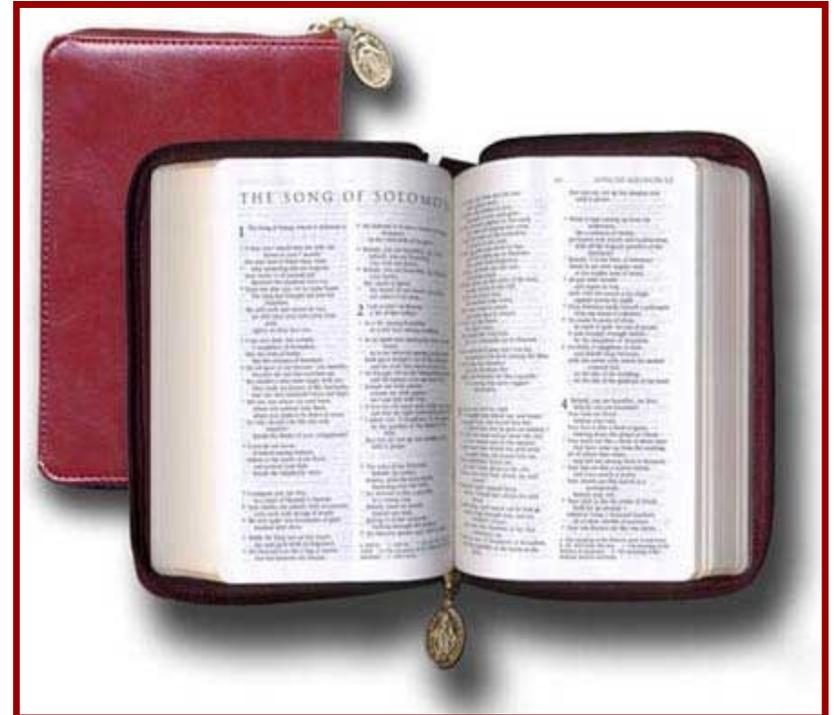




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SONG OF SONGS—39

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***IGNORANCE OF GOD
LEADS TO DESPAIR***

THE BEAUTY OF THE BRIDE

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.

Ignorance of God Leads to Despair - The Beauty of the Bride

To what then does ignorance of God lead? We must begin here, for this is where, as you will recall, we finished yesterday. What does it lead to? I have already told you: despair. Now I shall explain how. Imagine a man who decides to take stock of his way of life, who, unhappy in his sinful conduct, wants to reform and abandon his evil and carnal ways. If he does not know how good God is, how kind and gentle, how willing to pardon, will not his sensually-inspired reason argue with him and say: "What are you doing? Do you want to lose this life and the next? Your sins are too grave and too many; nothing that you do, even to stripping the skin from your flesh, can make satisfaction for them. Your constitution is delicate, you have lived softly, a lifetime's habits are not easily conquered." Dismayed by these and similar arguments, the unhappy man quits the struggle, not knowing how easily God's omnipotent goodness could overthrow all these obstacles, since he wills that no man should perish. Instead there is final impenitence, the greatest crime of all, an unforgivable blasphemy. In his agitation he is either swallowed up by excessive sadness and lost in a deep depression from which he will never have the consolation of emerging, in accord with scripture's saying that the wicked man shows only contempt when caught in the midst of evils; or he will dissimulate, flatter himself with false reasonings and, as far as in him lies, surrender irrevocably to the world, to find his pleasure and delight in what advantages it offers. But just when he believes that he has peace and security, misfortunes of all kinds will overwhelm him and he will not escape. Thus despair, the greatest evil of all, follows on ignorance of God.

**All those who lack knowledge of God
are those who refuse to turn to Him.**

**What are you afraid of, you men of little faith?
That He will not pardon your sins?**

But with His own hands He has nailed them to the cross.

5. Therefore as long as she is on earth she must cease from searching too curiously into the nature of the things of heaven, lest by intruding on God's majesty she be overwhelmed by glory. As long as she lives among women she must refrain from prying into the truths that are proper to the citizens of heaven, truths that are visible to them alone, lawful for them alone; heaven's realities are for its citizens. "The vision that you ask for, Bride of mine, is above your capacity, you are as yet unable to gaze upon that sublime noontide brightness that is my dwelling place. You have asked where I pasture my flocks, the place where I rest at noon. But to be drawn up through the clouds, to penetrate to where light is total, to plunge through seas of splendor and make your home where light is unapproachable, that is beyond the scope of an earthly life or an earthly body. That is reserved for you at the end of all things, when I shall take you, all glorious, to myself, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Do you not know that as long as you live in the body you are exiled from the light? With your beauty still incomplete how can you consider yourself fit to gaze on beauty in its totality? And why should you want to see me in my splendor, while you still do not know yourself? Because if you had a better knowledge of yourself you would know that, burdened with a perishable body, you cannot possibly lift up your eyes and fix them on this radiant light that the angels long to contemplate. The time will come when I shall reveal myself, and your beauty will be complete, just as my beauty is complete; you will be so like me that you will see me as I am. Then you will be told: "You are all fair my love, there is no flaw in you." But for now, though there is some resemblance, there is also some want of resemblance, and you must be content with an imperfect knowledge. Be aware of what you are, do not hanker after truths that are too high for you, nor for experiences beyond your power to bear. Otherwise, you do not know yourself, O beautiful among women - for ever I give you the title beautiful, but beautiful among women, with a beauty that is imperfect. When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. Therefore, "If you do not know yourself...." But the words that follow have been dealt with, and there is no need to deal with them again. I promised to put some helpful thoughts before you about the two kinds of ignorance; if I have failed to satisfy you fully, give me credit for my good-will. For I certainly have the will to do it, but the means to accomplish it I do not have, except in so far as the Church's Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ, enables me by his kindness to work for your well-being. May he be blessed for ever. Amen.

2. The Apostle says that there are some who have no knowledge of God. My opinion is that all those who lack knowledge of God are those who refuse to turn to him. I am certain that they refuse because they imagine this kindly disposed God to be harsh and severe, this merciful God to be callous and inflexible, this lovable God to be cruel and oppressive. So it is that wickedness plays false to itself, setting up for itself an image that does not represent him. What are you afraid of, you men of little faith? That he will not pardon your sins? But with his own hands he has nailed them to the cross. That you are used to soft living and your tastes are fastidious? But he is aware of our weakness. That a prolonged habit of sinning binds you like a chain? But the Lord loosens the shackles of prisoners. Or perhaps angered by the enormity and frequency of your sins he is slow to extend a helping hand? But where sin abounded, grace became superabundant. Are you worried about clothing and food and other bodily necessities so that you hesitate to give up your possessions? But he knows that you need all these things. What more can you wish? What else is there to hold you back from the way of salvation? This is what I say: you do not know God, yet you will not believe what we have heard. I should like you to believe those whom experience has taught, for "if you do not believe you will not understand." Not everyone however, has faith.

3. God forbid that we should think the bride has been admonished on the grounds of ignorance of God, for she has been gifted not merely with great knowledge of him who is both her Bridegroom and God, but with his friendship and familiar intercourse. She has enjoyed his frequent colloquies and kisses, and with a daring born of this intimacy can say to him: "Tell me where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon". It is not he that she demands to be shown, but the place where his glory dwells, although his domicile and his glory are no other than himself. But he thinks fit to reprove her on account of her presumption, and hints that she lacks self-knowledge by judging herself ready for a vision so great: in her excitement she may have overlooked that she was still living on this earth, or hoped against hope that even while still in this earthly body she could draw near to his inaccessible brightness. Hence he at once recalls her to her senses, proves her ignorance to her, and reprimands her boldness: "If you do not know yourself," he told her, "go forth." Here the Bridegroom speaks to his beloved not as a bridegroom, but with the awesome tones of a master. He is not venting his anger; his intention is to inspire the fear that purifies, that by this purification she may be made ready for the vision she longs for. It is a vision reserved for the pure of heart.

4. How aptly he describes her as beautiful, not in every sense, but beautiful among women; a qualification meant to restrain her, to enable her to know her limitations. I believe that by women he means people who are sensual and worldly, people devoid of manliness, whose conduct lacks both fortitude and constancy, people who are entirely superficial, soft and effeminate in their lives and behavior. But the person who is spiritual, although enjoying a beauty that comes from following the ways of the Spirit rather than the ways of the flesh, will still fall short of perfect beauty by the fact of living in the body. Hence the bride is not beautiful from every aspect, but beautiful among women, among people whose ideals are worldly, people who, unlike herself, are not spiritual; but not among the angels in their bliss, not among the Virtues, the Powers, the Dominations. And just as one of the Fathers was said to be a man of integrity among his contemporaries, surpassing all of his time and generation, and Tamar is shown to be righteous when compared with Judah, that is, more righteous than he, and the tax collector in the Gospel is said to have gone down from the temple at rights with God rather than the Pharisee, and even as the great John was once magnificently acclaimed as having no rival for greatness, but only among those born of women, not among the blessed choirs of heavenly spirits, so the bride is declared beautiful now, but, for the time being, among women, and not among the blessed spirits of heaven.