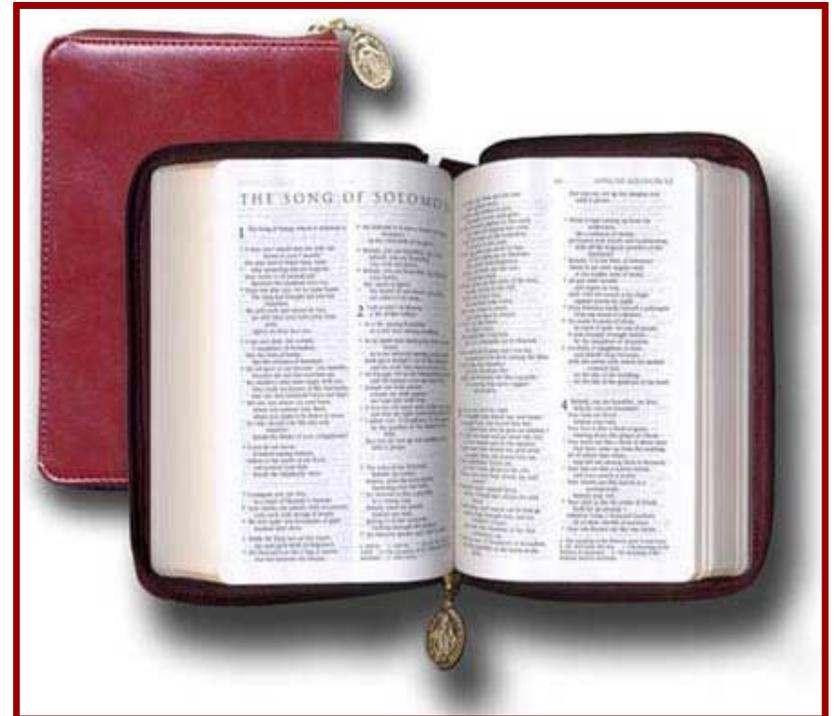




SONG OF SONGS—15

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE CHURCH OF CHRIST
AND
THE JEWS***

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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 Church of Christ and the Jews

"God is renowned in Judah, his name is great in Israel." The pagan people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, a light that shone in Judah and Israel, and filled them with longing to draw near and be enlightened. Those who once were not a people at all would now be formed into a people, and the two, converging like walls, would be joined as one by the one corner-stone. This union's fruit is peace. For confidence was imparted in the very utterance of the invitation already proclaimed: "Rejoice, pagans, with his people." Hence their desire to draw near; but the synagogue stood in their way, insisting that a church gathered from among the pagans would be both unclean and unworthy, taunting them as idolaters of the lowest type, blinded by the darkness of ignorance. "By what right do you come here?" the Jews challenged. "Do not touch me." "Why?" asked the pagans. "Is God the God of the Jews alone and not of the pagans too? And though it be true that we have no right, he is not lacking in tender mercy. Surely he is not merely just? He must be merciful too. O Lord, deal with me tenderly and I shall live; your mercies are manifold; give me life according to that justice of yours that can be gentle as mercy itself." What will the just and merciful Lord do when he discovers the Jews boasting of the law and flattering themselves on their own righteousness, blind to their need for mercy and scorning the pagans who feel that need? The pagans on the other hand, in their consciousness of sin, admit their unworthiness, and implore mercy rather than judgment. What, I ask, will the judge do, that judge in whom judgment and mercy are so equally immanent that neither precedes the other? What can be more fitting than that he should deal with each according to their dispositions, judgment for the one, mercy for the other? If the Jew wants judgment, let him have it; and let the pagans give due honor to God for his mercy. And the judgment is this, that those who despise God's loving righteousness and make self-righteousness their norm, merit censure rather than approval; left to their own righteousness they are fettered, not liberated.

The Words of Christ

"I HAVE TOLD YOU ALREADY, YOU WILL DIE IN YOUR SINS."

2. The Jews' position is a consequence of the law, which has never led anyone to perfection; it is a burden which neither they nor their ancestors were strong enough to support. But the synagogue is stubborn, and looks with disdain on the easy yoke and the light burden. It is in good health, it has no need of a doctor, of the grace of the Spirit. It puts its trust in the law: let the law give it what freedom it can. But no law has yet been made that could impart life; rather does it kill, for the written letters bring death. Hence the words of Christ: "I have told you already, you will die in your sins." And this, O Synagogue, is the judgment you have demanded. Blind and quarrelsome, you will be abandoned to your error until the whole pagan world that your pride has spurned and your envy obstructed, shall have entered the fold and bowed to the God who is renowned in Judah, whose name is great in Israel. It is for judgment that he has come into this world, so that those without sight may see and those with sight turn blind. Yet this will not be total blindness, for the Lord will not entirely reject his people, but will reserve for himself survivors such as the Apostles and the multitude of believers who in heart and mind are one. He will not cast them off forever, a remnant will be saved. Mindful of his mercy he will come again to the aid of Israel his servant, so that mercy may still accompany judgment even where it finds no occasion for exercise. For if the Jews were dealt with according to their deserts there would be judgment without mercy to those who had not themselves been merciful.

