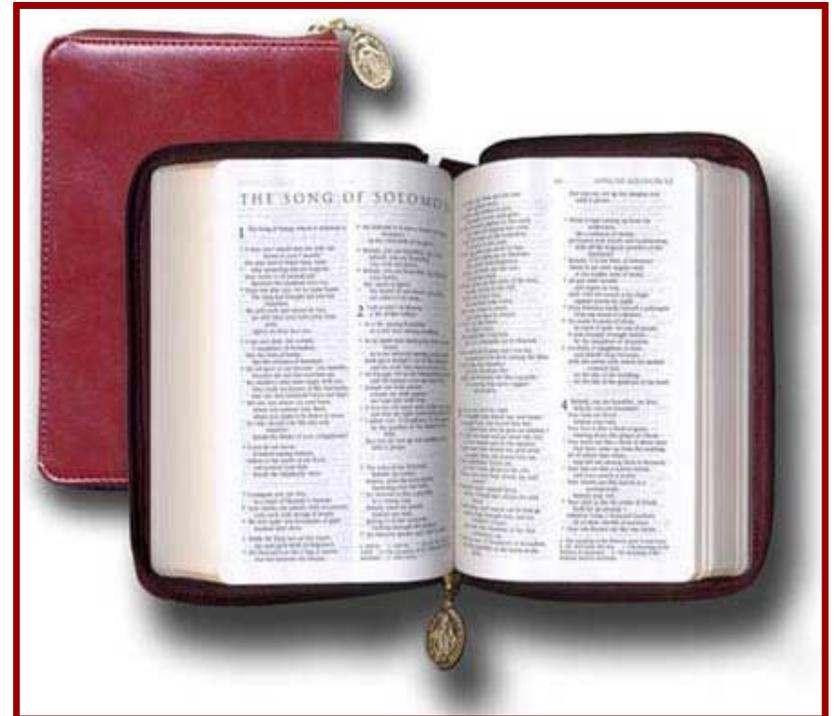




SONG OF SONGS—65

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF FOXES:
I STAND BY MY PROMISE***

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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 Different Kinds of Foxes: I Stand By My Promise

'Catch us the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines are in flower.' These foxes represent temptations. Now it is necessary that temptations come, for who shall receive a crown of victory unless he has contended according to the rules? And how shall they contend if there is no-one to oppose them? When you come to serve God, then, stand in awe and prepare your soul for temptation, certain that all who wish to live a godly life in Christ must suffer persecution. Now there are different kinds of temptation, corresponding to different times [in our lives]. At the beginning of our course, when we are like tender flowers on young plants, a sharp frost attacks us openly, as I described in my last sermon, and I have warned beginners to beware of this bane. Yet the powerful enemies of good do not dare openly to oppose the proficient, who have made some progress in sanctity, but they lie in wait for them in secret, like cunning little foxes, wearing the likeness of virtues, whereas they are really vices. How many, for instance, have I known who, at the beginning of life's journey, started out all right on the paths of righteousness and were making serene progress towards goodness when, for shame! they suffer the humiliation of being tripped up by these little foxes, and too late they grieve for the fruits of virtue which have been choked in them.

'How can men preach unless they are sent?'

9. Let it not be supposed, however, that it is a small and unimportant thing for a man to vanquish a heretic and refute his heresies, making a clear and open distinction between shadows and reality and exposing the fallacies of false teaching by plain and irrefutable reasoning in such a way as to bring into captivity a depraved mind which had set itself up against the knowledge revealed by God. The man who has done this has in fact caught the fox, though not to his salvation, and he has caught it for the Bride and Bridegroom, though in a different way. For even though the heretic was not raised up from the error of his ways, the Church has been strengthened in faith, and without doubt the Bridegroom rejoices in the progress of the Bride. 'The joy of the Lord is our strength.' He who has deigned to unite himself with us does not look upon our advantage as something foreign to himself, for he orders the foxes to be caught, not for himself, but for us along with him. Notice that he says 'for us'. What gracious condescension! Do you not think that he is speaking as the father of a family, in that he keeps nothing for himself, but has everything in common with his wife and children and household? He who speaks is indeed God, yet it is not as God that he speaks, but as a Bridegroom.

