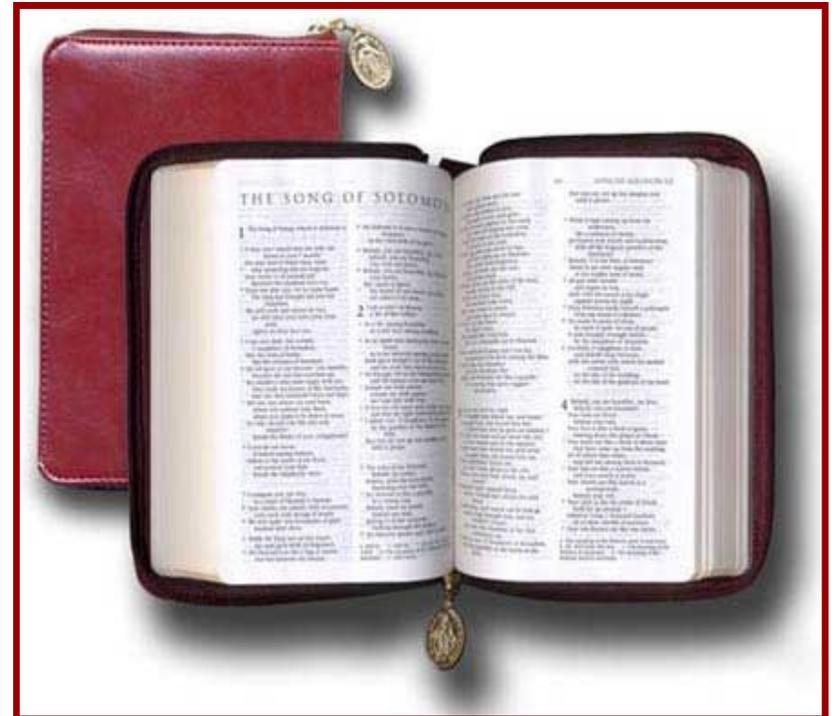


SONG OF SONGS—68

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***MY BELOVED IS MINE
AND I AM HIS***



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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.

My Beloved is Mine and I am His

“MY BELOVED is mine and I am his.” It is the bridegroom whose words we have pondered until now. We implore his presence that we may worthily trace the words of his Bride, to his glory and for our salvation, for we cannot worthily consider and study such words as these unless he is present to guide our discourse. For her words are pleasant and lovely, bringing profit to the understanding, and they are deep in mystery. To what shall I compare them? They are like a banquet which excels all others, threefold, delicious to the taste, giving true nourishment, and rich in healing power. So is every word of the Bride; and while it is sweet to hear, it delights the affections and enriches the mind, nourishing it with its wealth of meaning and its deep mysteries. The spirit is filled with dread even while it is stirred; the canker of pride swollen by learning is miraculously healed. But if anyone who imagines that he has a smattering of knowledge indulges in too close an inquiry, he will find his intellectual powers overcome and his whole mind reduced to subjection. How humbled he will be at her words, constrained to say: ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is mighty and I cannot attain to it.’ What sweetness marks her opening words! See how she begins her song: ‘My beloved is mine and I am his!’ Her words seem simple, and their sound is sweet. We shall consider this after a while.

2. She begins with love, and goes on to speak of the beloved, declaring that she knows no other than the beloved. Of whom she speaks is clear, but not to whom. We cannot suppose that she is speaking to the Bridegroom, since he is not present. That is not in question, for she appears to be calling him back to her, crying ‘Return, my beloved.’ Hence we cannot but believe that when he had ended his words he withdrew again, according to his custom, yet she continued to speak of him who was never absent from her. Thus it was; he was still on her lips and had not left her heart nor ever would. The words which came from her mouth came from her heart, and it was from the fullness of her heart that she spoke. Therefore it is of the beloved she speaks, she who is herself beloved and truly to be loved, since she loved much. We ask to whom she speaks, for we know of whom. There is no answer, unless perhaps she speaks with her handmaidens, who cannot leave their mistress while the Bridegroom is away.

‘Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.’

