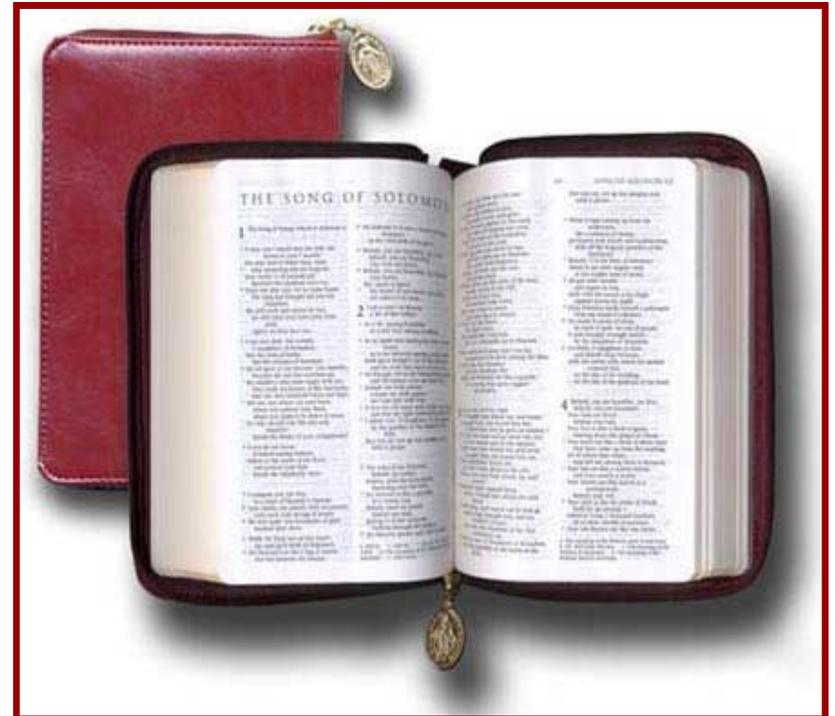




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SONG OF SONGS—53

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***GOD'S ESTEEM
FOR THE
ONE HE LOVES***

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.

God's Esteem for the One He Loves

“I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields, not to stir my beloved or rouse her until she pleases.’ This is a prohibition to the maidens whom he calls ‘daughters of Jerusalem’, because, although they are delicate and tender, their feminine appetites and conduct still untempered, they nevertheless cling to the bride in the hope of making progress and reaching Jerusalem. They are forbidden therefore to disturb the sleeping bride or to presume to awaken her against her will. Hence her completely tender bridegroom supports her head with his left arm, as has been already said, to enable her to relax and sleep on his breast. And now, as Scripture goes on to say, he keeps guard over her with all courtesy and affection, lest she be molested and wakened by the frequent and petty demands of the maidens. This is the literal sense of the text. But that attestation, ‘by the gazelles and hinds of the fields’, taken literally, seems entirely devoid of rational meaning, so totally does it demand a spiritual interpretation. But however this may be, in the meantime ‘it is good for us to be here’ and to gaze briefly on the goodness of the divine nature, its sweetness and courtesy. For what human affections have you ever experienced, any of you, that are sweeter than is now expressed to you from the heart of the Most High? And it is expressed by him who searches the depths of God, who cannot but know what is in him, because he is his Spirit, nor can he say openly anything except what he sees in him, for he is the Spirit of Truth.

**‘Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.’**

**For this place is truly a solitude where one dwells in the light,
precisely what the prophet calls
‘a shade by day from the heat,
a refuge and a shelter from rain and tempest’;**

or as holy David said:

**‘He hid me in His shelter in the day of trouble,
He concealed me under the cover of His tent.’**

7. There are some sitting here whom I wish to see paying greater attention to this present chapter. They should certainly ponder the deference owed to superiors, for by rashly disturbing them they become offensive even to those who dwell in heaven; and then at length they might begin to spare me a little bit more than hitherto, and not intrude so rudely and irresponsibly on my leisure. As they well know, rare is the hour in which I can relax from visitors, even when they themselves support me very patiently. I make this complaint reluctantly, however, for some timid person may conceal his needs and overtax his powers of endurance through fear of disturbing me. And so I desist, lest I seem to give an example of impatience to the weak. They are little ones of the Lord, putting their trust in him; I shall not permit them to be scandalized by me. I shall not use my authority; rather let them use me as they please, provided they attain salvation. They will spare me by not sparing me, and I shall rest more in knowing that they are not afraid to trouble me about their needs. I shall accommodate myself to them as far as I can, and as long as I live I shall serve God in them, in unfeigned love. Let me not seek my own advantage; it is what is useful not to me but to many that I shall judge useful for myself. This only I pray for, that my ministry may be pleasing to them and fruitful, and perhaps in time of evil I may, because of this, find mercy in their Father's eyes, and in those of the Church's bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who with him is above all things, God blessed for ever.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 53

2. Actually our race is not without someone who happily deserved to enjoy this gift, who experienced within herself this sweetest mystery, unless we entirely disbelieve the passage of scripture we have at hand, where the heavenly bridegroom is plainly shown as passionately defending the repose of his beloved, eager to embrace her within his arms as she sleeps, lest she be roused from her delicious slumber by annoyance or disquiet. I cannot restrain my joy that this majesty did not disdain to bend down to our weakness in a companionship so familiar and sweet, that the supreme Godhead did not scorn to enter into wedlock with the soul in exile and to reveal to her with the most ardent love how affectionate was this bridegroom whom she had won. That in heaven it is like this, as I read on earth, I do not doubt, nor that the soul will experience for certain what this page suggests, except that here she cannot fully express what she will there be capable of grasping, but cannot yet grasp. What do you think she will receive there, when now she is favored with an intimacy so great as to feel herself embraced by the arms of God, cherished on the breast of God, guarded by the care and zeal of God lest she be roused from her sleep by anyone till she wakes of her own accord.

