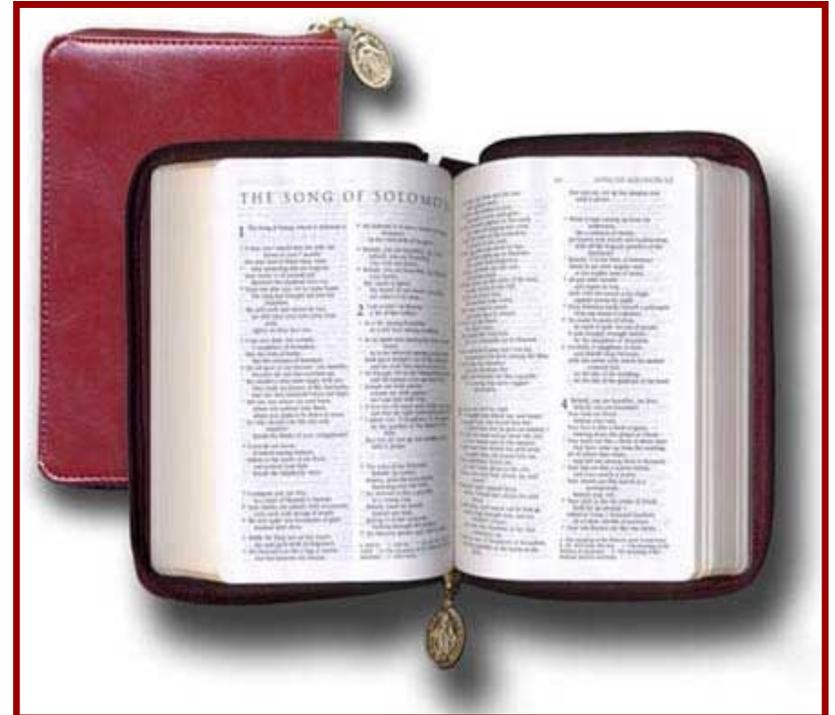




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SONG OF SONGS—17

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***MEANING OF
THE NUMBER "7"
AND***

THE QUALITIES OF TRUE CONFESSION

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.

Meaning of the Number "7" and the Qualities of True Confession

What then does that number seven mean? I wonder if anyone among us is so ingenuous as to think that those yawnings of the boy were devoid of import, their number fortuitous. I for one do not consider the Prophet's actions meaningless when he stretched himself on top of the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes to his eyes, and his hands on his hands. These deeds were done and described under the Holy Spirit's guidance chiefly for the instruction of people who have succumbed to their own corrupt passions, who have been taught to play the fool by the wisdom of this world. "For a perishable body presses down the soul, and this tent of clay weighs down the teeming mind." So no one should be surprised or annoyed if I spend some time in minute scrutiny of these matters, for in them the Holy Spirit has stored his treasures; I know that by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. And I must warn those present whose agile minds outstrip my thoughts, and in every sermon anticipate the end almost before they have grasped the beginning, that I am obliged to adapt myself primarily to minds that are less keen. But my purpose is not so much to explain words as to move hearts. I must both draw the water and offer it as a drink, a work that I shall not accomplish by a spate of rapid comments but by careful examination and frequent exhortation. I had indeed hoped that the discussion of the mystical sense of our text would not have detained us so long. I actually thought that one sermon would suffice, and that passing quickly through that shadowy wood where allegories lurk unseen, we should arrive, after perhaps one day's journey, on the open plain of moral truths. We did not succeed. We have already been two days traveling and the end has yet to be reached. Looking into the distance a man can see the tops of trees and the mountain peaks; but his eye cannot range over the great glens beneath them, nor pierce the pathless thickets. For example, was it possible for me to have foreseen a reference to Elisha's miracle, that suddenly sprang to my mind as I discussed the call of the pagans and the rejection of the Jews? And now that we have come upon it we must linger over it for a while, and later return to what we have left aside, for that too is food for our souls. Hunters and hounds sometimes abandon the quarry they have raised, and pursue another unexpectedly encountered.

***But if shame proves slow in accomplishing what it ought,
then let fear be summoned to aid us.
Let it be aroused and spur us on.***

O Wisdom, sweetly powerful and powerfully sweet, with what skill of healing in wine and oil do you restore my soul's health. Powerfully for me and sweet to me. You deploy your strength from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things sweetly, driving off all hostile powers and cherishing the weak. Heal me, Lord, and I shall really be healed, I shall sing praise to your name and cry out: "Your name is oil poured out. Not wine poured out—for I do not wish to be put on trial—but oil, for you crown me with love and tenderness. Oil by all means, for since it floats above all other liquids with which it mixes, it clearly designates a name that is above all names. Name utterly dear, utterly sweet! O Name renowned, predestined, sublime and exalted above all forever. This is truly the oil that makes a man's face shine, that anoints the head of the man who fasts, causing him to ignore the oil of sinners. This is the new Name which the mouth of the Lord has conferred, the Name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." Not the Jews only, but all who call on that name will be saved, for it has been poured out without limit. This was the Father's gift to the Son, the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord, Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS —17