I think it better to suppose she is speaking to herself, not to another, especially as her words appear abrupt and disconnected, insufficient to communicate knowledge to the hearer, which is the chief object of conversation. 'My beloved is mine and I am his.' Nothing more? The words hover - no, they do not hover, they fall. The hearer is left in suspense; he receives no communication, but his interest is aroused.

3. What is this that she says: 'He is mine and I am his'? We do not know what she says, because we do not know what she feels. O holy soul, what is your beloved to you? What are you to him? What is this intimate relationship, this pledge given and received? He is yours, you in turn are his. But are you to him what he is to you, or is there some difference? If you will, speak to us, to our understanding, tell us clearly what you feel. How long will you keep us in expectation? Is your secret to be for you alone? It is thus: it is the affectus, not the intellect, which has spoken., and it is not for the intellect to grasp. What then is the reason for these words? There is none, except that the Bride is transported with delight and enraptured by the long awaited words of the Bridegroom, and when words ceased she could neither keep silence nor yet express what she felt. Nor did she speak thus to express her feelings but merely to break her silence. 'Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaks,' but not in the same measure. The affectus have their own language, in which they disclose themselves even against their will. Fear has its trembling, grief its anguished groans, love its cries of delight. Are the lamentations of mourners, the sobs of those who grieve, the sighs of those in pain, the sudden frenzied screams of those in fear, the yawns of the replete - are these the result of habit? Do they constitute a reasoned discourse, a deliberate utterance, a premeditated speech? Most certainly such expressions of feeling are not produced by the processes of the mind, but by spontaneous impulses. So a strong and burning love, particularly the love of God, does not stop to consider the order, the grammar, the flow, or the number of the words it employs, when it cannot contain itself, providing it senses that it suffers no loss thereby. Sometimes it needs no words, no expression at all, being content with aspirations alone. Thus it is that the Bride, aflame with holy love, doubtless seeking to quench a little the fire of the love she endures, gives no thought to her words or the manner of her speech, but impelled by love she does not speak clearly, but bursts out with whatever comes into her mouth. How should she not do so when she is thus refreshed and satisfied?

4. Turn again to the words of this marriage-song from its beginning to this point, and see whether in all their trysts and colloquies such tenderness has ever been shown to the Bride, and whether she has ever heard so many delightful words from his mouth. When she has satisfied her desires with good things, why should it be strange if she utters a cry rather than words; or, if she seems to form words, that they should be inarticulate, not polished or well-chosen. The Bride thinks it no robbery to take to herself the words of the Prophet: 'My heart has belched a goodly theme,' since she is filled with the same spirit.

'My beloved is mine, and I am his'. There is no conclusion here, no prayer. What is there? It is a belch. Why should you look to find connected prayers or solemn declarations in a belch? What rules or regulations do you impose upon yours? They do not admit of your control, or wait for you to compose them, nor do they consult your leisure or convenience. They burst forth from within, without your will or knowledge, torn from you rather than uttered. But a belch gives out an odor, sometimes good, sometimes bad, according to the quality of the vessel they come from. Now a good man out of his good treasure brings forth good things, and an evil man evil things! The Bride of my Lord is a vessel of good things, and the odor which comes from her is sweet.

5. I thank you, Lord Jesus, who have deigned to allow me at least to sense that odor. Yes, Lord, for the dogs eat the crumbs which come from the rich man's table. The breath of your beloved is to me a goodly odor, and I receive of its fullness gratefully, in however small measure. For it causes the memory of your abundant sweetness to arise in me, and I find the ineffable sweetness of your condescending love in this saying: 'My beloved is mine and I am his.' Let her feast and rejoice in your sight, and delight in your joy. Let her be beside herself for you that she may be sober for us. Let her be filled with the good things of your house, and drink of the river of your pleasure. But, I beg, let but a light fragrance from her abundance come to me, a poor man. Moses belched for my profit and there is a goodly fragrance from his belching about the power of creation. 'In the beginning', he said, 'God created heaven and earth.' Isaiah uttered profitable words for me, for he gave forth the sweet fragrance of mercy and redemption, when he belched: 'He has poured out his soul unto death; he was numbered with the transgressors; he himself bore the sins of many and made intercession for the transgressors, that they shall not perish.' What smells of mercy like that? Good also is the word which comes from the mouth of Jeremiah, and good that which came from David, who said 'My heart has belched a goodly theme.' They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and their belching's filled all things with goodness. Do you ask for Jeremiah's belch? I have not forgotten; I was building up to it. 'It is good that a man should wait in silence for the salvation of God.' It is his, I am not making a mistake. Breathe it in; the sweetness it exudes is that of one who rewards justice, sweeter than balsam. He chooses that I should suffer for righteousness' sake and wait for my reward hereafter. I shall not receive it now, because the reward of justice is salvation, not as the world knows it, but the salvation of God. 'Though the vision tarry, wait for it,' he says, and adds, so that you will not murmur, 'it is good to wait in silence.' Therefore I shall do what he commands; I shall wait for the Lord my Savior.

