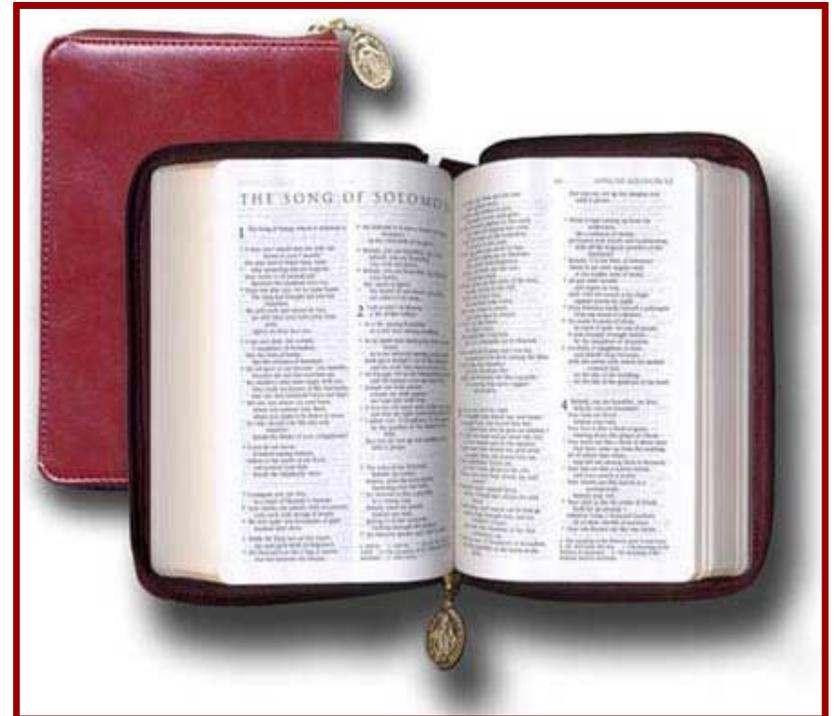




SONG OF SONGS—13

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE GRACE
OF
LOVING—KINDNESS***

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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 Grace of Loving-Kindness

As I recall, I have been discussing two ointments with you: one of contrition, that takes account of numerous sins, the other of devotion, that embodies numerous benefits. Both are wholesome experiences but not both pleasant. The first one is known to carry a sting, because the bitter remembrance of sins incites compunction and causes pain, whereas the second is soothing, it brings consolation through a knowledge of God's goodness and so assuages pain. But there is another ointment, far excelling these two, to which I give the name loving-kindness, because the elements that go to its making are the needs of the poor, the anxieties of the oppressed, the worries of those who are sad, the sins of wrong-doers, and finally, the manifold misfortunes of people of all classes who endure affliction, even if they are our enemies. These elements may seem rather depressing, but the ointment made from them is more fragrant than all other spices. It bears the power to heal, for "Happy the merciful; they shall have mercy shown them." A collection therefore of manifold miseries on which the eye rests with loving-kindness, represents the ingredients from which the best ointments are made, ointments that are worthy of the breasts of the bride and capable of winning the Bridegroom's attention. Happy the mind that has been wise enough to enrich and adorn itself with an assortment of spices such as these, pouring upon them the oil of mercy and warming them with the fire of charity! Who, in your opinion, is the good man who takes pity and lends, who is disposed to compassionate, quick to render assistance, who believes that there is more happiness in giving than in receiving, who easily forgives but is not easily angered, who will never seek to be avenged, and will in all things take thought for his neighbor's needs as if they were his own? Whoever you may be, if your soul is thus disposed, if you are saturated with the dew of mercy, overflowing with affectionate kindness, making yourself all things to all men yet pricing your deeds like something discarded in order to be ever and everywhere ready to supply to others what they need, in a word, so dead to yourself that you live only for others -- if this be you, then you obviously and happily possess the third and best of all ointments and your hands have dripped with liquid myrrh that is utterly enchanting. It will not run dry in times of stress nor evaporate in the heat of persecution; but God will perpetually "remember all your oblations and find your holocaust acceptable."

