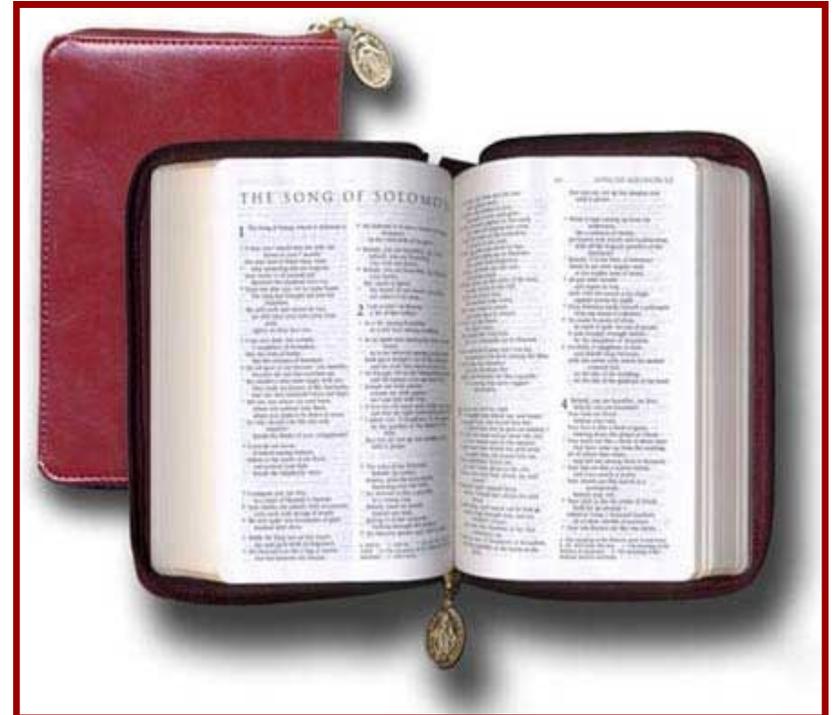




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SONG OF SONGS—23

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***ON THE FOUR OINTMENTS
OF THE BRIDEGROOM
AND THE
FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES***

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.

On the Four Ointments of the Bridegroom and the Four Cardinal Virtues

If the ointments of the bride are as precious and exquisite as you have heard them portrayed, how matchless must those of the Bridegroom be! And though any exposition of mine will fail to do justice to them, we must accept that their power is great and their grace efficacious, since their odor alone is enough to make not only the maidens but even the bride run. As you notice, she has not dared to make any such promise about her own ointments. She does indeed rejoice that they are flawless; but she does not say that they have inspired her to run, or that they will do so. This she attributes solely to the Bridegroom's ointments. But if the merest fragrance of these so excites her that she must run, what would the consequences be if she should experience the ointment itself being poured out in her? What wonder if she should even fly! But some of you must want to say: "Desist now from praising these gifts. When you begin to explain them we shall see clearly enough what they are." But no. I make no such promise. For believe me, I have not as yet decided whether I ought to express all the thoughts that suggest themselves. My opinion is that the Bridegroom has a varied and plentiful stock of perfumes and ointments. Some are solely for the pleasure of the bride who enjoys more intimate and familiar relations with him: others are wafted out to the maidens; and others again reach out to strangers afar off, so that "nothing can escape his heat." For although "the Lord is good to all," he is especially kind to those who live in his house, and the more one is assimilated to him by a virtuous life and an upright will, the more sensitive I think he will be to the fragrance of the newer perfumes and the sweeter ointments.

**Take note therefore of the fourfold anointing,
recognize the superabundant and indescribable
sweetness of him whom the Father
has anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows.**

“WE HAVE LEFT EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED YOU.”

**It was because of the desire to follow Christ
that they had left all things.**

2. In matters of this kind, understanding can follow only where experience leads, and I shall be the last to intrude rashly where the bride alone may enter. The Bridegroom knows the delights with which the Holy Spirit charms the one he loves, the inspirations with which he reanimates her affections, the perfumes that enhance her loveliness. Let her be as a fountain entirely his own, unshared by any stranger, untouched by unworthy lips: for she is "a garden enclosed, a sealed fountain," though rivulets flow from it into the streets. These I may use, though I want no trouble or ingratitude from anyone if I offer what I draw from a public source. I shall even pay myself a mild compliment in this matter, for no small effort and fatigue are involved in going out day by day to draw waters from the open streams of the Scriptures and provide for the needs of each of you, so that you may have at hand spiritual waters for every occasion, for washing, for drinking, for cooking of foods. God's word is a water of the wisdom that saves; when you drink it you are made clean, as the Lord himself points out: "You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you." The word of God, winged with the Holy Spirit's fire, can cook the raw reflections of the sensual man, giving them a spiritual meaning that feeds the mind, and inspiring him to say: "My heart became hot within me, and as I meditated a fire burst forth."

3. Far from disapproving of those whose purer mind enables them to grasp more sublime truths than I can present, I warmly congratulate them, but expect them to allow me to provide a simpler doctrine for simpler minds. How I wish that all had the gift of teaching: I should be rid of the need to preach these sermons! It is a burden I should like to transfer to another, or rather I should prefer that none of you would need to exercise it, that all would be taught by God, and I should have leisure to contemplate God's beauty. Now however I must confess, not without tears, that I have no time to seek after God, much less to contemplate him; no time to see the king in his beauty seated upon the Cherubim, on a throne raised aloft; to see him in that form in which, as the Father's equal, he was born before the dawning amid the sacred splendors. This is the form in which the angels long to contemplate him forever, God with God; and I, a man, describe him to men according to the human form that he adopted in order to reveal himself with the maximum of esteem and love; "made lower than the angels," he came out of his chambers like a Bridegroom and pitched a tent in the sun. I present him as attractive rather than sublime, as God's appointed servant and not a remote deity, as the one whom the Spirit of the Lord anointed and sent "to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year favorable to the Lord."

4. Every person, therefore, is free to pursue the thoughts and experiences, however sublime and exquisite, that are his by special insight, on the meaning of the Bridegroom's ointments. For my part, I offer for the common good what I have received from a common source. He is the fountain of life, a sealed fountain, brimming over from within the enclosed garden through the pipe of St Paul's mouth. This is that true wisdom which Job says, "is drawn out of secret places," divides into four streams and flows into the streets, where it indicates to us him who has been made by God "wisdom and righteousness, and holiness, and redemption." From these four streams as from priceless perfumes -- there is nothing to prevent us seeing them either as water or as perfume, water because they cleanse, perfume because of their scent -- from these four as from priceless perfumes blended from heavenly ingredients "upon the spicy mount so sweet an odor fills the nostrils of the Church, that she is roused even to the four corners of the earth by its sheer delightfulness. She hurries to meet her heavenly Bridegroom, like the Queen of the South who hastened from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, drawn by his fame as by a sweet scent.

5. The Church was devoid of the power to run in the odor of her Solomon until he who from all eternity was the Wisdom begotten of the Father, became Wisdom from the Father for her in time, and so enabled her to perceive his odor. Thus he has become for her righteousness and holiness and redemption, that she might run in the odor of these gifts too, since these also were equally in him before all things began. "In the beginning was the Word," but the shepherds hurried to see him only when his human birth was announced. Then it was that they said to each other: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this word that was made, which the Lord has made known to us." Scripture adds that "they came in haste." Before that, while the Word remained solely with God, they did not stir. But when the Word, which was, was made, when the Lord accomplished this and revealed it, then they came with haste, they ran. And therefore, just as the Word was in the beginning, but with God, so, when he began to live among men he was made. Even in the beginning he was wisdom and righteousness and holiness and redemption, but only for the angels; in order that he might become so to men as well, the Father made him all these things because he is the Father. Therefore it says he became our Wisdom from God. It does not say merely that he became Wisdom, but that he became Wisdom for us, because all that he was to the angels he became in turn to us.

10. It must be remarked too that the wise of this world have multiplied arguments about these four virtues to no purpose; they had no chance of grasping their true meaning, because they knew nothing of him whom God made our wisdom in order to teach us prudence, our righteousness to forgive our sins, our holiness through his example of chaste and temperate living, and our redemption through patience in his resolute acceptance of death. Perhaps one of you will say: "They are all suitably applied except holiness, which seems to bear no proper relation to temperance." To this I answer, first, that temperance and continence imply the same thing. Secondly, scriptural usage identifies continence or cleanliness with holiness. And finally, what else were those frequent rites of sanctification decreed by Moses but purifications consisting of abstinence from food, from drink, from sexual intercourse and similar things? But take special note of the freedom with which the Apostle attributed this meaning to the word holiness: "What God wants is for you all to be holy so that each one of you might know how to possess his body in holiness, not giving way to selfish passion;" and again: "God did not call us into uncleanness, but into holiness. It is clear that he identifies holiness with temperance.