Judah possesses in abundance the oil of the knowledge of God, but like a miser keeps it bottled up for his own benefit. Though I intercede with him he shows no compassion, he will not lend. For himself alone the worship of God, for himself alone the knowledge of God, the custody of God's great name. Far from being zealous for his own welfare, he is jealous of me.

3. You therefore, since you are my Lord, must take up my cause, that your great name may be still more glorious, the jars of oil be multiplied still. Let it increase, let it brim over, let it be poured out and diffused in rivulets among the pagans, that every man may experience the salvation of God. Why should the ingrate Jew demand that all the oil of salvation be confined to the beard of Aaron? The source of this oil is not the beard but the head, and the head exists not merely for the beard but for the whole body. The downward flow touches first the beard but not exclusively. For all that comes from above is transmitted to the members further down. Let them descend then, these supernal unguents, down upon the breasts of the Church, who with great eagerness does not disdain to wring them from the beard till she is totally bedewed with grace. Nor does she prove ungrateful, for she proclaims: "your name is oil poured out." But let it run still further down till it reaches the very hem of her garment, even me the last of all and the least worthy, yet a part, nevertheless; of that garment. For I, a little one in: Christ, by the very right of love crave these graces from the Church's maternal breasts. And if some man, roused to envy at the sight of your goodness, should grumble at your generosity, you, O Lord, must be my security; from you let my judgment come, not from the haughty Israel. Indeed you must speak too in your own defense and tell the calumniator -- because you are calumniated for bestowing gifts gratuitously -- tell him: "I choose to pay the last-comer as much as I pay you." The Pharisee objects to this. Why does he grumble? My claim rests on the will of the judge, the most just assessment of merit that there is, and the richest source of reward. Is he not free to act according to his will? The mercy that he bestows on me does not injure you in the slightest. "Take what belongs to you and go." If it be his will to save such as I, what loss is that to you?

8. This is plainly Israel's witness of praise to the name of the Lord, not indeed the Israel that lives by the law of the flesh, but he that lives by the law of the Spirit. For how could the carnal Israel utter such words? It is not that he has no oil, but that it is not poured out. He has it but keeps it hidden; he has it in his Scriptures but not in his heart. In the sight of men he clings to the letter of the law; he clutches in his hand a jar that is full but sealed, nor will he open it and be anointed. It is within you, deep within, that the Spirit's unction is poured out: open and be anointed and you will no longer be a rebellious house. Why store oil in jars and never apply it to your limbs? Of what use to ponder over your books on the name of our holy Savior if you exclude his love from your lives You have the oil: pour it out and experience its threefold power. The Jew scorns these monitions but you will listen to them. I wish now to tell you what I have so far left unmentioned: why the name of the Bridegroom is compared to oil. There are three reasons. But because he is called by many names, since that which is adequate to him is known to none -- for it is ineffable -- we must first invoke the Holy Spirit that he may be pleased to reveal to us that one name above all others on which he wishes us to concentrate in this instance, for he has given no written indication of it. This topic however must wait for another time. For even if I now knew all I should need to know, even if you should not feel oppressed nor I wearied, the hour-glass indicates the end. Hold fast to all that I have drawn to your attention, for tomorrow I shall not repeat it. The job I have undertaken, the task in hand, is to explain why the Bridegroom's name is compared to oil, and what this name is. And since I may not trust in my own powers for what I am to say, prayers must be offered that the Bridegroom himself, Jesus Christ, our Lord, may reveal it to us by his Spirit. To him all honor and glory for ever and ever." Amen.

7. But let us return to the words of the bride and listen attentively to what she says, that we may learn to relish what she relishes. I have already said that the bride is the Church. She it is to whom much has been forgiven because she loves much. Hence, when her rival hurls recriminations at her, she turns them to her own advantage. Hence too we find her more gentle under correction, more patient under trial; hence the ardor in her love, the wisdom in her decisions; the humility in her self-knowledge, the attractiveness in her modesty; she is prompt to obey, sincere and thoughtful in offering thanks. Finally, while the Jews, as we have said, murmur even when calling to mind their own merits, their endurance through the burden of the day and the heat, the Church remembers only the favor received and says: "Your name is oil poured out."