10. 'Catch us the foxes.' You see how he speaks, as though to equals - he who has no equal. He could have said 'me', but he preferred to say 'us', for he delights in companionship. What sweetness! What grace! What mighty love! Can it be that the Highest of all is made one with all? Who has brought this about? Love has brought this about, without regard for its own dignity, strong in affection and efficacious in persuasion. What could be more violent? Love prevails even with God. What could be so non-violent? It is love. What force is there, I ask, which advances so violently towards victory, yet is so unresisting to violence? For he emptied himself, so that you might know that it was the fulness of love which was outpoured, that his loftiness was laid low and that his unique nature made to be your fellow. With whom, O wonderful Bridegroom, have you such familiar friendship? 'Catch them for us,' he says. For whom, besides you? For the Church of the Gentiles? She is made up of mortals and sinners. What she is, we know; but who are you, so devoted to the Ethiopian woman, so eager a lover? Assuredly not a second Moses, but a greater than Moses. Are you not he who is the fairest of the children of men? I have I said too little. You are the brightness of eternal life, the splendor and image of the being of God, God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 65

2. I have seen a man running his course well, and then this thought occurs to him - is it not a little fox? - 'If I were at home', he says, 'I could share with so many of my brothers, kinsfolk, and acquaintances the good I here enjoy alone. They love me, and would readily agree with me when I appeal to them. To what purpose is this waste? I will go to them, and by saving many of them I shall save myself also. There is nothing to fear in a change of environment. As long as I am doing good, it does not matter where I am, although, of course, it is no doubt better to be where I may live a more useful life.' Need I say more? He goes, poor wretch, not so much an exile returning home as a dog returning to his vomit, and he is destroyed. Unhappy man, he loses his own soul without saving anyone else's. Surely this is a little fox - the vain hope of winning the souls of others? You can find one instance after another like this for yourselves from your own experience if you take the trouble.

3. Do you want me to show you yet another? I will, and I will describe a third and a fourth as well if I find you watchful and eager to catch those, of whatever kind, which you may notice in your own vineyard. It sometimes happens that a man who is making good progress feels himself bedewed with heavenly grace to an extraordinary degree, and is possessed by a desire to preach, not indeed to his relatives and friends - you remember the saying 'Immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood'—but to all and sundry, as though that were a purer, more fruitful and more powerful procedure. He is acting with great caution. No doubt he is afraid of incurring the prophet's curse if he holds back from the people the grain which he received in secret, and is afraid of acting contrary to the Gospel if he does not proclaim from the housetop what he hears whispered. This too is a fox, even more dangerous than the last, because its coming is less obvious; but I will catch it for you. First, Moses says 'You shall not plough with the first-born of your bull'. This Paul interprets as: 'Not a new convert, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil', and again, 'A man does not take this honor upon himself, but is called by God, as was Aaron', and yet again: 'How can men preach unless they are sent?' Now we know that the duty of a monk is not to teach but to weep. Of these and like considerations I weave my net and catch the fox so that it may not spoil the vine. They make it quite clear that it is not expedient for a monk to preach in public, nor is it seemly for a novice, nor proper for anyone unless he is expressly sent. What devastation of the conscience to fly in the face of all these three! Therefore if any suggestion of this kind presents itself to you, whether it arises from your own mind or is suggested by an evil spirit, you must recognize it as a cunning fox, evil disguised as good.

4. Look at another [example]. How many fervent souls have been drawn from their monasteries by the attraction of the solitary life, and have then become lukewarm and have been spewed forth, or if they have remained, have become slack and dissolute, violating the law of the hermit? A little fox has plainly been at work when such havoc has been caused in the vineyard! It is the destruction of a man's life and integrity. He supposed that the solitary life would produce the fruits of the Spirit in much greater abundance than the common life, where he had experienced, so he thought, only ordinary grace. The idea seemed to him a good one, but the outcome showed that it was more like a destructive fox.