Finally a few brief words to end this present subject. The man whose speech intoxicates and whose good deeds radiate may take as addressed to himself the words: "Your breasts are better than wine, redolent of the best ointments." Now who is worthy of such a commendation? Which of us can live uprightly and perfectly even for one hour, an hour free from fruitless talk and careless work? Yet there is one who truthfully and unhesitatingly can glory in this praise. She is the Church, whose fullness is a never-ceasing fount of intoxicating joy, perpetually fragrant. For what she lacks in one member she possesses in another according to the measure of Christ's gift and the plan of the Spirit who distributes to each one just as he chooses. The Church's fragrance is radiated by those who use their money, tainted though it be, to win themselves friends; she intoxicates by the words of her preachers, who drench the earth and make it drunk with the wine of spiritual gladness, and yield a harvest through their perseverance. With the bold assurance of one confident that her breasts are better than wine and redolent of the choicest perfumes, she lays claim to the title of bride. And although none of us will dare arrogate for his own soul the title of bride of the Lord, nevertheless we are members of the Church which rightly boasts of this title and of the reality that it signifies, and hence may justifiably assume a share in this honor. For what all of us simultaneously possess in a full and perfect manner, that each single one of us undoubtedly possesses by participation. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your kindness in uniting us to the Church you so dearly love, not merely that we may be endowed with the gift of faith, but that like brides we may be one with you in an embrace that is sweet, chaste and eternal, beholding with unveiled faces that glory which is yours in union with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 13

10. But let us get back to the ointments of the bride. Do you not see how that ointment of merciful love, the only one that may not be wasted, is to be preferred to the others? The fact that not even the gift of a cup of cold water goes unrewarded shows that nothing actually is wasted. The ointment of contrition of course is good, made up as it is from the recollection of past sins and poured on the Lord's feet, because "You will not scorn, O God, this crushed and broken heart." But better by far is the ointment of devotion, distilled from the memory of God's beneficence, and worthy of being poured on Christ's head. Concerning it we have God's own witness: "Whoever makes thanksgiving his sacrifice honors me." The function of merciful love, however, is superior to both; it works for the welfare of the afflicted and is diffused through the whole Body of Christ. By this I do not mean the body which was crucified, but the one that he acquired by his passion. An ointment that by its excellence blinds him to the worth of the other two is beyond question the best, for he said: "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice." This, more than all the other virtues, is diffused, like a perfume from the breasts of the bride, who desires to conform in all things to the will of her Bridegroom. Was it not the fragrance of mercy that enveloped the death-bed of Tabitha. And like a life-giving perfume, it hastened her resurgence from death.

2. There are men of riches in the city of the Lord of hosts. I wonder if some among them possess these ointments.

As invariably happens, the first to spring to my mind is that chosen vessel, St Paul, truly a vessel of myrrh and frankincense and every perfume the merchant knows. He was Christ's incense to God in every place. His heart was a fountain of sweet fragrance that radiated far and wide, seized as he was with an anxiety for all the churches. See what those ingredients were, those spices that he had accumulated for himself: "I face death every day," he said, "for your glory." And again: "Who was weak, and I was not weak with him? Who was scandalized, and I did not burn?" Many similar passages, well known to all of you, show how prolific this rich man was in compounding the best of ointments. It was so fitting that the breasts which, fed the members of Christ should be redolent of the finest and purest of spices; they were members to whom Paul was truly a mother, giving birth to them all over and over again, until Christ was formed in them, that the members might be renewed in the likeness of their head.

3. Another man too, rich in the possession of these choice materials from which he prepared ointments of superior quality, said: "No stranger ever had to sleep outside, my door was always open to the travelers;" and again: "I was eyes for the blind, and feet for the lame. Who but I was father of the Poor? I used to break the fangs of wicked men, and snatch their prey from between their jaws. Have I been insensible to poor men's needs, or let a widow's eyes grow dim? Or taken my share of bread alone, not giving a share to the orphan? Have I ever seen a wretch in need of clothing, or a beggar going naked, without his having cause to bless me from his heart, as he felt the warmth of the fleece from my lambs?" What a sweet perfume that man must have radiated throughout the earth by works such as these? Every action bore its own aroma. Even his own conscience was filled with accumulating perfumes, so that pleasant odors from within tempered the stench of his rotting flesh.

