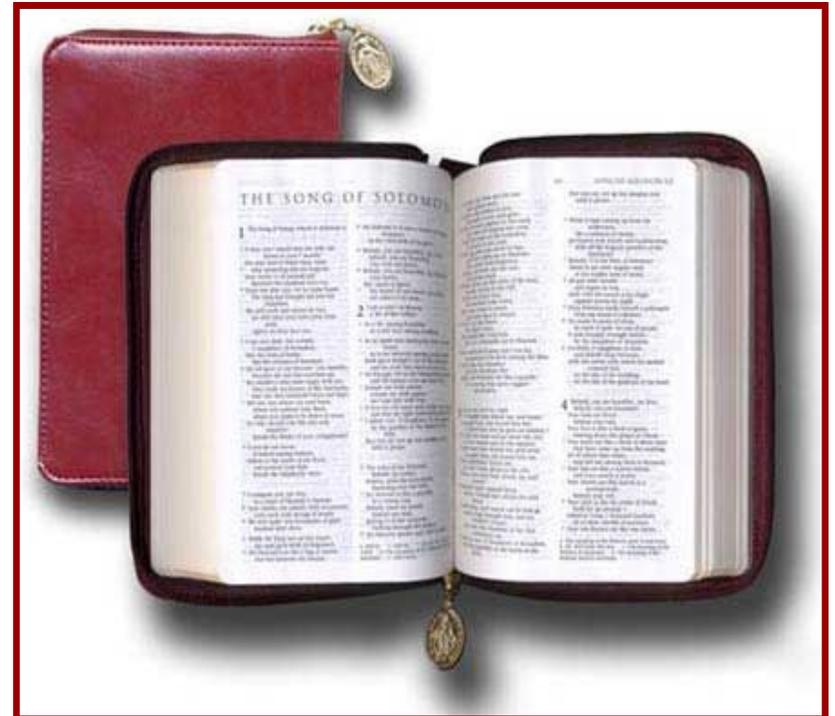




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—73***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***'UNTIL THE DAY BREATHES FORTH LIFE'***

*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.*

### **'Until the Day Breathes Forth Life'**

'My beloved is mine and I am his; he feeds among the lilies until the day breathes forth life and the shadows lie prostrate.' Only the last clause of this passage has now to be treated, and I am in doubt, on entering upon it, as to which of the two preceding ones it should be joined to, for I cannot connect it with either. For whether you say 'My beloved is mine and I am his, until the day breathes forth life and the shadows lie prostrate' putting in parenthesis 'who feeds among the lilies' - or whether you follow the literal order 'who feeds among the lilies until the day breathes forth life and the shadows lie prostrate', you will make good sense. The only difference is that when you join 'until' to the first clause, you include the other clause in the meaning; if you join it to the second you exclude the first clause. If we suppose that the Bridegroom ceases to feed among the lilies when day has come to fulness, will he likewise cease to incline toward the Bride or she towards him? Not at all. They will continue to do so for ever. The only difference will be that their relationship will be happier as it is stronger, and stronger as it is less hindered. This word 'until' must be understood in its meaning in the Gospel according to Matthew, where it is related that Joseph did not know Mary 'until she brought forth her first born son,' for he did not know her afterwards. Or as in that verse in the psalm, 'Our eyes wait for the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us': when he begins to have mercy they will not turn away; as Our Lord said to the Apostles, 'I am with you even unto the end of the world'. He will not cease to be with us afterwards. But now see how it appears if you join the clause beginning 'until' to 'my beloved is mine and I am his'. For if you prefer to take it with 'who feeds among the lilies' you must understand it in a different sense. Also, it is more difficult to explain how the beloved ceases to feed when the day breathes forth life. Even if it is the day of resurrection, how will he want to feed less among the lilies when there is a greater abundance of them? But that is enough about the connection of the clauses.

