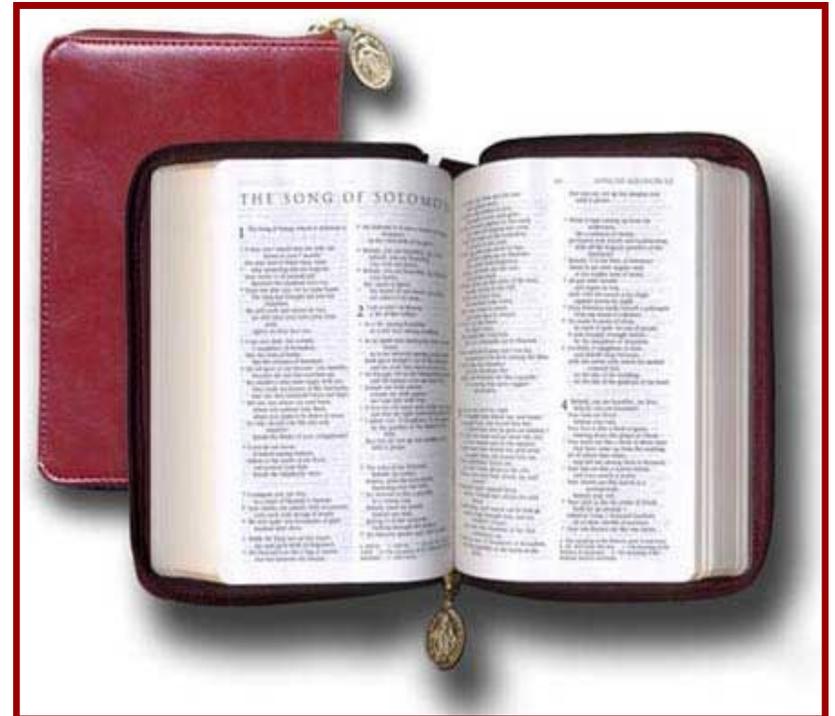




SONG OF SONGS—32

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE VARIOUS WAYS
OF SEEING GOD***

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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 Various Ways of Seeing God

"Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon?" The Word, who is the Bridegroom, often makes himself known under more than one form to those who are fervent. Why so? Doubtless because he cannot be seen yet as he is. That vision is unchanging, because the form in which he will then be seen is unchanging; for he is, and can suffer no change determined by present, past or future. Eliminate past and future, and where then is alteration or any shadow of a change? For whatever evolves out of the past and does not cease to move toward future development, passes through the instant that is the present, but one cannot say: it is. How can one say: it is, when it never remains in the same state? That alone truly is, which is neither altered from its past mode of being nor blotted out by a future mode, but "is" alone is predicated of it impregnably and unchangeably, and it remains what it is. No reference to the past can deny that it is from all eternity, nor any reference to the future that it is for all eternity. In this way it proves that it truly is, that is, it is uncreated, interminable, immutable. When he therefore who exists in this manner - who, furthermore, cannot be one moment in this form, another in that - is seen just as he is, that vision endures, as I have said, since no alteration interrupts it. This is the moment when that one denarius mentioned in the Gospel is given in the one vision that is offered to everyone who sees. For as he who is seen is immutable in himself, he is present immutably to all who contemplate him; to these there is nothing more desirable that they wish to see, nothing more enticing that they could see. Can their eager appetite, then, ever grow weary, or that sweetness ebb away, or that truth prove deceptive, or that eternity come to a close? And if both the ability and will to contemplate are prolonged eternally, what is lacking to total happiness? Those who contemplate him without ceasing are short of nothing, those whose wills are fixed on him have nothing more to desire.

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2. But this vision is not for the present life; it is reserved for the next, at least for those who can say: "We know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Even now he appears to whom he pleases, but as he pleases, not as he is. Neither sage nor saint nor prophet can or could ever see him as he is, while still in this mortal body; but whoever is found worthy will be able to do so when the body becomes immortal. Hence, though he is seen here below, it is in the form that seems good to him, not as he is. For example, take that mighty source of light, I speak of that sun which you see day after day; yet you do not see it as it is, but according as it lights up the air, or a mountain, or a wall. Nor could you see even to this extent if the light of your body, the eye, because of its natural steadiness and clearness, did not bear some degree of likeness to that light in the heavens. Since all the other members of the body lack this likeness, they are incapable of seeing the light. Even the eye itself, when troubled, cannot approach the light, because it has lost that likeness. Just as the troubled eye, then, cannot gaze on the peaceful sun because of its unlikeness, so the peaceful eye can behold it with some efficacy because of a certain likeness. If indeed it were wholly equal to it in purity, with a completely clear vision it would see it as it is, because of the complete likeness. And so when you are enlightened you can see even now the Sun of Justice that "enlightens every man who comes into this world," according to the degree of the light he gives, by which you are made somehow like him; but see him as he is you cannot, because not yet perfectly like him. That is why the Psalmist says: "Come to him and be enlightened, and your faces shall never be ashamed." That is very true, provided we are enlightened as much as we need, so that "with our unveiled faces contemplating the glory of God, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the same image, as by the spirit of the Lord."

