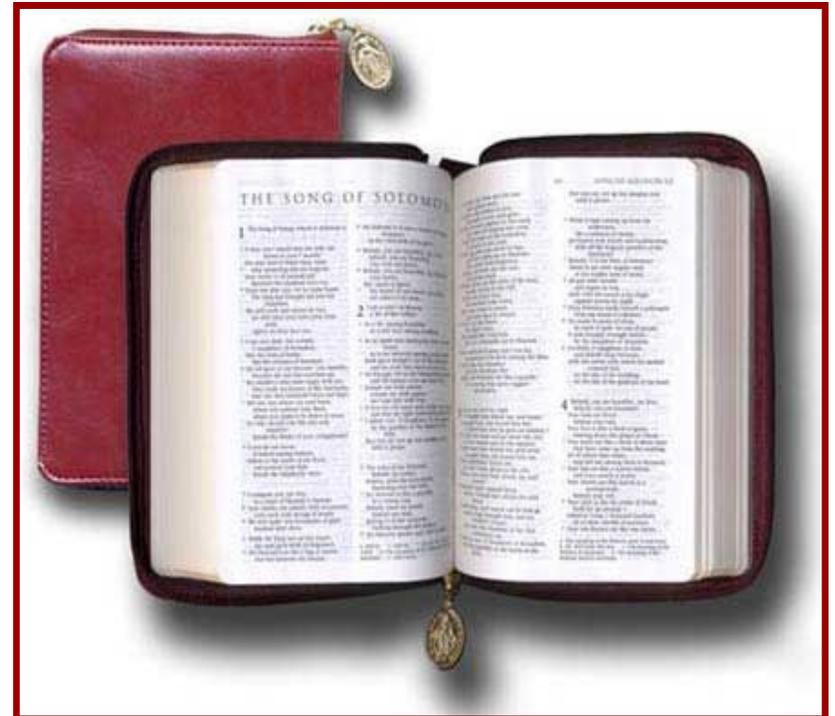


SONG OF SONGS—80

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BOND OF LOVE
BY WHICH THE BRIDE HOLDS
THE BRIDEGROOM
AND WILL NOT LET HIM GO***



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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.

The Bond of Love by Which the Bride Holds the Bridegroom and Will not let Him Go

‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’ O strong and burning love, O love urgent and impetuous, which does not allow me to think of anything but you, you reject all else, you spurn all else but yourself, you are contented only with yourself! You throw order into confusion, ignore moderation; you laugh at all considerations of fitness, reason, modesty and prudence, and tread them underfoot. All the Bride's thoughts and words are full of nothing but your music and fragrance, so completely have you taken possession of her heart and tongue. ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’ she asks - as though they would know what she meant. Who is it whom your soul loves, for whom you enquire? Has he no name? Who are you and who is he? I speak like this because of the strange manner of speech and extraordinary disregard for names, quite different from the rest of the Scriptures. But in this marriage song it is not the words which are to be pondered, but the affections behind them. Why is this, except because the sacred love which is the subject of the whole canticle cannot be described in the words of any language, but are expressed in deed and truth? And love speaks everywhere; if anyone desires to grasp these writings, let him love. It is vain for anyone who does not love to listen to this song of love, or to read it, for a cold heart cannot catch fire from its eloquence. The man who does not know Greek cannot understand Greek, nor can anyone without Latin understand someone speaking Latin, and so on. So, too, the language of love will be meaningless jangle to one who does not love, like sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. But as they - I mean the watchmen - have received from the Spirit the desire to love, they know what the Spirit says, and as they understand the expressions of love, they are ready to reply in similar terms, that is, in loving zeal and works of mercy.

**“I have hold of him and will not let him go
until I bring him to my mother’s house,**

Into the bedchamber of her who bore me.’

2. Indeed they instruct her so well about the one for whom she inquires that she can say, 'I had left them behind a little while when I found him whom my soul loves.' She is right to say 'a little while,' for they gave her a brief word; in fact, they gave her the creed. It was indeed necessary that as she passed by she should meet those from whom she was to learn the truth, yet she had to leave them behind. If she had not, she would not have found the one she sought. You can have no doubt that they urged her to do so. For they did not preach themselves, but the Lord Jesus, who is without question above them and beyond them. It is for this reason that he says, 'Come to me, all who desire me.' But it was not enough for her to meet them as she passed by; she was told to pass on and leave them behind, for he whom she was searching for had also passed on. He passed not only from death to life, but passed on to glory. How should she not also pass on? She could not come to him otherwise than by following in the footsteps where he had gone.