11. See that foolish bride, the Synagogue, who took no account of the justice of God, that is the grace of the Bridegroom, but chose to set up her own, owing no allegiance to the justice of God. Therefore the unhappy bride was put away, and it is no longer she who is the Bride, but the Church, to whom is said: 'I have betrothed you to myself in faith, in judgment and justice, in mercy and pity. For you have not chosen me but I have chosen you; not for any merits that I found in you did I choose you, but I went before you. Thus have I betrothed you to myself in faith, not in the works of the law; in justice indeed, but the justice which is of faith, not of the law. Now you may give right judgment between us, the judgment in which I betrothed you to myself, whereby it is established that it is not your merits which mediate between us, but my pleasure. This is the judgment, that you do not extol your merits or uphold the works of the law, or bear the burden and heat of the day, but rather be known as betrothed in faith, in the justice which is of faith, in mercy and pity.'

12. She who is the true Bride acknowledges this, and recognizes each grace - first that which is first because it goes before, then that which follows. Therefore she says first: 'My beloved is mine and I am his', ascribing to the Beloved the beginning; then she follows with: 'I am my beloved's and he is mine,' conceding to him equally the end. Now let us observe that she says 'My beloved is mine'. If we may supply, as I suggested before, 'inclines himself to me' - as the Prophet says, 'I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined unto me'. I find in that word something far from insignificant, something of considerable importance. But you are tired of listening. I must not inflict on you a subject which needs all your attention. If it does not incommode you, I will defer it, but only for a little. Tomorrow I will begin with it. Only pray that we may be preserved meanwhile from all disturbance by the mercy of the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

10. But it is the Bride who speaks more directly, for she does not pretend to any merit, but mentions first the kindness she has received, acknowledging that the grace of the Beloved goes before her. She does well. For 'who has first given a gift to him, and been recompensed by him?' Now hear John's reflections on this: 'In this is love', he says, 'not that we loved God, but that he first loved us.' And even though the Prophet is silent about the grace that precedes, he does beyond all doubt speak about that which follows. Now listen in another passage to an even dearer statement on this subject: 'Your mercy; will follow me all the days of my life.' And there is an equally emphatic statement about prevenient [grace] : 'My God, his mercy shall go before me', and again to the Lord [he says] : 'Let your mercies speedily go before us, for we have been brought very low.'

A little later the Bride uses the same words again, unless I am mistaken, but not in the same order. With exquisite subtlety, she follows the order of the Prophet and says: 'I am my Beloved's and he is mine.' Why this? Surely that she may show herself more full of grace when she surrenders wholly to grace, attributing to him both the beginning and the ending. How indeed could she be full of grace if there were any part of her which did not itself spring from grace? There is no way for grace to enter, if [a sense of] merit has taken residence in the soul. A full acknowledgment of grace then is a sign of the fullness of grace. Indeed if the soul possesses anything of its own, to that extent grace must give place to it; whatever you impute to merit you steal from grace. I want nothing to do with the sort of merit which excludes grace. I shrink from whatever I possess, that I may truly possess myself, unless that which makes me my own is to some extent my own. Grace restores me to myself, freely justified, and thus sets me free from the bondage of sin. For where the Spirit is, there is liberty.

6. But I am a sinner, and a long road still awaits me; for salvation is far from the wicked. Yet I will not murmur; until then I shall console myself with its fragrance. The righteous shall rejoice in the Lord, tasting and knowing what I only perceive by its fragrance. He whom the righteous sees face to face, the sinner awaits; and the waiting is fragrance. 'For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the revelation of the sons of God.' And to see is to taste, and to know how gracious the Lord is.