4. Joseph, after he had drawn all the Egyptians to run after him to the odor of his ointments, ultimately proffered the same perfumed favor to the very men who had sold him. He began indeed by angrily reproaching them, but could not for long restrain the tears that burst forth from the fullness of his heart, tears that effaced the signs of anger and betrayed his love. Samuel mourned for Saul, the man who was intent on killing him; his heart grew warm with the fire of charity, his spirit melted within him, and love made him weep. And because his reputation was diffused abroad like a perfume, Scripture tells of him that "all Israel from Dan to Beersheba came to know that Samuel was accredited as a prophet of the Lord." What shall I say of Moses? With what a rich feast did he not fill his heart? Not even that rebellious house in which for a time he sojourned, could destroy by its rude anger the spiritual grace bestowed on him at the beginning of his career. His gentleness remained unshaken despite unremitting discords and conflicts day after day. Well did he deserve that testimony of the Holy Spirit that he was the humblest man on earth. For with them that hated peace he was peaceable since he not only curbed his anger in face of an ungrateful and rebellious people, but even appeased by his intervention the anger of God, as Scripture says "He talked of putting an end to them and would have done, if Moses his chosen had not stood in the breach, confronting him, deflecting his destructive anger." He even went so far as to say: "If it please you to forgive, forgive. But if not, then blot me out from the book that you have written." Surely a man truly filled with the grace of mercy! Clearly he speaks as a mother would for whom there is no delight or happiness that is not shared by her children. For instance, if a wealthy man should say to a poverty-stricken woman: "Come and join me at dinner, but better leave outside the child in your arms, his crying will only disturb us," do you think she would do it? Would she not rather choose to fast than to put away the child so dear to her and dine alone with the rich man? Hence Moses was resolved not to go alone to join in his Master's happiness while those people to whom he clung as a mother, with all a mother's affection despite their restlessness and ingratitude, remained outside. Inwardly he suffered, but he judged that suffering to be more tolerable than separation from them.

9. My brothers, let us give due honor to bishops but have a wholesome fear of their jobs, for if we comprehend the nature of their jobs we shall not hanker after the honor. Let us admit that our powers are unequal to the task, that our soft effeminate shoulders cannot be happy in supporting burdens made for men. It is not for us to pry into their business but to pay them due respect. For it is surely churlish to censure their doings if you shun their responsibilities; you are no better than the woman at home spinning, who foolishly reprimands her husband returning from the battle. And I add: if a monk happens to notice that a prelate working in his diocese lives with less constraint than he, and with less circumspection; that he speaks more freely, eats as he pleases, sleeps when he will, laughs spontaneously, gives rein to anger, passes judgment readily, let him not rush precipitately to wrong conclusions, but rather call to mind the Scripture: "Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good." For you do well in keeping a vigilant eye on your own behavior, but the man who helps many acts with more virile purpose fulfilling a higher duty. And if in the performance of this duty he is guilty of some imperfection, if his life and behavior are less than regular, remember that love covers a multitude of sins. I want this to be a warning against that twofold temptation with which the devil assails men in religious life: to covet the fame of a bishop's status, and to pass rash judgment on his excesses.

8. There have been times, if I may digress a little, when as I sat down sadly at the feet of Jesus, offering up my distressed spirit in sacrifice, recalling my sins, or again, at the rare moments when I stood by his head, filled with happiness at the memory of his favors, I could hear people saying: "Why this waste?" They complained that I thought only of myself when, in their view, I could be working for the welfare of others. In effect they said: "This could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." But what a poor transaction for me, to forfeit my own life and procure my own destruction, even if I should gain the whole world! Hence I compared such talk to the scriptural mention of dead flies that spoil the perfumed oil, and remembered the words of God: "O my people, those who praise you lead you into error." But let those who accuse me of indolence listen to the Lord who takes my part with the query: "Why are you upsetting this woman?" By this he means: "You are looking at the surface of things and therefore you judge superficially. This is not a man, as you think, who can handle great enterprises, but a woman. Why then try to impose on him a burden that to my mind he cannot endure? The work that he performs for me is good, let him be satisfied with this good until he finds strength to do better. If he eventually emerges from womanhood to manhood, to mature manhood, then let him engage in a work of corresponding dignity."