4. Over-rate your merits as you please, and boast of your labors -- the mercy of the Lord is better than life itself. I confess that I have not borne the burden of the day and the heat; it is the will of the Father that my yoke should be easy and my burden light. I work for scarcely an hour; and if longer, I do not notice it because of love. Let the Jew rely on his own strength; I am free to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do. This is how I make good what I lose in time and work. The Jew places his trust in the text of a covenant, I in God's good pleasure; nor shall my trust be reputed as folly, because his will is a spring of life. That will reconciles the Father to me, restores my inheritance with immense liberality, with music, songs and feasting, with the resounding joys of a whole family in celebration. If that elder brother of mine becomes indignant and chooses to eat a kid outside with his friends rather than the fatted calf in my company in my Father's house, he shall have his answer: "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found." The Jews still make merry outside with their friends the demons, who are pleased to see them swallowing down the insipid kid of their own sinfulness, to see them stowing it away, foolishly concealing it in their sluggish stomach. Meantime they despise the justice of God, and with the purpose of substituting their own, declare themselves free of sin, free of the need to kill the fatted calf, because in their own eyes they are made clean and just by the works of the law. But when the evil of the written letter that brings death is torn in two at the death of the crucified Word, the Church, led by the Spirit of liberty, daringly penetrates to his inmost depths, acknowledges and takes delight in him, occupies the place of her rival to become his bride, to enjoy the embraces of his newly-emptied arms. In the fire of her spirit, clinging to the Lord Christ who distills and pours on her whole being the oil of gladness in a measure not given to her companions, she says: "Your name is oil poured out." What wonder if she be anointed, since she embraces him who is the Anointed One?

5. Therefore the Church reclines within, but only the Church of the perfect during the present time. We too, however, have grounds for hope. Imperfect though we be, let us rest outside the doors, rejoicing in hope. Meantime the bride and Groom are within by themselves, enjoying the mystery of their mutual embraces, safe from the jarring turmoil of carnal desires, from the restless intrusion of sensible images. But the bevy of bridesmaids, who cannot as yet overcome the giddiness of youth, must wait outside. Let them wait with confidence for the fulfillment of those words they have so often read: "The virgins in her train are led into the king, her ladies-in-waiting follow." And that each may know of what spirit she is, I mean by virgins those who committed themselves to Christ before they could be stained by sinful love. Persevering steadily in this union, they are all the more happy the earlier they made choice of him. Those called ladies-in-waiting, however, are the ones who, once conformed to this world by shamefully prostituting themselves on the full tide of carnal lust to the princes of this world, whose law was lustful desire, are now at last filled with the shame that urges them to rid themselves of that deformity and to hasten to put on the form of the new man with a sincerity all the greater the more late the decision. Both classes make progress, they grow neither weak nor weary, though still far from feeling the urge to exclaim: "Your name is oil poured out." Neither have they the courage to address the Bridegroom directly. Yet if they make the effort to follow more exactly the footsteps of the bride, they will find delight in the odor at least of the overflowing oil, and so be inspired with the desire to strive for more excellent ends.

6. I am not ashamed to admit that very often I myself, especially in the early days of my conversion, experienced coldness and hardness of heart, while deep in my being I sought for him whom I longed to love. I could not yet love him since I had not yet really found him; at best my love was less than it should have been, and for that very reason I sought to increase it, for I would not have sought him if I did not already love him in some degree. I sought him therefore that in him my numbed and languid spirit might find warmth and repose, for nowhere could I find a friend to help me, whose love would thaw the wintry cold that chilled my inward being, and bring back again the feeling of spring-like bliss and spiritual delight. But my languor and weariness only increased, my soul melted away for sorrow, even to the verge of despair. All I could do was repeat softly to myself: "Who can stand before his cold?" Then, at times when I least expected, at the word or even the sight of a good and holy man, at the memory of a dead or absent friend, he set his wind blowing and the waters flowing, and my tears were my food day and night. How can I explain this? Only by ascribing it to the odor from the oil that anointed the friend in question. For me there was no anointing, but rather the experience that came by another's mediation. And so, though made happy by this favor, I was also embarrassed and humiliated: it was a mere puff of perfumed air, not the dewy sprinkling for which I longed. Given only the pleasure of its odor and not of its touch, I saw myself as unworthy of him to whom God himself would communicate his sweetest joys. And even now, if a similar experience should happen to me, I eagerly grasp at the proffered gift, I am grateful for it, even though I feel sad beyond words that I have not won it by my own merits, that despite my urgent request it has not passed directly from his hand to mine. I feel ashamed that the remembrance of human goodness should affect me more powerfully than the thought of God. In these straits I cry out with a groan: "When shall I come and behold the face of God?" Many of you too, I feel, have had similar experiences, and have them even still. In what light then must we view them? I hold that through them our pride is shown up, our humility guarded, brotherly love fostered and good desires aroused. One and the same food is medicine for the sick and nourishment for the convalescent; it gives strength to the weak and pleasure to the strong. One and the same food cures sickness, preserves health, builds up the body, titillates the palate.