10. Here it is apposite to quote the words spoken by Our Lord, that 'to the one who has, more will be given, but as to the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away from him'. So it is: and in death too light will be increased to those who see, and taken away from those who do not. For in proportion as these see less and less, so the others see more and more, until the horror of the night engulfs the first, and the life-breathing day dawns on the second; and this is the last day of both, complete blindness and perfect sight. Then nothing remains to be taken from those who are completely emptied, nor is there anything more to be given to those who are filled, unless they may expect to receive more than fullness, according to the promise made to them. Now these are the words of this promise: 'They shall put into your arms full measure pressed down and overflowing'. You must see that anything which is overflowing is more than full. You will have peace of mind when you hear of this fullness and overflowing if you remember reading that God shall reign 'till eternity and beyond'. He then will be the crown and the glory of that life-breathing day. That day, I say, will add its measure of fullness breathed in to the abundance of the day which breathes on them, bringing about a weight of glory exalted above measure, so that the superabundant outpouring of light should reflect upon bodies also. For this reason it is said to be not breathing, but breathing upon them, even breathing forth life into them, and the Holy Spirit makes this clear by the addition of the preposition "ad" because those whom he enlightens within he adorns also without, and clothes them with a robe of glory.

11. And this will be reason enough to give for the meaning of the word 'aspiring', 'breathing life', and if you desire to know, the life-breathing day is the Saviour whom we await, 'who shall change the body of our lowliness to conform it to the body of his glory. For he is also the one who breathes life into us according to his operation by which he first makes us breathe in the light which he inspires, so that we also will be in him a day of respiring, of coming to life. Now our inner man is renewed from day to day and renewed in the spirit of its mind to be likeness of him who created it, becoming day from the day and light from light. There are then, two successive days in us, the one a day of inspiration, of breathing in life, for the life of the body, and the other a day of respiration, of coming to life, for sanctification by grace. And there remains a life-breathing day in the glory of the resurrection, for it is clear that the great mystery of holiness which has gone before in the head will be accomplished in due time in the body, and there will be fulfilled the testimony of the prophet who said, 'He will revive us after two days; on the third day he will raise us up and we shall live in his sight; we shall recognize him and we shall follow him, that we may know him to be the Lord! It is he whom the angels desire to look upon, the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is God above all things blessed for ever. Amen.

8. In this day we are all born. All of us bear branded upon us the mark of this conspiring, burnt into us; Eve still lives in our flesh, and because of our inborn lust the serpent schemes ceaselessly to win our consent to his rebellion. Therefore, as I said, the saints cursed that day, desiring that it should be short and should quickly turn to night, for it is a day of discord and dispute in which the flesh does not cease to strive against the spirit. The contrary law of our flesh rebels continually against the law of the spirit. Thus it became a day of expiring; then, and ever since. 'Who is the man who will live and not see death?' You may call this the effect of God's wrath, but I would rather consider it the effect of his mercy, whereby the elect of God, for whom all things are done, may not long be wearied by the strife and trouble which holds them captive to the law of sin which is in their members. For it is with anguish of mind that they suffer the shame of their captivity and the bitterness of their struggle.

9. Let us then make haste to respire, to come to life out of that ancient disobedience, that conspiring, for the days of men are brief. May the day come and breath upon us before we are devoured by the sighing horror of the night and overwhelmed by the everlasting shadows of outer darkness. Do you wish to know where this respiration, this coming to life, is to be found and what it consists of? Of the spirit beginning to war against the flesh. You resist the flesh, you begin to live again; if by the spirit you begin to mortify the works of the flesh, if you crucify the flesh with its defects and lusts you live again. 'I punish my body,' says Paul, 'and bring it into subjection, so that when I have preached to others I may not myself be rejected'. Those are the words of someone who is living again - someone who has indeed come to life. Go and do likewise, and show that you have come to life, and know that the living day is breathing on you and giving you light.

Not even the night of death shall prevail against this day of new life: instead it shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not swallow it up. Even when life departs I do not think that the light of life will fail and I think that the saying 'Even the night about us will be light' cannot be applied to anyone more fitly than to one who dies this way. How should he not see more clearly when he is freed from the shroud - or rather the corruption - of the body? When he is loosed from the bonds of the flesh he will surely be free among the dead, sighted among the blind. For as in Egypt when darkness lay everywhere, the people of Israel alone in the midst of the gloom knew and saw God; for Scripture says, 'Where the people of Israel dwelt there was light', so the just shall shine among the sons of darkness in the dreadful shadow of death and they shall see the more clearly as they are freed from the shades of the body. But those who have not come to life again - who did not seek the light of that day or breath its air, and on whom the Sun of Righteousness did not rise - these, I say, will go from darkness to even deeper darkness, and those who are in darkness will be in darkness still, and those who see will see more and more.

