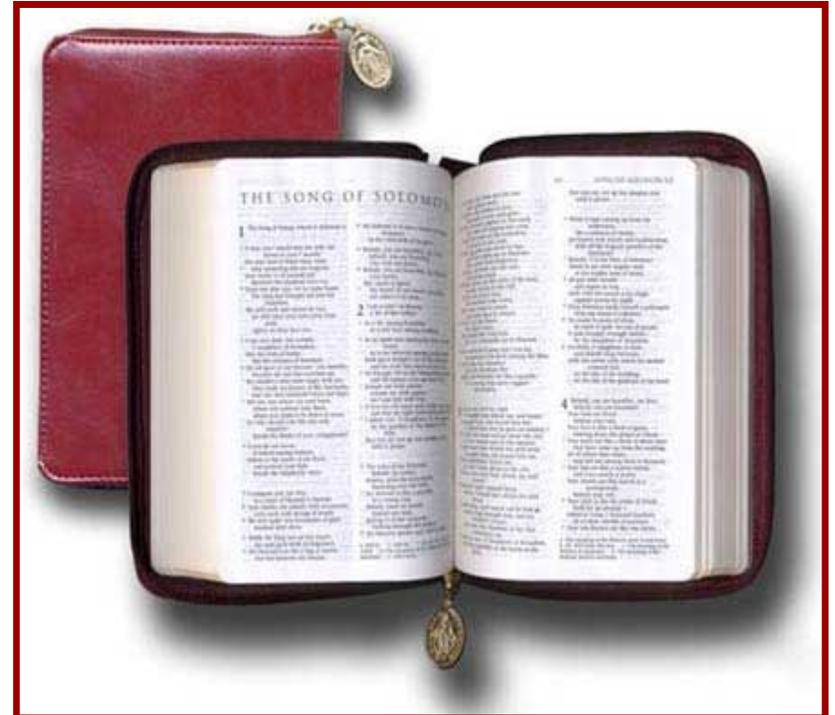




SONG OF SONGS—64

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE VINEYARD
WHICH THE
FOXES DESTROY***

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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 Vineyard Which the Foxes Destroy

'Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines; for our vine has flowered.' Obviously the trip to the vineyard was no waste of time, since foxes were discovered there destroying it. That is what the literal meaning says. But what is the spiritual? First of all we must totally reject in our interpretation the common and familiar meaning of the text as absurd and insipid and clearly unworthy of inclusion in holy and authentic Scripture. One may, of course, be so stupid, so mentally dull, as to think he is getting an important lesson here, like one of this world's children, on how to care for earthly possessions, to protect and defend his vineyard against the incursions of wild animals, lest he forfeit the enjoyment of the wine, in which is debauchery, while labor and expense are wasted. A mighty loss indeed, if we are to read the holy book with such great care, such veneration that we may learn from it to guard our vineyard against foxes, for fear we should have vainly emptied our purses for its cultivation by being remiss in caring for it. You are not so cloddish, so devoid of spiritual grace, as to understand it in this carnal fashion. Let us therefore look for the spiritual meaning. We do indeed find there, by sound understanding and worthy sense, both flowering vines and destructive foxes, in whose capture and removal we shall be profitably and becomingly employed. Can you doubt that souls must be guarded with far greater vigilance than crops, that far more watchfulness is required in warding off the spiritual forces of evil than in catching cunning little foxes?

Do you see how nothing is in vain for the wise man?

**His discourse, his thoughts, his manner of life,
his whole conduct,
is it not all God's farm, God's building,
the vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth?**

6. That parable is for our times. Do you see these novices? They came recently, they were converted recently. We cannot say of them that 'our vineyard has flowered': it is flowering. What you see appear in them at the moment is the blossom; the time of fruiting has not yet come. Their new way of life, their recent adoption of a better life - these are blossoms. They have assumed a disciplined appearance, a proper deportment in their whole body. What can be seen of them is pleasing, I admit: One notices less attention to painstaking care of the body and of dress; they speak less, their faces are more cheerful, their looks more modest, their movements more correct. But since these are new beginnings, the flowers must be judged by their very novelty, and a promise of fruits rather than the fruits themselves. For you, my young sons, I do not fear the cunning of the foxes, who are known to hunger for the fruits, not for the blossoms. The threat to you is from elsewhere. What I dread for the blossoms is not theft but blight from the cold. The north wind is unwelcome to me, and the morning frosts that are wont to destroy the early blossoms and deprive us of fruit. Hence any harm to you threatens from the north. 'Who will endure the cold?' If this cold once penetrates the soul when (as so often happens) the soul is neglectful and the spirit asleep and if no one (God forbid) is there to curb it, then it reaches into the soul's interior, descends to the depths of the heart and the recesses of the mind, paralyzes the affections, obstructs the paths of counsel, unsteadies the light of judgment, fetters the liberty of the spirit, and soon - as appears to bodies sick with fever - a rigor of the mind takes over: vigor slackens, energies grow languid, repugnance for austerity increases, fear of poverty disquiets, the soul shrivels, grace is withdrawn, time means boredom, reason is lulled to sleep, the spirit is quenched, the fresh fervor wanes away, a fastidious lukewarmness weighs down, brotherly love grows cold, pleasure attracts, security is a trap, old habits return. Can I say more? The law is cheated, justice is rejected, what is right is outlawed, the fear of the Lord is abandoned. Shamelessness finally gets free rein. There comes that rash leap, so dishonorable, so disgraceful, so full of ignominy and confusion; a leap from the heights into the abyss, from the court-yard to the dung-heap, from the throne to the sewer, from heaven to the mud, from the cloister to the world, from paradise to hell. Now is not the time to reveal the source and origin of this plague, or the skills by which to avoid it, or the power by which it may be overcome; there is another place for that. Now let us pursue what we began with.