3. Note that we must approach gently, not intrude ourselves upon him, lest the irreverent searcher of majesty be overwhelmed by glory. This approach is not a movement from place to place but from brightness to brightness, not in the body but in the spirit, as by the Spirit of the Lord; evidently by the spirit of the Lord, not by ours, although in ours. The brighter one becomes, the nearer is the end; and to be absolutely bright is to have arrived. For those thus arrived in his presence, to see him as he is means to be as he is, and not to be put to shame by any form of unlikeness. But, as I have said, this is for the next life.

In the meantime this immense variety of forms, these countless species of creatures, what are they but rays emanating from the Godhead, showing that he from whom they come truly is, but not fully explaining what he is. Hence what you see is what emanates from him, not himself. Nevertheless, though not seeing himself but what comes from him, you are made aware beyond all doubt that he exists, and that you must seek him. Grace will not be wanting to the seeker, nor ignorance excuse the negligent. All have access to this kind of vision. According to the Apostle Paul, it is common to everyone who has the use of reason: "The invisible attributes of God have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."

4. Another kind of vision is that by which in former times the Fathers were often graciously admitted to sweet communion with God, who became present to them, though they did not see him as he is but only in the form he thought fitting to assume. Nor does he appear to all in a similar manner, but as the Apostle says: "in many and various ways," still remaining one in himself, in accord with his word to Israel: "The Lord your God is one God." This manifestation, though not apparent to everybody, took place exteriorly, and consisted of images or the spoken word. But there is another form of divine contemplation, very different from the former because it takes place in the interior, when God himself is pleased to visit the soul that seeks him, provided it is committed to seeking him with all its desire and love. We are told what the sign of such a visit is, by one who experienced it. "Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries round about." The fire of holy desire ought to precede his advent to every soul whom he will visit, to burn up the rust of bad habits and so prepare a place for the Lord. The soul will know that the Lord is near when it perceives itself to be aflame with that fire, and can say as the Prophet did: "He has sent a fire from on high down into my bones, and enlightened me;" and again: "My heart became hot within me and in my meditation fire burst forth."

9. That the faith is shadowy is a blessing, it tempers the light to the eye's weakness and prepares the eye for the light; for it is written: "He cleansed their hearts by faith." Faith therefore does not quench the light but protects it. Whatever it may be that the angel sees, is preserved for me by the shadow of faith, stored up in its trusty breast, until it be revealed in due time. If you cannot yet grasp the naked truth is it not worthwhile to possess it wrapped in a veil? Our Lord's Mother herself lived in the shadow of faith, for she was told: "Blessed are you who believed." Even the body of Christ was a shadow for her, as implied in the words: "The power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow." That is no mean shadow which is formed by the power of the Most High. Assuredly there was power in the flesh of Christ that overshadowed the Virgin, since by means of the envelope of his vivifying body she was able to bear his majestic presence, and endure the unapproachable light, a thing impossible to mortal woman. That was power indeed by which every opposing might was overcome. Both the power and the shadow put the demons to flight and became a shelter for men: an invigorating power surely, a shadow radiating coolness.

10. We therefore who walk by faith live in the shadow of Christ; we are fed with his flesh as the source of our life. For Christ's flesh is real food. And perhaps for that reason he is now described here as appearing in the guise of a shepherd, when the bride addresses him as though one of the shepherds: "Tell me where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon." The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep! He gives them his life, he gives them his flesh; his life their ransom, his flesh their food. How wonderful! He is their shepherd, their food, their redemption. But this sermon is getting too long, the subject is extensive and contains great truths that cannot be explained in a few words. This necessitates that we break off rather than finish off. Since the matter is merely suspended we must keep it alive in our memories, so as to resume soon again where we have left off, and continue it with the aid of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Bridegroom, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 32

5. When the Beloved who is thus sought for pays a visit in his merciful love to the soul that is filled with longing, that prays often, even without intermission, that humiliates itself in the ardor of its desire, that soul may fittingly say with St Jeremiah: "You are good, O Lord, to those who hope in you, to the soul that seeks you." And that soul's angel, one of the friends of the Bridegroom, and by him commissioned to be the minister and witness of that secret and mutual exchange - that angel, I say, must be dancing with joy! Does he not participate in their gladness and bliss, and turning to the Lord, say: "I thank you, Lord of majesty, because 'you have granted him his heart's desire, not denied him what his lips entreated' "? He is everywhere the soul's tireless attendant, never ceasing to lure it on and guide it with constant inspirations, as he whispers: "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart;" and again: "Wait for the Lord and keep his way." Or: "If he seems slow, wait for him; he will surely come, he will not delay." Turning to the Lord, he says: " 'As a hart longs for flowing streams, so that soul longs for you, O God.' It has yearned for you in the night, and your Spirit within it watched for you from morning onwards." And again: "All the day this soul reaches out to you; grant what it wants because it is shouting after you; relent a little and show your mercy. Look down from heaven and see, and visit this desolate spirit." This loyal groomsman, watching without envy over this Interchange of love, seeks the Lord's glory rather than his own; he is the go-between for the lover and his beloved, making known the desires of one, bearing the gifts of the other. He quickens the soul's affections, he conciliates the Bridegroom. Sometimes too, though rarely, he brings them into each other's presence, either snatching her up to him, or leading him down to her: for he is a member of the household, a familiar figure in the palace, one who has no fear of being rebuffed, who daily sees the face of the Father.

