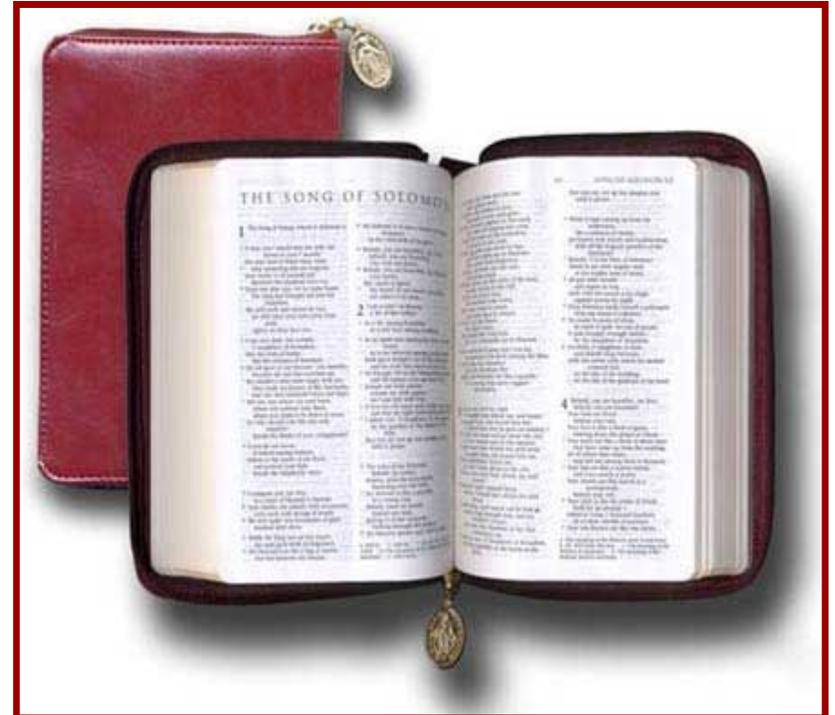




SONG OF SONGS—35

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



TRUE HUMILITY

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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.

True Humility

"If you do not know, O fairest among women, go forth and follow the flocks of your companions and pasture your kids beside the shepherds' tents." Of old, taking advantage of the familiar friendship that had developed between him and God, that holy man Moses so longed for the great favor of seeing him that he said to God: "If I have found favor in your sight, show yourself to me." Instead of that he received a vision of an inferior kind, but one which nevertheless would help him to attain eventually to the one for which he longed. Following the guileless urging of their hearts, the sons of Zebedee also dared to ask for a great favor, but they too were directed back to the way by which they must ascend to higher things. In similar fashion now, when the bride seems to demand a very special concession, she is rebuffed with an answer that, though harsh, is meant to be helpful and trustworthy. Anyone who strives forward toward the spiritual heights must have a lowly opinion of himself; because when he is raised above himself he may lose his grip on himself, unless through true humility, he has a firm hold on himself. It is only when humility warrants it that great graces can be obtained, hence the one to be enriched by them is first humbled by correction that by his humility he may merit them. And so when you perceive that you are being humiliated, look on it as the sign of a sure guarantee that grace is on the way. Just as the heart is puffed up with pride before its destruction, so it is humiliated before being honored. You read in Scripture of these two modes of acting, how the Lord resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble. Did he not decide to reward his servant Job with generous blessings after the outstanding victory in which his great patience was put to the severest test? He was prepared for blessings by the many searching trials that humbled him.

"GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER."

**It is the possession of a joyful and genuine humility
that alone enables us to receive grace.**

5. But where does this take me? I feel that your endurance of this protracted discussion on humility and patience is an exercise in patience; but let us return to the place from which we digressed. All that I have said developed from the answer in which the Bridegroom decided that the bride's aspiration toward lofty experiences should be restrained, not in order to confound her, but to provide an occasion for more solid, more deep humility, by which her capacity and worthiness for the sublimer experiences she desired would be increased. However, we are but at the beginning of this present verse, so with your permission, I shall postpone discussion of it to another sermon, lest the Bridegroom's words be recounted or heard with weariness. May our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever, avert this from his servants. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 35

2. But it matters little if we willingly accept the humiliation which comes from God himself, if we do not maintain a similar attitude when he humiliates us by means of another. And I want you to take note of a wonderful instance of this in Saint David, that time when he was cursed by a servant and paid no heed to the repeated insults, so sensitive was he to the influence of grace. He merely said: "What has this to do with me and you, O sons of Zeruah?" Truly a man after God's own heart, who decided to be angry with the one who would avenge him rather than with the one who reviled him. Hence he could say with an easy conscience: "If I have repaid with evils those who offended me, let me rightly fall helpless before my enemies." He would not allow them to silence this evil-spoken scoundrel; to him the curses were gain. He even added: "The Lord has sent him to curse David." A man altogether after God's own heart, since the judgment he passed was from the heart of God. While the wicked tongue raged against him, his mind was intent on discovering the hidden purpose of God. The voice of the reviler sounded in his ears, but in his heart he disposed himself for blessings. Was God in the mouth of the blasphemer? God forbid! But he made use of it to humiliate David. And this was not hidden from the Prophet, to whom God had manifested the unpredictable secrets of his wisdom. Hence he says: "It was good for me that you humiliated me, that I might learn your statutes."

3. Do you see that humility makes us righteous? I say humility and not humiliation. How many are humiliated who are not humble! There are some who meet humiliation with rancor, some with patience, some again with cheerfulness. The first kind are culpable, the second are innocent, the last just. Innocence is indeed a part of justice, but only the humble possess it perfectly. He who can say: "It was good for me that you humiliated me," is truly humble. The man who endures it unwillingly cannot say this; still less the man who murmurs. To neither of these do I promise grace on the grounds of being humiliated, although the two are vastly different from each other, since the one possesses his own soul in his patience, while the other perishes in his murmuring. For even if only one of them does merit anger, neither of them merits grace, because it is not to the humiliated but to the humble that God gives grace. But he is humble who turns humiliation into humility, and he is the one who says to God: "It was good for me that you humiliated me." What is merely endured with patience is good for nobody, it is an obvious embarrassment. On the other hand we know that "God loves a cheerful giver." Hence even when we fast we are told to anoint our head with oil and wash our face, that our good work might be seasoned with spiritual joy and our holocaust made fat. For it is the possession of a joyful and genuine humility that alone enables us to receive grace. But the humility that is due to necessity or constraint, that we find in the patient man who keeps his self-possession, cannot win God's favor because of the accompanying sadness, although it will preserve his life because of patience. Since he does not accept humiliation spontaneously or willingly, one cannot apply to such a person the scriptural commendation that the humble man may glory in his exaltation.

4. If you wish for an example of a humble man glorying with all due propriety, and truly worthy of glory, take Paul when he says that gladly will he glory in his weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell within him. He does not say that he will bear his weaknesses patiently, but he will even glory in them, and that willingly, thus proving that to him it is good that he is humiliated, and that it is not sufficient that one keep his self-possession by patience when he is humbled; to receive grace one must embrace humiliation willingly. You may take as a general rule that everyone who humbles himself will be exalted. It is significant that not every kind of humility is to be exalted, but that which the will embraces; it must be free of compulsion or sadness. Nor on the contrary must everyone who is exalted be humiliated, but only he who exalts himself, who pursues a course of vain display. Therefore it is not the one who is humiliated who will be exalted, but he who voluntarily humiliates himself; it is merited by this attitude of will. Even suppose that the occasion of humiliation is supplied by another, by means of insults, damages or sufferings, the victim who determines to accept all these for God's sake with a quiet, joyful conscience, cannot properly be said to be humiliated by anyone but himself.