7. We turn back our discussion to those who are more advanced and more stable, to the vineyard which has already flowered, whose flowers need no longer fear the cold, but whose fruits are not safe from the foxes. One must say more plainly what the spiritual significance of these foxes is, why they are called small, especially why they are ordered to be caught and not driven away or, killed. And the various kinds of these animals must be introduced, that by knowing them better listeners may be on their guard - not however in this sermon so I do not weary you, and so that the freshness of our devotion may be preserved in the grace and praise of the glory of the Church's great Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 64

2. It is up to me now to explain the spiritual meaning of the vines and foxes. It will be your job, my sons, for you, each of you to provide for his own vineyard, when he apprehends from my words the situations and dangers he must be especially wary of. To a wise man the vineyard means his life, his soul, his conscience. And the wise man will tolerate nothing in himself that is uncultivated or gone to waste. Not so the fool: with him you will find everything neglected, everything lying about, everything filthy and un-cared for. The fool has no vines. How can there be a vineyard where there is no sign of planting, no sign of cultivation anywhere? The fool's whole life bristles with briars and thistles - some vineyard! There may once have been one but there no longer is, reduced as it is to a wilderness. Where is the vine of virtue? Where the grapes of good works? Where the wine of spiritual gladness? 'I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man without sense,' it says, 'and lo, it was all overgrown with thorns, the ground was covered with nettles, and the stone wall was broken down.' You are hearing the wise man mock at the fool because, by neglecting the endowments of nature and the gifts of grace which he had received in the cleansing water of rebirth, he has reduced his very own first vineyard (which God, not man, had planted) to something that is no vineyard. Besides, there can be no vineyard where there is no life. The fool may be alive, but to me it is death rather than life. How can life exist with barrenness? Isn't a withered and barren tree considered dead? Strewn branches are also dead. 'He killed their vines with hail', said [the psalmist], showing that those condemned to barrenness are deprived of life. And so the fool, since he lives to no purpose, is dead even as he lives.

3. Only of the wise man, who possesses life, can it then be said that he has, or better, is, a vineyard. He is a fruitful tree in God's house, and because of this living wood. Indeed the very wisdom through which a man is, and is called, wise, is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. Why should he who lays hold of her not live? He does live, but by faith. The wise man is a just man, and the just man lives by faith. And if the soul of the just man is the abode of wisdom, then he who is just is wise. Therefore whether you call him just or wise, he never lives without a vineyard because he is never otherwise than alive. His life is his vineyard. And the just man's vineyard is good, or rather the just man is a good vineyard; his virtue is like the vine, his deeds like the branches, his wine the witness of his conscience, his tongue the wine-press. The one thing we are proud of, said [St Paul], is the witness of our conscience. Do you see how nothing is in vain for the wise man? His discourse, his thoughts, his manner of life, his whole conduct, is it not all God's farm, God's building, the vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth? Can any of it be lost to him, when its leaves do not fade?

4. On the other hand, such a vineyard is never free from infestation and infiltrations. For 'where goods abound, nibblers abound'. The wise man will be no less concerned to guard his vineyard than to cultivate it, he will not allow it to be a prey to foxes. The worst fox is the hidden slanderer, but just as bad is the smooth-tongued sycophant. A wise person will beware of these. He will strive, as much as he can, to catch those who do such things, but to catch them by kindness and courtesies, by wholesome advice and by praying to God for them. He will not cease to heap coals of fire on the head of the maligner, on the head of the sycophant until - if possible - he banishes envy from the heart of the one, hypocrisy from that of the other, fulfilling the command of the Bridegroom: 'Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines.' Surely someone caught with cheeks all red, and blushing his own judgment, will seem to you a witness to his own undoing and penitence, either because of his hate for a person so deserving of love or because he loved in words or talk alone one by whom, he realized too late, he was loved in deed and in truth? Caught obviously he is, and caught for the Lord according to his distinct command: 'catch [them] for us'. Would that I could catch all who oppose me without cause, and either restore them to or acquire them for Christ! Yes, 'shame and disgrace be on those who seek my life; may those who wish me evil retreat in dismay'! But let me be found submissive to the Bridegroom, that I too may catch the foxes, not for me but for him. But let us go back to where we began that our exposition may proceed with due sequence.

5. 'Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines.' This text has a moral import, and taking it in a moral sense we have already shown that these spiritual vineyards signify spiritual men within whom all things are cultivated, all things, are germinating, bearing fruit and bringing forth the spirit of salvation. What was said of the kingdom of God we can equally say of these vineyards of the Lord of hosts - that they are within us. We read in the Gospel that the kingdom will be given to a people who will produce its fruits. St Paul enumerates these: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, forbearance, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity.' These fruits indicate our progress. They are pleasing to the Bridegroom because he takes care of us. Is God concerned about bushes? The Man-God loves men, not trees, and counts our progress as his own fruits. Unflaggingly he watches for their season, smiles when they appear, and anxiously strives that we should not lose them when they do appear; or rather that he should not lose them, for we are as dear to him as he is. With foresight then he orders that the cunning little foxes be caught for him, lest they pilfer the immature fruits: 'Catch us the little foxes,' he says, 'that destroy the vines.' And if someone were to object: 'Your fears are premature - the time of fruiting has not yet come', he answers: 'it is not so, already "our vineyard has flowered".' Between flowers and fruit there is no delay: while the flowers are falling the fruits are budding forth, they begin to show at once.