3. If I may make my meaning clearer, if my Lord Jesus had indeed risen from the dead but had not ascended into heaven, one could only say that he had passed by, not that he had passed on to glory, and that the Bride who seeks him must also only pass by, and not pass on. But since he had passed by in his Resurrection and had passed on in his Ascension, she too could not rest content with passing by but had to pass on in faith and devotion and follow him even to heaven. To believe in the Resurrection, then, is to pass by, but to believe in the Ascension is to pass on. Perhaps, as I remember saying one day, she knew the one, but not the other. Therefore their instruction had supplied the knowledge she lacked, that after the Resurrection he also ascended, and she likewise ascended. In fact, she passed on and she found him. How could she fail to find him, when she came in faith to where he is in the body? 'When I had left them behind a little while.' And she is right to say 'them,' for our head has surpassed them as he has all his other members on earth, in two respects: in his Resurrection, as we have seen, and in his Ascension. Indeed 'Christ is the first fruits' he has gone before, and our faith has gone with him. Where would it not follow him? If he goes up to heaven, our faith is there; if he goes down to hell, it is there. If he takes the wings of the morning and dwells in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me. Is it not then through our faith that the omnipotent and good God has raised us up and made us sit down at his right hand? This is to explain what the Church said, 'I left them behind,' for she has left herself behind, abiding in faith where she had not yet come in fact. It must now be clear why she said she had left them behind and passed on, rather than met them as she passed. Let us go on to the next words.

4. 'I have hold of him and will not let him go until I bring him to my mother's house, into the bedchamber of her who bore me.' And so it is; from that time onward the Christian people have never failed; there has been faith on earth and charity within the Church. 'Floods came, winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, for it was founded on a rock.' And the rock is Christ. Therefore neither the wordy utterances of philosophers, nor the wrangling's of heretics, nor the swords of persecutors, can ever separate it from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. So, firmly does she hold to him whom her soul loves, so good it is to cling to God. 'It is ready for the soldering,' said Isaiah. What holds more strongly than this solder, which is not washed away by water, or blown away by the wind, or cleft by the sword? 'Many waters cannot quench love.' 'I have hold of him and will not let him go.' And the holy patriarch Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' So she does not want to let him go, and perhaps she is more determined than the patriarch, for she does not want to let him go even for a blessing. Now when Jacob had received a blessing he let him go, but she would not. 'It is not your blessing I desire,' she says, 'but you. What have I in heaven, and what do I desire on earth apart from you? I will not let you go, even if you bless me.'

5. 'I have hold of him, and will not let him go.' But perhaps he wishes to be held, for he says, 'My delight is to be with the sons of men,' and he promises, 'Lo, I am with you every day, even 'til the end of the world.' What bond can be stronger than this, which is secured by the single strong will of the two who make it? 'I held him,' she says. Yet in her turn she is held by the one whom she holds, and she says to him, 'You have held me by the right hand.' Now she both holds and is held. How can she fall? She holds him by her strong faith and devoted affection. Yet she could not hold for long unless she herself was held. She is held by the power and mercy of God. 'I have hold of him and will not let him go until I bring him to my mother's house, into the bedchamber of her who bore me.' Great is the charity of the Church, who does not grudge her delights even to her rival, the Synagogue. What could be kinder than to be willing to share with her enemy him whom her soul loves? But it is not surprising, because 'salvation is from the Jews.' The Saviour returned to the place from which he had come, so that the remnant of Israel might be saved. Let not the branches be ungrateful to the root, nor sons to their mother; let not the branches grudge the roots the sap they took from it, nor the sons grudge their mother the milk they sucked from her breast. Let the Church hold fast the salvation which the Jews lost; she holds it until the fulness of the Gentiles comes, and so all Israel may be saved. Let her wish that the universal salvation come to all, for it can be possessed by everyone without anyone having less. This she does, and more, for she desires for the Jews the name and grace of a Bride. This is more than salvation.

6. This charity would be unbelievable, but that the words of the Bride herself compel belief. For you will observe that she said she wished to bring him whom she held not only to her mother's house but into her bedchamber, which is a mark of singular privilege. For him to enter the house would be enough for salvation; but the privacy of her bedchamber betokens grace, 'This day has salvation come to this house,' said our Lord. Salvation must necessarily come to a house once the Savior has entered it. But she who is found worthy to receive him in the bedchamber has a secret for herself alone. Salvation is for the house; the bridal chamber has its own secret delights. 'I will bring him to my mother's house,' she says. What house is this, unless it is the one foreshadowed to the Jews. 'Behold, your house shall be left for you desolate.' He has done what he said, and you have his words in the writings of the prophet: 'I have left my house and my inheritance,' and now she promises to bring him back and restore its lost salvation to her mother's house. And if this is not enough, hear the promise of good things which she adds: 'and into the bedchamber of her who bore me.' He who enters the bridal chamber is the bridegroom. How great is the power of love! The Saviour had left his house and his inheritance in anger; now he has relented and inclined towards her in love, and thus returns not only as Saviour but as Bridegroom. You are blessed by the Lord, O daughter, for you have softened his anger and restored the inheritance! You are blessed by your mother, for it is through your blessing that his anger is turned away and salvation restored with him who says 'I am your salvation.' Nor is this enough. He goes on to say, 'I will betroth you to myself in justice and righteousness; I will betroth you to myself in mercy and pity.' But remember that it is the Bride who has brought about this reconciliation. How can she give up her Bridegroom to another, and choose to do it willingly? But it is not so. She is a good daughter, and desires to share him with her mother, not to give him up. The one is enough for both, for they are one in him. He is our peace, he who made both one, that there might be one Bride and one Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS —80