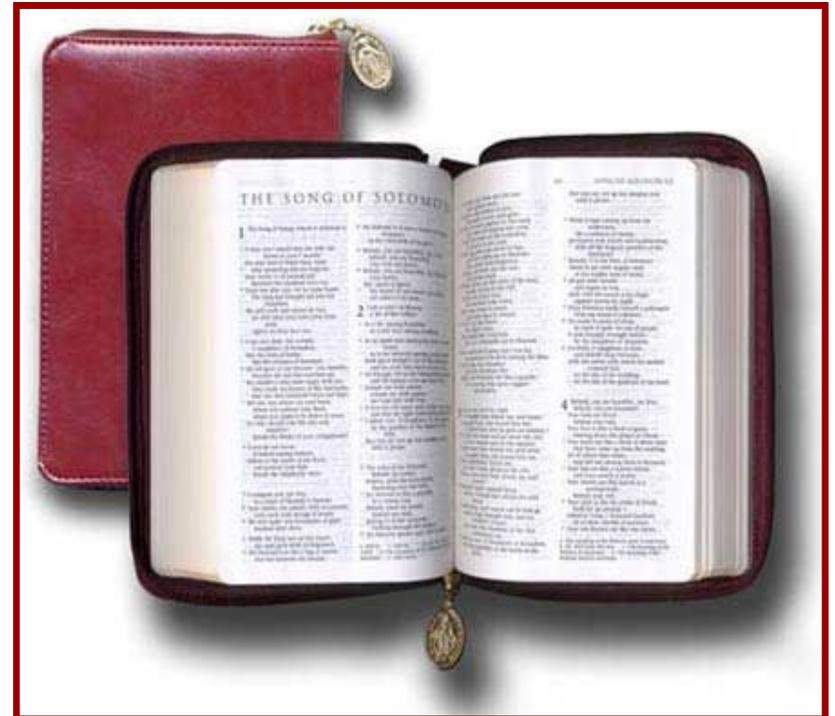




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# ***SONG OF SONGS—45***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***THE SOULS BEAUTY***

***IT'S DIALOGUE WITH THE WORD***

*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 Soul's Beauty - Its Dialogue with the Word**

“My beloved is to me a cluster of grapes of Cyprus among the vines of En-gedi.” If he is beloved, while on the myrrh-tree, how much more in the sweet cluster of grapes. My Lord Jesus dead is a myrrh-tree for me; risen, a cluster of grapes. He has given himself to me as the most wholesome of drinks, bringing tears in full measure. He died for our sins and rose for our justification, that we might die to sin and live in holiness. Hence if you have been truly sorry for your sin you have swallowed the bitter drink; but if a holier life has already refreshed you with the hope of eternal life, the bitterness of myrrh has been changed for you into the wine that gladdens man's heart. Perhaps this is the meaning to be derived from the wine mixed with myrrh offered to the Savior: he refused to drink it because he thirsted for the true wine. You too, once you have tasted the sweet wine after the bitter myrrh, may say without any presumption: “My beloved is to me a cluster of grapes of Cyprus among the vines of En-gedi.” The name En-gedi has two interpretations but both meanings can be harmonized. One meaning is “the fountain of the kid,” and this manifestly designates the baptism of the nations and the tears of the sinners. It is also called “an eye for temptation,” for along with producing tears it foresees the temptations that are never absent from man's life on this earth. The pagan peoples who lived in darkness could never of their own power perceive the traps of temptation, and therefore could not escape them until they received the light of faith as a gift from him who gives light to the blind; until they entered the Church which has the power to discern what temptation is; until they listened to the instructions of spiritual men who, enlightened by the spirit of wisdom and taught by their own experience, can truly say: we are not ignorant of the designs of the devil.”

**“You must love your neighbor as yourself”**

8. That then is the source of the oil. But whence the wine? From the cluster of grapes of Cyprus. For if you love the Lord Jesus with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, can you see him endure injuries and contempt and keep a quiet mind? Surely not. Carried away by a burning ardor for justice, "like a hero fighting-mad with wine," with the resolute zeal of Phinehas, you would say with David: "My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words;" or with the Lord: "Zeal for your house devours me." The wine then is that burning zeal pressed from the grape-cluster of Cyprus: the love of Christ - a cup that intoxicates. Again, "our God is a consuming fire," and when the Prophet feels inflamed with divine love he describes it as a fire sent from heaven into his bones. So when fraternal love gives you gentleness like oil, and divine love inspires you with zeal like wine, you may feel secure in your purpose to heal the wounds of the man who fell among brigands, you are equipped for the work of the good Samaritan. You may repeat, too, with the assurance of the bride: "My beloved is to me a cluster of grapes of Cyprus among the vines of En-gedi;" meaning that the fraternal love that I exercise, my zeal for righteousness, is the fruit of my beloved's love in me. And let me finish there. As often happens my weakness reminds me that I must cease, so that, as you know, I am frequently compelled to leave my sermons unfinished and to postpone the rest of the chapter to another day. But does it matter? I am ready for the lash, knowing that what I have suffered till now is far less than I deserve. Let him strike then, strike me as a useless workman; if the lashes can be reckoned as merits perhaps he will have mercy on the victim even when he finds in me no good worth rewarding - he who is the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 45***

2. Balsam shrubs grow in En-gedi and the natives cultivate them after the manner of vines; this is perhaps why she referred to them as vines. Otherwise what would a cluster of grapes of Cyprus be doing among the vines of En-gedi? Who ever transported bunches of grapes from one vineyard to another? When something is lacking one supplies it from another source, but not where it is present. By the vines of En-gedi therefore we may understand the peoples of the Church, which possess a liquid balsam, the spirit of gentleness, to soothe and cherish the tenderness of those who are still "babes in Christ," and to ease the sorrows of repentant sinners. So if a brother sins, let a man of the Church, who has already received this spirit, come to his assistance with all gentleness, not forgetting that he himself may be tempted. It is to typify this that the Church anoints with oil the bodies of all whom she baptizes.

3. But let us consider the man who fell into the hands of brigands and was carried by the good Samaritan to that inn which is the Church. His wounds were healed not by oil alone but by wine and oil, to show that the spiritual physician must possess the wine of fervent zeal as well as the oil of gentleness, since he is called not only to console the timid but to correct the undisciplined. For if he sees that the wounded man, the sinner, rather than improving through the exhortations so gently addressed to him, rather disregards the kindness and becomes gradually more negligent, resting more securely in his sins, then, since the soothing oils have been tried in vain, the physician must use medicines with a more pungent efficacy. He must pour in the wine of repentance, that is, accost him with severe threats and warnings, and if his persistent obduracy demands it in the circumstances, he must beat the contemptuous with the rod of ecclesiastical censure. But where is this wine to come from? In the vineyards of En-gedi one finds oil, not wine. Let him look for it therefore in Cyprus, an island that abounds with wine, the best wine; let him take from there a huge cluster of grapes such as the spies of Israel once carried on a pole between two bearers: that long procession of prophets to the forefront, the band of apostles to the rear, and in between them Jesus, beautifully prefigured by the grapes. Let him take possession of this cluster and say: "My beloved is to me a cluster of grapes of Cyprus."

4. We have seen the cluster, let us see how the wine of zeal is pressed from it. If any man, conscious of his own sins, refuses to be angry when he sees a fellowman committing an offence, but instead approaches him with a love and sympathy that comfort him like the sweetest balsam, here is something whose source we know, about which you have already heard, but perhaps without grasping its significance. What I said is, when a man reflects on his own conduct he ought to feel impelled to be gentle with all. Following the wise counsel of St Paul, he must learn to love those who are caught in habits of sin, not forgetting that he himself is open to temptation. Is it not in this very thing that love of neighbor is rooted, as the commandment reveals: "You must love your neighbor as yourself"? For it is in intimate human relationships like this that fraternal love finds its origins; the natural inbred pleasure with which a man esteems himself is the nourishing soil that gives it growth and strength. Then, influenced by grace from above, it yields the fruits of loving concern, so that a man will not think of denying to a fellowman who shares the same nature, the good that he naturally desires for himself. When the opportunity offers, let him freely and spontaneously do as the occasion demands, urged by his humane instinct. Where human nature has not been perverted by sin it possesses this choice and pleasant balsam that induces compassionate tenderness toward sinners and not an angry severity.

5. We are told in Ecclesiastes that "dying flies spoil this oil of sweetening," and since nature lacks the power within itself to restore what it has lost, it knows it has undergone a regrettable change. It finds itself in that condition of which Scripture very truly states: a man's senses and thoughts are prone to evil from his youth. One cannot commend that adolescence in which the younger son asks for a portion of the paternal estate for himself, desiring to have in his private possession goods that are more happily possessed in common, to have for himself alone the goods that common use would not have diminished but by personal use will be squandered. Thus says Scripture: "He squandered all his goods with prostitutes in a life of debauchery." Who are these prostitutes? Surely they are those desires of the flesh that destroy the oil of sweetness of which Scripture so wisely warns you when it says: "Do not follow your lusts." Wisdom properly describes them as dying, for the world and its lusts are passing away. And so when we try to find our own personal satisfaction in them, we deprive ourselves by this selfish indulgence of the good that is enjoyed in communal sharing. These foul and malodorous flies mar the beauty that nature gives us, they tear the mind with cares and anxieties, and destroy the pleasure of social intercourse. This man is called the younger son because his nature, corrupted by the lusts of thoughtless youth, has forfeited the virile energy and wisdom of mature manhood. Grown churlish in manner and barren of intellect he displays a contempt for everybody but himself and has become a man devoid of love.

6. From his earliest youth, base and miserable, a man's thoughts and imagination are prone to evil. By nature he is more prompt to dissension than to compassion. Like one who has divested himself entirely of that humanity by which he would wish others to assist him in time of need, he himself will not assist them in their need. He who bears the name of man judges, spurns, ridicules other men; the guilty one condemns the sinners, failing to consider himself lest he himself be tempted. As I have pointed out, nature can never shake off this evil by its own strength, nor regain the oil of innate kindness once it has been destroyed. But what nature cannot do, grace can. And therefore the man on whom the merciful unction of the Holy Spirit deigns to pour out again the grace of its gentleness, will be immediately restored to a truly human condition, and will obtain from grace gifts far greater than nature could bestow. In his faith and gentleness it will make him holy and will endow him with something more than oil, with balsam in the vineyards of En-gedi.

7. There is no reason to doubt that the better gifts flow from the fountain of the kid, whose sprinkling changes kids into lambs and transfers sinners from the left side to the right, so abundantly are they bedewed with the graces of mercy, so that where sin was multiplied, grace now abounds. Is he not restored to true manhood, the man who has abandoned his undisciplined worldliness and been clothed with a human gentleness that is embellished by grace: a disposition that the flies of his carnal lusts had totally destroyed? Out of this humanity that now clothes him - that is, his real self - he draws the inspiration and the insight to compassionate other men, so that he abhors as he would a barbarous rite not only the infliction on other men of things he himself would not endure, but even the omission to do for all of them all the good he would wish done for himself.