11. Now that I have thrown light on what seemed obscure, I return to the point from which I digressed. What have you to do with righteousness if you are ignorant of Christ, who is the righteousness of God? Where, I ask, is true prudence, except in the teaching of Christ? Or true justice, if not from Christ's mercy? Or true temperance, if not in Christ's life? Or true fortitude, if not in Christ's Passion? Only those can be called prudent who are imbued with his teaching; only those are just who have had their sins pardoned through his mercy; only those are temperate who take pains to follow his way of life; only those are courageous who hold fast to the example of his patience when buffeted by sufferings. Vainly therefore will anyone strive to acquire the virtues, if he thinks they may be obtained from any source other than the Lord of the virtues, whose teaching is the seed-bed of prudence, whose mercy is the well-spring of justice, whose life is a mirror of temperance, whose death is the badge of fortitude. To him be honor and glory for evermore. Amen.

6. But you will say: "I cannot see how he could have brought redemption to the angels. The Scriptures give no grounds for thinking that they were ever the captives of sin or doomed to death," and therefore in need of liberation, excepting only those who incurred the incurable sin of pride, and afterwards could not merit to be redeemed. If therefore the angels were never set at liberty, some not needing it because they never fell, others not meriting it because fallen irrevocably, on what grounds do you say that Christ the Lord is their redemption? Listen for a moment. He who raised up fallen man and freed him from slavery, enabled the angels not to fall by guarding them from slavery. Thus he was equally the liberator of both, providing release for one, protection for the other. It is clear then that just as the Lord Christ was righteousness and wisdom and holiness for the angels, so too he was their redemption; it is also clear that he was made flesh with these four gifts for the sake of men, who can contemplate the invisible things of God only by studying the things he has made. All that he was for the angels, he became for us. What? Wisdom and righteousness, and holiness and redemption: wisdom in preaching, righteousness in forgiving of sins, holiness in social contacts with sinners and redemption in the passion he endured for sinners. When therefore he was made these by God, then the Church perceived the odor, then it ran.

7. Take note therefore of the fourfold anointing, recognize the superabundant and indescribable sweetness of him whom the Father has anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows. You lived, O man, in darkness and the shadow of death through ignorance of the truth; you were a prisoner and your sins were your shackles. He came down to you in your prison, not to torture you but to liberate you from the power of darkness. And first of all, as the Teacher of Truth, he banished the murk of your ignorance by the light of his wisdom. By "the righteousness that comes of faith, he loosed the bonds of sin, justifying the sinners by his free gift. By this twofold favor he fulfilled those words of David: "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind." Furthermore, by living holily in the midst of sinners he laid down a pattern of life that is a pathway back to the fatherland. As a supreme gesture of love he surrendered himself to death and from his own side produced the price of satisfaction that would placate his Father, thus clearly making his own the verse: "It is with the Lord that mercy is to be found, and a generous redemption." Utterly generous, for not a mere drop but a wave of blood flowed unchecked from the five wounds of his body.