3. Well then, let me explain if I can what this sleep in which the bridegroom wishes his beloved to enjoy, from which he will not allow her to be wakened under any circumstances, except at her good pleasure; for if someone should read the apostle's words: 'it is full time now for you to wake from sleep', or read how God was asked by the prophet to enlighten his eyes lest he sleep the sleep of death, he might be troubled by the ambiguity of the words and be entirely unable to form any worthy sentiments about the sleep of the bride that is here described. Nor does it resemble that sleep of Lazarus which the Lord mentions in the Gospel: 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to wake him out of sleep'. He said this about the death of his body, though the disciples were thinking of sleep. This sleep of the bride, however, is not the tranquil repose of the body that for a time sweetly lulls the fleshly senses, nor that dreaded sleep whose custom is to take life away completely. Farther still is it removed from that deathly sleep by which a man perseveres irrevocably in sin and so dies. It is a slumber which is vital and watchful, which enlightens the heart, drives away death, and communicates eternal life. For it is a genuine sleep that yet does not stupefy the mind but transports it. And— I say it without hesitation - it is a death, for the apostle Paul in praising people still living in the flesh spoke thus: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

4. It is not absurd for me to call the bride's ecstasy a death, then, but one that snatches away not life but life's snares, so that one can say: 'We have escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers'. In this life we move about surrounded by traps, but these cause no fear when the soul is drawn out of itself by a thought that is both powerful and holy, provided that it so separates itself and flies away from the mind that it transcends the normal manner and habit of thinking; for a net is spread in vain before the eyes of winged creatures. Why dread wantonness where there is no awareness of life? For since the ecstatic soul is cut off from awareness of life though not from life itself, it must of necessity be cut off from the temptations of life. 'O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.' How I long often to be the victim of this death that I may escape the snares of death, that I may not feel the deadening blandishments of a sensual life, that I may be steeled against evil desire, against the surge of cupidity, against the goads of anger and impatience, against the anguish of worry and the miseries of care. Let me die the death of the just, that no injustice may ensnare or wickedness seduce me. How good the death that does not take away life but makes it better; good in that the body does not perish but the soul is exalted.

5. Men alone experience this. But, if I may say so, let me die the death of angels that, transcending the memory of things present, I may cast off not only the desire for what are corporeal and inferior but even their images, that I may enjoy pure conversation with those who bear the likeness of purity.

This kind of ecstasy, in my opinion, is alone or principally called contemplation. Not to be gripped during life by material desires is a mark of human virtue; but to gaze without the use of bodily likenesses is the sign of angelic purity. Each, however, is a divine gift, each is a going out of oneself, each a transcending of self, but in one, one goes much farther than in the other. Happy the man who can say: 'See, I have escaped far away, and found a refuge in the wilderness'. He was not satisfied with going out if he could not go far away, so that he could be at rest. You have so over-leaped the pleasures of the flesh that you are no longer responsive to its concupiscence even in the least, nor gripped by its allure. You have advanced, you have placed yourself apart, but you have not yet put yourself at a distance, unless you succeed in flying with purity of mind beyond the material images that press in from every side. Until that point promise yourself no rest. You err if you expect to find before then a place of rest, the privacy of solitude, unclouded light, the abode of peace. But show me the man who has attained to this and I shall promptly declare him to be at rest. Rightly may he say: 'Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.' For this place is truly a solitude where one dwells in the light, precisely what the prophet calls 'a shade by day from the heat, a refuge and a shelter from rain and tempest'; or as holy David said: 'He hid me in his shelter in the day of trouble, he concealed me under the cover of his tent.'

6. Consider therefore that the bride has retired to this solitude, there, overcome by the loveliness of the place, she sweetly sleeps within the arms of her bridegroom, in ecstasy of spirit. Hence the maidens are forbidden to waken her until she herself pleases. But how forbidden?

This is no straightforward prohibition nor the customary mild warning, but an entirely new and unusual adjuration, namely, 'by the gazelles and hinds of the fields'. It seems to me that these animals, because of their sharpness of vision and swiftness of motion, fittingly designate both the holy souls who have laid aside the body and the angels who are in God's presence. We know that these qualities belong to those spirits; they easily soar to the heights and penetrate secret things. Again, the life [the animals] live in the fields obviously points to the free and graceful discourse of [the angels'] contemplation. What is their part then in this solemn appeal? Surely that the restless maidens may not dare, through fickleness, to recall his beloved from the sublime company to which she is introduced as often as she becomes ecstatic in contemplation. And so they are justly intimidated by the authority of those from whose company their importunity would snatch her away. Let the maidens realize whom they offend when they disturb their mother, and beware of so presuming on her maternal love that without real necessity they intrude on that heavenly encounter. Let them realize that this is what they do when without justification they trouble a person resting in contemplation. Since she is not allowed to be aroused by them until she pleases, it is for her to choose both when to be at leisure and when to devote attention to them. The bridegroom knows how ardently the bride glows with love for her neighbors too, how her own love amply prompts her maternal interest in her daughters' progress, and that she will neither withdraw from nor refuse to go to them when they need her. Hence he judged that management of those affairs might be safely committed to her discretion. For she is not one of the many marked down by the prophet's withering scorn, those who take possession of the fat and the strong and reject the weak. Does a doctor visit the healthy, and not more the sick? And if he does, it is more as a friend than as a doctor. Good master, whom will you teach if you drive away all the untaught? In whom, I ask, will you inculcate discipline, if you banish all the wayward, or fly from them? Among whom will you test your patience if you receive the gentle only, and exclude the willful?