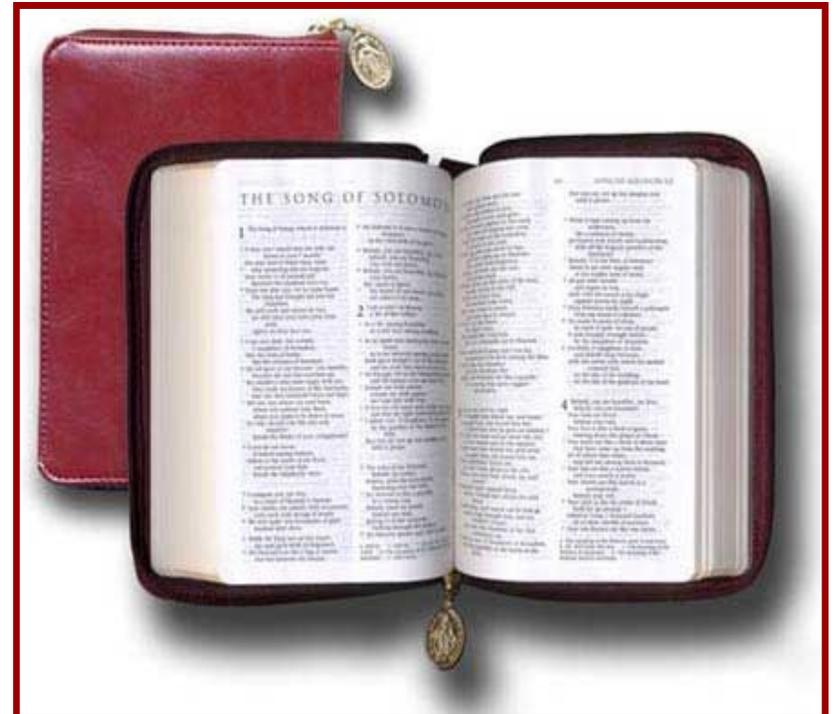


SONG OF SONGS—44

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE SUFFERINGS
OF CHRIST***

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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 take 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 Sufferings of Christ

"My beloved is to me a little bundle of myrrh that lies between my breasts." Recently he was king, now he is the beloved; recently he was on his royal couch, now he lies between the breasts of the bride. This illustrates the great power of humility, to which the God of majesty will so gladly yield. In a moment reverence has given way to friendship, and he who seemed so distant has been quickly brought close. "My Beloved is to me a little bundle of myrrh." Because myrrh is a bitter herb it symbolizes the burdensome harshness of afflictions. Foreseeing that the service of her beloved makes them inevitable, she speaks with a sense of gladness, trusting that she will undergo them all with courage. "The disciples left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus." Hence she refers to the beloved by the diminutive endearment, "bunch," not bundle, to indicate that the love she bore him would make light of imminent hardship and pain. How apt the word bunch, for he is born to us an infant. Apt, too, in another sense, because "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." What today is a bunch of myrrh will become one future day an immense profusion of glory. A bunch surely, if its yoke is easy and its burden light. Not that it is of its nature light - there was nothing light about the cruel passion or the bitter death —only the lover finds it light. Hence she does not say: "My Beloved is a bunch of myrrh;" but rather he is a bunch of myrrh "to me," because I love. That is why she calls him "beloved," to show that the power of love can prove superior to all the miseries of suffering for "love is strong as death." As proof, too, that she does not glory in herself but in the Lord, that she does not presume on her own strength but on his, she says that he will lie between her breasts. To him she sings with safety: "Even though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death I will not fear evil because you are with me."

“Let your mercies come to Me that I may live.”

5. Dear brothers, you too must gather this delectable bunch for yourselves, you must place it in the very center of your bosom where it will protect all the avenues to your heart. Let it abide between your breasts. Always make sure it is not behind you on your shoulders, but ahead of you where your eyes can see it, for if you bear it without smelling it the burden will weigh you down and the fragrance will not lift you up. Be mindful that this is the Christ that Simeon took in his arms; whom Mary bore in her womb, fostered in her lap, and like a bride placed between her breasts. And not to leave anything out, he was present too in the prophetic words of Zechariah and of many others. And I can imagine how Mary's husband Joseph would often take him on his knees and smile as he played with him. For all these people he was to the fore, not behind. They are an example for you, do as they did. If you carry him where your eyes can rest on him you will find that the sight of his afflictions will make your burdens lighter, helped as you will be by him who is the Church's Bridegroom, God blessed for ever. Amen.

2. I remember saying in one of my previous sermons that the breasts of the bride signified a sharing in joy and a sympathy in suffering, like the Pauline prescription to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep. And because her life swings between extremes of good fortune and bad, with peril lurking on both sides, she wants to find her beloved midway between these breasts, so that fortified against both by his unceasing protection, she may not be proud in prosperity nor depressed in sorrow. You too, if you are wise, will imitate the prudence of the bride, and never permit even for an hour that this precious bunch of myrrh should be removed from your bosom. Preserve without fail the memory of all those bitter things he endured for you, persevere in meditating on him and you in turn will be able to say: "My beloved is to me a little bunch of myrrh that lies between my breasts."

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 44

3. As for me, dear brothers, from the early days of my conversion, conscious of my grave lack of merits, I made sure to gather for myself this little bunch of myrrh and place it between my breasts. It was culled from all the anxious hours and bitter experiences of my Lord; first from the privations of his infancy, then from the hardships he endured in preaching, the fatigues of his journeys, the long watches in prayer, the temptations when he fasted, his tears of compassion, the heckling when he addressed the people, and finally the dangers from traitors in the brotherhood, the insults, the spitting, the blows, the mockery, the scorn, the nails and similar torments that are multiplied in the Gospels, like trees in the forest, and all for the salvation of our race. Among the teeming little branches of this perfumed myrrh I feel we must not forget the myrrh which he drank upon the cross and used for his anointing at his burial. In the first of these he took upon himself the bitterness of my sins, in the second he affirmed the future incorruption of my body. As long as I live I shall proclaim the memory of the abounding goodness contained in these events; throughout eternity I shall not forget these mercies, for in them I have found life.

4. These are the mercies that King David once begged for with tears as he said: "Let your mercies come to me that I may live." And another of the saints sighed as he recalled these, and said: "The mercies of the Lord are many." What a multitude of kings and prophets desired to see, and did not! They worked hard, and I have entered into the reward of their labors. I have reaped the myrrh that they had planted. This life-giving bunch has been reserved for me; no one will take it away from me, it shall lie between my breasts.

I have said that wisdom is to be found in meditating on these truths. For me they are the source of perfect righteousness, of the fullness of knowledge, of the most efficacious graces, of abundant merits. Sometimes I draw from them a drink that is wholesomely bitter, sometimes an unction that is sweet and consoling. When I am in difficulties they bear me up, when I am happy they regulate my conduct. For anyone traveling on God's royal road, they provide safe guidance amid the joys and sorrows of this life, warding off impending evils on every side. These win me the favor of him who is the world's judge, revealing him, despite his awesome powers, as one who is gentle and humble. Though beyond the reaches of princes and filling kings with fear, he is yet not one who only forgives but even offers himself as an example to follow. Hence as you well know, these sentiments are often on my lips, and God knows they are always in my heart. They are a familiar theme in my writings, as is evident. This is my philosophy, one more refined and interior, to know Jesus and him crucified. I do not ask, as the bride did, where he takes his rest at noon, because my joy is to hold him fast where he lies between my breasts.

I do not ask where he rests at noon for I see him on the cross as my Savior. What she desired is the more sublime, what I experience is the more sweet. Her portion was bread that satisfies the hunger of children, mine is the milk that fills the breasts of mothers; therefore I shall keep it between my breasts.