5. Who was more gentle than David who bewailed the death of the man who had ever thirsted for his own? What greater evidence of kindness could there be than his unhappiness at the demise of him into whose place he stepped as king? How hard it was to console him when his parricidal son was killed! Affection such as this certainly witnessed to an abundance of the best ointment. Therefore there is an assured ring in the words of that prayer: "O Lord, remember David and all his meekness." All these persons possessed the best ointments and even today diffuse their perfumes through all the churches. A similar influence is achieved by those too who, in the course of this life have been indulgent and charitable, who have made an effort to show kindness to their fellow-men, not vindicating to themselves alone any grace they were gifted with, but exercising it for the common good in the consciousness that they owe a duty to enemies no less than friends, to the wise just as much as to the unwise. Since their purpose was to be of help to everybody they evinced a great humility before all in all that they did, they were beloved by God and men, their good odor a perfume in the memory. Men like these, whatever their number, permeated their own times and today, too, with the best of ointments.

And you too, if you will permit us your companions to share in the gift you have received from above, if you are at all times courteous, friendly, agreeable, gentle and humble, you will find men everywhere bearing witness to the perfumed influence you radiate. Everyone among you who not only patiently endures the bodily and mental weaknesses of his neighbors, but, if permissible and possible, even plies them with attentions, inspires them with encouragement, helps them with advice, or, where the rules do not so permit, at least does not cease to assist them by fervent prayers -- everyone, I repeat, who performs such deeds among you, gives forth a good odor among the brethren like a rare and delicate perfume. As balsam in the mouth so is such a man in the community; people will point him out and say: "This is a man who loves his brothers and the people of Israel; this is a man who prays much for the people and for the holy city."

6. But let us turn to the Gospels to see if they contain any reference to these perfumes. "Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices with which to go and anoint Jesus." What were these ointments, so precious that they were bought and prepared for the body of Christ, so abundant that they sufficed to anoint every part of it? For nowhere do we find that the other two ointments were either bought or specially prepared for use on the body of Christ, or that they were spread over every part of it. There is a moment when we are suddenly brought face to face with a woman who in one place kisses Christ's feet and covers them with a perfume, and in another either she or a different woman brings in an alabaster box of ointment and pours it on his head. But in this instance we are told: "They bought spices with which to go and anoint Jesus." They buy spices, not ointments; the ointment for his body was not bought ready made, a totally new one was prepared; and not for application merely to a part of his body such as the feet or the head, but -- as is indicated in the words: "to anoint Jesus" -- to cover his whole body, not any particular part.

7. You too, if you are to become deeply compassionate, must behave generously and kindly not only to parents and relatives, or those from whom you have received or hope to receive a good turn -- after all non-Christians do as much -- but, following Paul's advice, you must make the effort to do good to all. Inspired by this God-oriented purpose, you will never refuse to do an act of charity, whether spiritual or corporal, to an enemy, or withdraw it once offered. It will thus be clear that you abound with the best ointments, that you have undertaken to care not only for the head or feet of the Lord, but, as far as in you lies, for his whole body which is the Church. It was perhaps for this reason the Lord Jesus would not allow the mixture of spices to be used on his dead body, he wished to reserve it for his living body. For that Church which eats the living bread which has come down from heaven is alive: she is the more precious Body of Christ that was not to taste death's bitterness, whereas every Christian knows that his other body did suffer death. His will is that she be anointed, that she be cared for, that her sick members be restored to health with remedies that are the fruit of diligence. It was for her that he withheld these precious ointments, when, anticipating the hour and hastening the glory of his resurrection, he eluded the women's devout purpose only to give it new direction. Mercy and not contempt was the reason for this refusal; the service was not spurned but postponed that others might benefit. And the benefit I refer to is not the fruit of this material thing, this anointing of the body; it is a spiritual benefit symbolized by it. On this occasion he who is the teacher of religious devotion refused these choice ointments that are symbols of devotion, because it was his absolute wish that they be used for the spiritual and corporal welfare of his needy members. A short time previously, when valuable ointment was poured on his head and even on his feet, did he try to prevent it? Did he not rather oppose those who objected to it? Simon, indignant that he should allow a sinful woman to touch him, received a stern rebuke in the course of along parable, while others who grumbled at the waste of the ointment were silenced with the question: "Why are you upsetting the woman?"