It adds strength to my confidence to think that the great Prophet, mighty in work and word, came down from heaven's high mountain to visit me who am but dust and ashes, pitying me in my spiritual death, stretching himself upon me as I lay prone, diminishing his stature to be equal to my littleness, sharing with my blindness the light of his own eyes, freeing my dumbness with the kiss of his mouth, and bracing my weak hands with the touch of his own. To linger amid these truths is my delight; my heart is enlarged, my whole inward being is enriched, my very bones vibrate with praise. He performed this work once for the human race as a whole, but daily each one of us may experience it in ourselves, when the light of understanding floods our heart, when helpful words grace our speech, when good deeds flow from our hands. By his grace we can think what is true, we can express it to advantage, we can live it with efficacy. Here you are provided with a durable three-ply cord for drawing souls out of the devil's prison, and towing them after you into the kingdom of heaven; if you think rightly, if you speak worthily, and if you confirm what you say by your life. Covering my eyes with his own he adorned my interior faculties with the twin lights of faith and understanding. joining his mouth to this dead mouth of mine, he gave the kiss of peace, for while we were yet sinners and dead to righteousness, he reconciled us to God. Setting his mouth to mine he breathed into it a second time the breath of life, but this time a holier life; for at first he created me a living being, then re-made me a life-giving spirit. As he placed his hands on mine I was imbued with the power of doing good, with the grace of obedience. He certainly showed how strong his hands can be, that he might train my hands for war and my fingers for battle.

The child yawned seven times. One yawn would have sufficed to manifest the extraordinary miracle, but this multiplicity allied to the eminent character of the number seven, warns us of mystery. First of all, if you regard the whole human race as one huge dead corpse, you may see in every land the Church springing up in the life received from the recumbent body of the prophet and opening her mouth seven times to perform her seven-fold daily praise. Then, turning your gaze on yourself, you will know that you live a spiritual life and satisfy the demands of this mystical number if you control your five senses by the twofold law of charity; if, as the Apostle says, you put your bodies at the service of righteousness for your sanctification, as once you put them at the service of vice and immorality; or again, if while putting these five senses to work for your neighbor's salvation, you complete the number seven by these two, praise of the mercy and of the justice of God.

But I have still another interpretation for these seven yawnings; they are seven experiences without which a man cannot be sure that the renewal of his spiritual life is true and efficacious. Four pertain to the feeling of sorrow for sin, three to oral confession. If you are alive, if you can speak and feel, you must be aware of these experiences in yourself. For you will know that you have fully regained your power of awareness if you perceive your conscience to be stung by a fourfold compunction, by two kinds of shame and by two kinds of fear. Later on I shall speak of the three kinds of confession that raise our lives to the perfection implied by the number seven. Did not Jeremiah, for instance, produce four lamentations?

You too should follow this Prophet's example in lamenting your own sins. Think of God as your creator, think of him as your benefactor, your father, your lord. You have sinned against each of these titles to your loyalty, be sorry for them one by one. The first and last should arouse your fear, the second and third your shame. One is not afraid of the Father, because he is a father. A father's instinctive attitude is to spare and to be merciful. And if he does strike it is with a light rod, not with a heavy staff; and when he strikes he heals. It is the Father's voice that says: "When I have struck it is I who heal." There is no reason to be afraid of a father, for although there are times when he does use the rod, it is always to correct, never for revenge. To think that I have offended the Father certainly gives ground for shame, but not for fear. Not by the impulse of carnal intercourse, as by my earthly father, was I begotten, but by God's will, by his word of truth. And for me thus begotten he did not spare his only-begotten Son. He revealed himself to me as a true father, but I did not respond in turn as a son. With what effrontery then do I, bad son that I have been, dare look on the face of so good a father? I am filled with shame for conduct so unworthy of my lineage, ashamed of my ignoble life in presence of so great a father. Dissolve in streams of tears, O eyes of mine; let blushes suffuse my cheeks, shame cover them like a cloud. Let my life be worn out with sorrow, my years with sighs. O shame! What harvest have I gathered from deeds that now humiliate me? If I have sown in the flesh, from the flesh I shall reap only corruption; if in the world -- both it and its lusts pass away. Unhappy madman that I was, I did not blush to prefer things perishable and vain, mere dreams, things destined to be lost, to the love and honor of my eternal Father. I am confounded, doubly confounded to hear him say: "If I am a Father, where is my honor?"