Perhaps it is instead the righteous man who awaits it, and the blessed who possesses it. The hope of the righteous is joy, but a sinner has nothing to hope for. Therefore, because the sinner is not only attached to the good things of this present world, but is also satisfied with them, he does not set his hope on the future and is deaf to this call. 'Wait', said the Lord, 'wait for the day of my rising that is to come.' Simeon was righteous because he waited in hope and already knew the fragrance of Christ in his spirit, though he did not yet adore him in the flesh; and blessed was he in his expectation, and through the fragrance of his expectation, and through the fragrance of expectation he came to the taste of contemplation. Then he said: 'Mine eyes have seen thy salvation.' Abraham was righteous, waiting to see the day of the Lord, and he was not disappointed of his hope, for he saw it and rejoiced. The Apostles were righteous, to whom it was said, 'You yourselves are like men who wait for their Lord.'

7. Was David not righteous when he said 'I waited patiently for the Lord'? He is the fourth of those whose utterances I have mentioned. I had almost passed him by. But that would not be right. He opened his mouth and drew in his breath, and when he was fulfilled he not only belched but also sang. Good Jesus! With what sweetness he suffused my nostrils and my ears when he belched and sang of the oil of gladness with which God anointed him above his fellows, and of 'myrrh and aloes and cassia from your vestments, from the ivory palaces, with which the king's daughters have honored you and made you glad'. If only you would count me worthy of meeting such a prophet, such a friend of yours in the day of solemn gladness, when he comes forth from your chamber, singing his marriage-song in joyful psalmody with the harp, shedding abroad his delights, scattering and strewing everywhere every powdery pigment. In that day, in that hour - if there is an hour then, and it may be not even an hour, but half an hour, according to the words of Scripture: 'There was silence in heaven for about the space of half-an-hour' - in that hour my mouth shall be filled with joy and my tongue with gladness, for I shall sense the fragrance of every Psalm, not merely of every Psalm, but of every Psalm, every verse, every belch, more fragrant than any perfume. What is more fragrant than the belch of John, who makes sweet for me the eternal generation and divinity of the Word? What shall I say about Paul's belches, how they have filled the world with sweetness? Now the sweet savor of Christ is everywhere. Although he does not allow me to hear the ineffable words, yet truly he bids me desire them, and I may freely catch the fragrance of what I may not hear. For some unknown reason, what is hidden is most desirable, and we long most strongly for what is denied us.

But now notice how it is the same with the Bride: how, like Paul in the passage we are considering, she does not reveal her secret, nor yet leave it without mention, for she is pleased to give us some satisfaction, allowed us to catch the fragrance of the mystery which through our unworthiness or weakness she sees we are not fit to taste.

8. 'My beloved is mine, and I am his.' There is no doubt that in this passage a shared love blazes up, but a love in which one of them experiences the highest felicity, while the other shows marvelous condescension. This is no betrothal or union of equals here. Who could lay claim to any clear knowledge of the nature of this token of love in which she glories, bestowed upon her and repaid again by her? Who indeed, except one worthy himself of a like experience, being pure in soul and holy in body? Its reality is in the affections; it is not to be attained by reason but by affections by conformity. How few there are who can say: 'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from glory into glory, even by the Spirit of the Lord.'

9. Now let us put these words into some form which can be grasped by the intellect. The Bride's own secret must be preserved, for we may not yet attain to it, being what we are. Let us therefore consider something better suited to our common sense and of a more familiar nature, something which derives from her words and gives understanding to the simple. I think it should satisfy our blunted and untutored understanding if we take the words 'My beloved is mine' to mean, 'inclines', so the meaning is: 'My beloved inclines to me, and I to him.' I am not the only one to suggest this meaning, nor the first, for the Prophet before me said: 'I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined to me.' You note clearly the way in which the Lord inclines to the Prophet, and the Prophet to the Lord, when he says, 'I waited patiently', for he who waits inclines towards the one for whom he waits, and to wait for anyone is to incline towards him. Thus the meaning of the words, and even the words themselves, are the same as those of the Bride, but their order is reversed, so that what he puts first she puts last, and vice versa.