2. Now consider with me how the Bridegroom, living and rejoicing in the midst of a kingdom bright with lilies, is not said to be feeding as he had previously been accustomed to do. For where now are the sinners whom Christ has, as it were, ground and pressed with the teeth of hard discipline, of mortification of the flesh and the heart's contrition, so that he may incorporate them into himself? But the Bridegroom, the Word, will no longer require to be fed by any deeds or words of obedience where the only activity is repose, and contemplation and affection the only duty. His food is indeed to do the will of his Father; but here below, not there. When all is done, what is there for him to do? And we know that all will be accomplished. Then the saints will know what the will of God is, which is good and acceptable, and perfect. Surely when perfection is reached, nothing remains to be done. There remains only to enjoy it, not to bring it about; to experience it, not to strive for it; to live by it, not to carry it out laboriously. For is it not that very will for whose accomplishment on earth as in heaven we are taught by the Lord to pray with such earnest supplication that the activity may not weary us, but its fruits may be our delight? So the Bridegroom, the Word, will have no need for the food of good works since all works must cease where wisdom is understood fully by all, for it is said, 'They who have little need of activity shall understand it.'

3. But let us see whether our words can stand alongside the sense in which some interpret the saying that he takes delight in the brightness of virtues; for among the other interpretations we have not missed that one. Shall we say that there will be no virtues, or that the Bridegroom will then take no pleasure in them? Surely either of these is unreasonable. But see whether perhaps he delights in them in some other way - for there is no question that he delights in them - maybe as drink rather than as food. In our life in this world no virtue is so purified or made so sweet and clear that it would be easy for the Bridegroom to drink of it; yet he who desires that all men be saved overlooks many things, and strives with skill and toil to draw from that which he cannot easily drink something which may be relished as food. There will come a time when virtue need not be pressed wearily by the teeth, or rather cause weariness to the one who eats, but will give pleasure without trouble to the one who drinks, being used as a drink, not as food. For you have his promise in the Gospel: 'I will not drink of the fruit of the vine,' he says, 'until I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'. There is no mention of eating. We read in the prophet: 'Like a strong man drunk with wine', but here too there is no mention at all of food. The bride then is aware of this mystery when she finds her beloved and sees him among the lilies, and she names a time until when he will deign to do this; or rather she knows and states a time already determined saying, 'until the day breathes forth life and the shadows lie prostrate.' For she knew that he would drink of virtues rather than eat them. This seems to follow the normal custom of taking drink after food. Therefore he who eats now will drink hereafter, and with more pleasure and tranquility, for he will drink what he now partakes of with difficulty.

4. Now let us turn to consider that day and those shadows: what day this is, what shadows these are, how the one breathes forth life, and why the other lies prostrate. For this saying is strange and without parallel: 'until the day breathes forth life'. It is only here, if I am not mistaken, that you will find the day spoken of as 'breathing'. Breezes, not times, are said to breathe. A man breathes, all the other animals breathe; it is the air they ceaselessly breathe which enables their life to continue. And what is this but the wind? The Holy Spirit also breathes; that is why he is called 'Spirit', one who breathes. How then can a day breathe, since it is neither wind, nor spirit, nor animal? Yet it is not merely said to breathe but to breathe forth life. It is no less strange that the shadows are said to lie prostrate. For at the rising of physical, visible light shadows do not lie prostrate but melt away. But the reality must be understood beyond the physical way. If we find a spiritual day and spiritual shadows, perhaps the meaning of the one 'lying prostrate' and of the other 'breathing forth life', will become clearer. Anyone who understands in a literal sense the day of which the prophet said 'One day in your courts is better than thousands', will take anything in a literal sense. There is also a day with an evil significance which is cursed by the Prophets. Let us not suppose that the day which the Lord has made is one of those visible days. It must be a day in a spiritual sense.