8. What should he have done for you and has not done? He gave sight to the blind, set captives free, led the wanderers back, reconciled sinners. Who would not run spontaneously and eagerly after him who sets men free from error, overlooks their blundering, bestows merits by his mode of life and acquires rewards for them by his death? What excuse can anyone have for not running in the fragrance of your perfumes, except that the fragrance has not reached him? But the fragrance of your life has gone into every land, because "the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord," and his compassion is over all that he has made." Therefore the man who fails to perceive this life-giving fragrance that permeates all places, and does not run on that account, must be dead or even corrupt. Fragrance signifies fame. When the fragrance of his fame arrives it excites men to run, it leads to the experience of inward grace, to the reward of vision. The joyous throng who attain to it shout all together: "As we have heard so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts." If we run after you, Lord Jesus, it is entirely because of the meekness associated with your name, because you do not spurn the poor nor recoil from the sinner. You did not reject the repentant thief, the weeping sinner, the importunate Canaanite woman, the woman caught in adultery, the man who sat at the customs house, the humble tax collector, the disciple who denied you, the man who persecuted your followers, even those who crucified you. We run in the fragrance that these diffuse. The fragrance of your wisdom comes to us in what we hear, for if anyone needs wisdom let him but ask of you and you will give it to him. It is well known that you give to all freely and ungrudgingly. As for your justice, so great is the fragrance it diffuses that you are called not only just but even justice itself, the justice that makes men just. Your power to make men just is measured by your generosity in forgiving. Therefore the man who through sorrow for sin hungers and thirsts for justice, let him trust in the One who changes the sinner into a just man, and, judged righteous in terms of faith alone, he will have peace with God. Your holiness, for its part, is sweetly and richly radiated not only by your mode of life, but even by your conception. You have neither committed sin nor been contaminated by it. Repentant sinners therefore who wish to attain to that holiness essential for the vision of God, should listen to your warning: "Be holy, for I am holy." Let them pay attention to your ways for you are just in all your ways and holy in all your doings. Finally, how many are inspired to run by the sweet odor of your redemption! When you are lifted up from the earth you draw all things to yourself. Your Passion is the ultimate refuge, a remedy that is unique. When our wisdom lets us down, when our righteousness falls short, when the merits of our holiness founder, your Passion becomes our support. Who would presume that his own wisdom, or righteousness or holiness suffices for salvation? "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God." Therefore when my strength is spent I shall not be troubled, I shall not lose heart. I know what I shall do: I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. Enlighten my eyes, O Lord, that I may learn what is pleasing to you at all times, and then I am wise. "Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions," and then I am righteous. "Teach me your way," and then I am holy. And yet, unless your blood cries out on my behalf, I am not saved. To obtain all these gifts we run after you: forgive us, because we cry after you.

9. All of us do not run with equal ardor in the fragrance of all the perfumes; some are more eager for the study of wisdom, others concentrate on doing penance in the hope of pardon, others again are inspired to practice the virtues by the example of Christ's life and behavior, while yet others are roused to fervor more by the memory of his Passion. Is it possible for us to find examples of each kind? Those ran in the fragrance of wisdom who had been sent by the Pharisees and returned to them saying: "No man ever spoke like this man!" They admired his doctrine and praised his wisdom. Nicodemus also was lured into running by this fragrance when he came to Jesus by night, in the clear light of his wisdom, and went back reformed, instructed in many things. Mary Magdalene ran in the fragrance of justice: many sins were forgiven her because she loved much. She had ceased to be the sinner taunted by the Pharisee, and become a virtuous and holy woman. He did not realize that righteousness or holiness is a gift of God, not the fruit of man's effort, and that the man "to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity" is not only just but blessed. Had he forgotten how the Lord had cured his or some other man's bodily leprosy with a touch without contracting it? So, when the just One is touched by the sinner, he imparts rather than loses righteousness, nor is he tarnished with the stain of the sin from which he cleanses her. The tax collector ran in similar fashion; and justice himself bears witness that after he had humbly implored forgiveness for his sins, he "went home again at rights with God." Peter ran when, after his fall, he wept bitterly to wash away his sin and be restored to righteousness. David ran when he acknowledged and confessed his crime and was privileged to be told: "The Lord has put away your sin." Paul testifies that he ran in the fragrance of holiness, when he glories in being an imitator of Christ. He said to his followers: "Take me for a model as I take Christ." And all those were running, too, who said: "We have left everything and followed you." It was because of the desire to follow Christ that they had left all things. A general exhortation to everyone to follow in this fragrance is contained in the words: "He who says he abides in Christ ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." Finally, if you wish to hear of those who ran in the fragrance of the Passion, behold all the martyrs. Such, then, is my explanation of the four ointments: the first, wisdom; the second, righteousness; the third, holiness; and the fourth, redemption.

Remember their names and enjoy their fragrance, but forbear to question the manner in which they are made or the number of ingredients they contain. For the knowledge of the nature of the ointments of the Bridegroom cannot be as easily ascertained by us as was that of the ointments of the bride, that we have previously discussed. For in Christ these are in their fullness, unnumbered and unmeasured. His wisdom is infinite, his righteousness is like the mountains of God, mountains that are eternal, his holiness is unique, his redeeming work inexplicable.