When these conditions are fulfilled both in your sorrow and your confession, when you are thus assured of life, you become certain that Jesus, who produced these divinely willed effects in you, was called by no empty name; it was not in vain that he followed after the staff he had sent in advance. He did not come in vain because he did not come empty. How could he have been empty in whom the fullness of divine life dwelt? Nor was the Holy Spirit given to him by measure. He came too when the fullness of time had come. All of which indicate that he was full in every sense. And truly filled, since the Father had anointed him with the oil of gladness above his fellows; he anointed and sent him to us full of grace and truth. He was anointed that he might anoint others. All who merited to receive of his fullness have been anointed by him. Hence he could say: "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord." He came, as you have heard, to medicate our wounds and to soothe our pains; therefore he came as one anointed, meek and humble and full of mercy for all who call upon him. He knew he was coming down to those who were sick, and he appeared to them as the one they needed. Because their infirmities were manifold he showed his competence by bringing with him medicines of all kinds. He brought "a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and piety, and a spirit of fear of the Lord."

These are so many vials filled with medicines prepared by this physician from heaven, to heal the wounds of the unfortunate man who fell into the hands of robbers. They are seven in number, very apt for producing the seven yawnings of which we have been speaking. These vials contained the spirit that gives life. From them he poured oil upon my wounds; wine too but in smaller measure. In doing this he adapted himself to my weakness, that mercy might triumph over judgment, just as oil rests on top of wine in a vessel. So he took five measures of oil with him, but only two of wine. Fear and strength are symbolized by the wine; the other five, because of their soothing effects, are represented by the oil. In the spirit of strength, like a hero fighting-mad with wine, he descended into Sheol, breaking bronze gates open and smashing iron bars, to bind up the strong man and free those held in prison. He descended too in the spirit of fear, not afraid but inspiring fear.

It must also be guileless. If you are guilty beware of the device of excusing your intention, a thing that is hidden from men's eyes; and do not make light of a fault that is grave; nor ascribe it to another person's influence, since no one is compelled to do what his will disapproves. The first of these maneuvers is not a confession but a defense; instead of placating, it provokes. The second reveals ingratitude; the more one lessens the fault the more one diminishes the glory of him who forgives it. A favor is bestowed less willingly when it is felt that the recipient will offer but a paltry thanks for what he deems unnecessary. One who devalues the gift is liable to forfeit the pardon that he needs; and the person who, in confession, attempts to minimize his guilt, finds himself in that situation. The example of Adam warns us about the third ruse: he did not deny his guilt, yet he failed to obtain pardon, doubtless because he would make Eve a sharer in his guilt. To involve another in the crime of which you are accused is a form of excuse. The prophet David teaches that this desire to excuse oneself when reprehended, is not merely fruitless but even fraught with danger. He describes excuses for sins as wicked words, and begs and beseeches God to preserve his heart from so great a fault. And rightly so. A man who excuses himself sins against his own interests by rejecting the medicine of forgiveness; with his own mouth he cuts himself off from life. What greater wickedness is there than to take up arms against your own salvation; to stab yourself with the sword-point of your own tongue? If a man is mean to himself, to whom will he be good?"

You must confess your sins in the spirit of faith, that you may confess them with the hope that does not doubt of pardon; to do otherwise would be to condemn rather than justify yourself. Both Judas who betrayed the Lord, and Cain who murdered his own brother, admitted their sin, but without hope of pardon. Judas said: "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood;" Cain's words were: "My sin is too great to be pardoned." Though they admitted the truth of their sin, their confession was fruitless because faithless. These three qualities of confession, along with the four previously ascribed to compunction, complete the number seven.

But as well as being my Father, he has overwhelmed me with favors, countless favors that repeatedly bear witness against me: the daily nourishment of my body, the prolonged gift of time, and above all the blood of his beloved Son that cries out to him from the earth. I blush for my ingratitude. To add to my confusion I stand convicted of returning evil for good and hatred for love. But I need fear my benefactor no more than I need fear my Father. For he is a genuine benefactor who showers down his gifts abundantly and never reproaches. There is no reproach on account of the gifts, because they are gifts; and his favors were bestowed upon me, not sold. And finally, these gifts are irrevocable. But the more I appreciate his kindness, the more I am compelled to recognize my unworthiness. Be ashamed and grieve, O my soul, for though it becomes him not to utter reproaches nor revoke his gifts, it is entirely unbecoming for us to remain ungrateful and forgetful. Alas! even now what return shall I make to Him for all His goodness to me?

But if shame proves slow in accomplishing what it ought, then let fear be summoned to aid us. Let it be aroused and spur us on.