5. Who can doubt that which overshadowed Mary as she conceived was a spiritual shadow; so too was that of which the prophet Jeremiah said, 'The Lord's anointed is a spirit before our face, and beneath his shadow shall we live among the heathen'. But I think that in this passage 'shadows' refer to those hostile powers which the Apostle Paul called not merely shadows or darkness but even the princes of darkness and that this includes also those from our race who consent with them, children of night, not of light or day, and when the day breathes forth life these shadows will not be annihilated like natural shadows, which we see not only fading away but completely disappearing; they will not be utterly destroyed but they will be utterly wretched. They will still exist, but cowering and subdued. The Psalm says 'he will cower and fall when he has domination over the poor', referring no doubt to the prince of darkness. So his nature shall not be destroyed but his power shall be taken away; his substance shall not perish but the hour of darkness and its power shall pass. They are taken away that they may not see the glory of God; they are not blotted out, that they may burn forever.

How shall the shadows not lie prostrate when the mighty are put down from their seat and are made a footstool? That must soon come to pass. It is the last hour: the night is far spent, and the day is at hand. The day will breathe forth life, the night will breathe its last. The night is the devil, night is the angel of Satan, though he may disguise himself as an angel of light. Night is the Antichrist, whom the Lord shall slay with the breath of his mouth and destroy with the brightness of his coming. Is not the Lord the day? Clearly he is the day, bright and throbbing with life. He puts the shadows to flight with the breath of his mouth, and destroys the phantoms with the brightness of his coming.

If you prefer to take the words 'to lie prostrate' in their literal meaning, taking the view that 'to lie prostrate' means nothing but to be destroyed, I would accept this interpretation; for the dark sayings and riddles of the Scriptures we call 'shadows' as we do the ambiguities of speech, verbal quibbles, and involved arguments - all of which obscure the light of truth for a while! We know in part, and we prophesy in part. When the day breathes forth life the shadows truly lie prostrate, for when the fulness of night pervades all things, then no trace of shadows can remain! For when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away!

6. This would be enough to say about these matters if the day had been described as breathing and not breathing forth life, but because of this small addition I think something more should be said to explain the shade of meaning involved. For I admit that I have long been convinced that in the sacred and precious writing there is no slightest detail which is without significance.

Aspiring is a word which we use when we desire something passionately, as for example when we say, 'He aspires to this or that honor or dignity'. By this word is signified a marvelous richness and power of the spirit, to be manifested on that day when not only our hearts but also our bodies will become spiritual after their own fashion, and will be inebriated with the wealth of the house of the Lord and drink of the river of his pleasures.

7. Or again, the day of righteousness has already shone upon the holy angels, breathing upon them with continual breath and ceaseless flow the sweet mysteries of the eternal Godhead. 'The flooding river makes glad the city of God', but that is the city of which is said 'In you is the dwelling place of all who rejoice'. But when that day comes upon us who inhabit the earth, to breathe upon us, it will not only breathe but also breathe forth life, admitting us also into its wide embrace. Or, to go back further and give it a wider meaning, when man was fashioned from the clay of the earth, God who fashioned him, as the true account tells, breathed into him the breath of life, and that day became for him a day of inspiration. Then, see, a baleful night, under the pretense of light burst upon it; for promising an even brighter light it quenched the new dawn with the sudden clouds of treachery, and plunged our first parents into terrible darkness by its accursed counsel. Woe, woe! They did not know, they did not understand, they walked in the darkness in ignorance, counting darkness as light and light as darkness. When the serpent offered the woman the fruit of the tree which God had forbidden, she ate it and gave it to her husband. Then, as it were, a new day began for them, for the eyes of both were opened, and it became for them a day of conspiring, destroying that inspiration and putting in its place a day of expiring. Certainly they conspired and took counsel together against the Lord and against his Christ - the subtlety of the serpent and blandishments of the woman, and the man's weakness. Then indeed the Lord and his Christ spoke together: See, the man has become as one of us, because he has consented to the enticements of sinners, to the ruin of each.