacob, perceived Christ. He said: 'See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed'; as he said this however he kept his happiness to himself, he did not share it with any one. 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.' Then straightway the perfume that was in him diffused itself everywhere, so that the Church, perceiving it even from the ends of the earth, exclaimed: 'Your name is oil poured out', and the maidens hastened to the oil's perfume. Thus that vine gave off its perfume, and others too in whom this perfume of life existed gave it forth at that time. Why wouldn't they? From them Christ came as man. The vines therefore were said to give off a perfume either because those who were faithful strewed a good opinion of themselves everywhere or because the prophecies and revelations of the Fathers were made known to the world and their perfume penetrated to every land, just as the apostle said: 'Great indeed is the mystery of our religion: he was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed in the world, taken up in glory.'