Forget for a while the loving titles of Benefactor and Father, and turn to names of harsher import. Read that he who is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, is also the Lord God of revenge, God the judge, righteous and strong," terrible his deeds among men, a jealous God. For you he is Father and Benefactor, for himself he is Lord and Creator, since as Scripture says: "The Lord has made everything for himself." If therefore he defends and preserves for you what is yours, will he not ultimately be concerned too for what is his? Will he not demand the honor due to his authority? That is why the wicked man has angered God; he said in his heart: "He will not demand it" And what does he mean by saying in his heart: "He will not demand it," except that he has no fear that he will demand it? But he will demand it to the last farthing, and repay the arrogant with interest. He will expect allegiance from the man he has redeemed, honor and worship from the creature he has made.

So then, the Father dissembles, the Benefactor forgives, but not so the Lord and Creator; he who will spare a son will not spare an imposter, a wicked servant. Consider how dreadful it is, how terrifying, to have despised your Creator, the Maker of all things, to have offended so majestic a Lord. Majesty and sovereignty inspire fear especially the majesty and sovereignty of God. If human laws impose the death penalty on one guilty of treason against the head of the State, what will be the fate of those who spurn God's omnipotence? He touches the mountains and they belch forth smoke, and will a pinch of common dust, that a casual breeze can scatter forever, dare provoke his awe-inspiring majesty? He surely is to be feared who, after he has killed the body, has the power to cast into hell. I dread the thought of hell, I dread the face of the Judge in whose presence even the angels are filled with fear. Terror unnerves me at the thought of the Almighty's anger, the fury in his countenance, the crash of a world tumbling to ruin, the immense fires and uncontrollable storm, and above it all the Archangel's menacing trumpet, and the voice of him who destroys. I am terrified of the fangs of the monster of hell, the pit that swallows up sinners, where demons roar as they devour. I recoil in horror from the gnawing worm, the rolling fires, the smoke and sulfurous mist, the whirling storms; I recoil from the encroaching vastness of the dark. Who will turn my head into a fountain, and my eyes into a spring of tears, that I may forestall that weeping and gnashing of teeth, the unyielding shackles on hands and feet, the heavy bonds that oppress, that strangle, that burn and never consume. Why, O mother, did you bring to birth a son destined for sorrow, the prey of bitterness, the object of God's indignation, doomed to remorse without end? Why did you take upon your knees, why did you feed at your breasts a child who was born to be fuel for the fire?

There is no doubt that the man who thinks like this has recovered his senses; this twofold fear and twofold shame account for four yawnings.

The three which remain are found in oral confession, a sign that he may no longer be described as devoid of voice and sensibility, provided that the confession proceeds from a humble, guileless and trusting heart. These conditions will be fulfilled if he confesses all that pricks his conscience with humility, sincerity and trust. There are people who find their joy in doing wrong, and their delight in deceitfulness, of whom the Prophet says: "They proclaim their sin like Sodom." But of these there is no question in the present discourse, they are like the lay-folk outside our enclosure with whom we have nothing to do.

However, we do sometimes hear men who have committed themselves to religious life and wear the religious habit, shamelessly boasting as they recall their past misdeeds: the duels they fought, their cunning in literary debate or other kinds of vain display that worldlings cherish, behavior of its nature pernicious and injurious, so opposed to spiritual well-being. These are signs of a mind still worldly, and the humble habit worn by religious of this kind serves but as a cloak for their old sinfulness rather than as proof of their renewal in holiness. Some recount past vices as though to express sorrow and repentance for them, but their minds thrill with a secret pleasure, they delude themselves rather than purge their sins; but God is not mocked. Without putting off the old nature they have pretended to put on the new. The old yeast is not extruded and cast out by such a confession, it is simply fixed in its place. In the Psalmist's words: "My bones grew old while I cried out all day long." I am ashamed when I recall the audacity of monks who were utterly without shame in boasting of things they should have bewailed in sackcloth; about how, even after receiving the holy habit, they craftily outwitted their neighbor, how they cheated a brother in a business deal, how they recklessly retaliated on those who insulted or reproached them, returning evil for evil, a curse for a curse.

There is a kind of confession all the more calamitous for its subtle concealment of vanity, as when we unhesitatingly reveal our ugly or immoral behavior, not because we are humble but because we want to appear so. But to seek praise for humility is to destroy the virtue in it. The truly humble man prefers to pass unnoticed rather than have his humility extolled in public. He is happy to be overlooked; if he has any pride at all it consists in despising praise. What is more perverse, more unbecoming, than that confession, humility's guardian, should join battle on the side of pride, that you should seek to enhance your reputation by means ordained to diminish it? What a marvel of boasting! You cannot be regarded as holy unless you appear polluted by wickedness! But a confession that makes humility a sham not only fails to merit pardon, it provokes God's anger. Of what avail was it to Saul that he confessed his sin when reprimanded by Samuel? Surely it was a sinful confession since it did not wash away his guilt. For when did the Master of humility, who by his very nature is inclined to give grace to the humble, ever scorn a humble confession? It is impossible for him not to be appeased if the humility professed in words finds its source in the heart. For these reasons I have said confession should be humble.