5. Now I must mention a matter which frequently causes us serious trouble: the excessive and superstitious abstinence of some among us, which makes them a burden to themselves and everyone else. How can such discord to others cause the destruction of the consciences of those concerned, and, as far as is in their power, the devastation of this great vine which the right hand of the Lord has planted, by destroying the unity of all of you? 'Woe to the man by whom the offence comes! Whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble' - what follows is hard, but how much harder a fate does the man deserve who causes so great and holy a multitude to stumble! Whoever he is, he will bear his judgment, and it will be very severe. But of this [I will speak] another time.

6. Now let us consider what the Bridegroom said about these cunning little animals that spoil the vines. They are little, I would say, not because they have little malice, but because of their subtlety. This kind of creature is indeed cunning by nature, and exceedingly quick to do damage in secret, and it may, I think, be most appropriate to consider them as representing certain subtle vices cloaked in the likeness of virtues. I have already given a brief description of their nature and cited a few examples. They can do no damage at all except by falsely representing themselves as virtues, because, of their very likeness to virtues. For they are either the vain thoughts of men or the promptings of Satan's evil angels, who disguise themselves as angels of light, making ready their arrows in the quiver - that is in secret - to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart. That, I think, is why they are called little, for while other vices show themselves as it were in bodily form, this kind are not easily recognized because of their subtlety. They cannot easily be avoided except by the perfect and the experienced, and by such as have the eyes of their souls enlightened for the discernment of good and evil, and particularly for the discernment of spirits, so that they can say with the Apostle Paul: 'We are not ignorant of the designs of Satan' or of his thoughts. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Bridegroom has given orders that they are not to be exterminated or driven away or killed, but caught. Cunning little beasts of this kind must obviously be watched with the utmost vigilance and caution, and so trapped, that is caught in the toils of their own subtlety. Then, when their deception is made known and their falsity uncovered, it can truly be said that the little fox that destroys the vine has been caught. Thus we say that a man is trapped in his speech, as you find in the Gospel: 'The Pharisees came together to trap Jesus in his speech.'

7. This is why the Bridegroom gives orders that the little foxes who spoil the vines are to be caught, that is trapped, overcome, and brought out into the open. This kind of pest is the only one with the peculiarity, that once recognized it can do no harm; if it is recognized it is conquered. Who but a madman would knowingly and consciously put his foot into a trap if he knew it was there. It is enough, then, for this kind to be caught, that is, discovered and brought into the light of day, since for them to be seen is to perish. It is not so with other vices, for they attack openly, and their damage is done openly. They ensnare even those who are aware of them and overcome even those who resist them, and that by force, not by guile. When we are dealing with beasts of this kind who rage openly, we have not to flush them out, but to bring them under control. It is only these little foxes, these great deceivers, whom it suffices to bring into the light of day and catch in the toils of their cunning. Once they are recognized they can do no harm - but they do have holes. This is why we are commanded to catch these foxes, and why they are described as little. Or perhaps they are so called because it is by careful observation in the early stages, while they are still small, that you may catch vices in time and prevent them from growing larger and doing greater damage, besides becoming more difficult to catch.

8. If we continue the allegory, taking vines to represent Christian congregations, and foxes heresies, or rather heretics themselves, the interpretation is simple: heretics are to be caught rather than driven away. They are to be caught, I repeat, not by force of arms but by arguments by which their errors may be refuted. They themselves, if it can be done, are to be reconciled with the Catholic [Church] and brought back to the true faith. This is His will, that all men should be saved and brought to the knowledge of the truth. This is what he shows us when he says not simply 'Catch the foxes', but 'Catch us the foxes'. It is for himself and his bride, that is the Catholic [Church], that he orders these foxes to be apprehended when he says 'Catch us the foxes'. So if an experienced and well-instructed churchman undertakes to debate with a heretic, he should direct his intention to convincing him of the error of his ways in such a way as to convert him, bearing in mind the saying of the Apostle James, that anyone who causes a sinner to be converted from the error of his ways will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. But if he will not be converted or convinced even after a first and second admonition, then, according to the Apostle, he is to be shunned as one who is completely perverted. Consequently I think it better that he should be driven away or even bound rather than be allowed to spoil the vines.