6. Be careful, however, not to conclude that I see something corporeal or perceptible to the senses in this union between the Word and the soul. My opinion is that of the Apostle, who said that "he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him." I try to express with the most suitable words I can muster the ecstatic ascent of the purified mind to God, and the loving descent of God into the soul, submitting spiritual truths to spiritual men. Therefore let this union be in the spirit, because "God is a spirit," who is lovingly drawn by the beauty of that soul whom he perceives to be guided by the Spirit, and devoid of any desire to submit to the ways of the flesh, especially if he sees that it burns with love for himself.

One who is so disposed and so beloved will by no means be content either with that manifestation of the Bridegroom given to the many in the world of creatures, or to the few in visions and dreams. By a special privilege she wants to welcome him down from heaven into her inmost heart, into her deepest love; she wants to have the one she desires present to her not in bodily form but by inward infusion, not by appearing externally but by laying hold of her within. It is beyond question that the vision is all the more delightful the more inward it is, and not external. It is the Word, who penetrates without sound; who is effective though not pronounced, who wins the affections without striking on the ears. His face, though without form, is the source of form, it does not dazzle the eyes of the body but gladdens the watchful heart; its pleasure is in the gift of love and not in the color of the lover.

7. Not yet have I come round to saying that he has appeared as he is, although in this inward vision he does not reveal himself as altogether different from what he is. Neither does he make his presence continuously felt, not even to his most ardent lovers, nor in the same way to all. For the various desires of the soul it is essential that the taste of God's presence be varied too, and that the infused flavor of divine delight should titillate in manifold ways the palate of the soul that seeks him. You must already have noticed how often he changes his countenance in the course of this love-song, how he delights in transforming himself from one charming guise to another in the beloved's presence: at one moment like a bashful bridegroom maneuvering for the hidden embraces of his holy lover, for the bliss of her kisses; at another coming along like a physician with oil and ointments, because weak and tender souls still need remedies and medicines of this kind, which is why they are rather daintily described as maidens. Should anybody find fault with this, let him be told that "it is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick." Sometimes, too, he joins up as a traveler with the bride and the maidens who accompany her on the road, and lightens the hardships of the journey for the whole company by his fascinating conversation, so that when he has parted from them they ask: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?" A silver-tongued companion who, by the spell of his words and manners, persuades everyone, as if in a sweet-smelling cloud arising from the ointments, to follow him. Hence they say: "We will run after you in the odor of your ointments." At another time he comes to meet them as a wealthy father of a family "with bread enough and to spare" in his house; or again like a magnificent and powerful king, giving courage to his timid and poverty-stricken bride, stirring up her desire by showing her the ornaments of his glory, the riches of his wine-presses and storehouse, the produce of his gardens and fields, and finally introducing her into his private apartments. For "her husband's heart has confidence in her," and among all his possessions there is nothing that he thinks should be hidden from her whom he redeemed from indigence, whose fidelity he has proved, whose attractiveness wins his embraces. And so he never ceases, in one way or another, to reveal himself to the inward eye of those who seek him, thus fulfilling the promise that he made: "Be assured I am with you always, to the end of time."

8. On all these occasions he is kind and gentle, full of merciful love. In his kisses he shows that he is both loving and charming; with the oil and the ointments that he is boundlessly considerate and compassionate and forgiving; on the journey he is gay, courteous, ever gracious and ready to help; in the display of his riches and possessions he reveals a kingly liberality, a munificent generosity in the bestowal of rewards. Through the whole context of this song you will find images of this nature to delineate the Word. Hence I feel that the Prophet was thinking on these lines when he said: "Christ the Lord is a spirit before our face; under his shadow we shall live among the nations," because now we see in a mirror dimly and not yet face to face. So it will be while we live among the nations; among the angels it will be otherwise. For then we shall enjoy the very same happiness as they; even we shall see him as he is, in the form of God, no longer in shadow.

Just as we say that our ancestors possessed only shadows and images, whereas the truth itself shines on us by the grace of Christ present in the flesh, so also no one will deny that in relation to the world to come, we still live in the shadow of the truth, unless he wishes to deny what the apostle asserts: "our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect;" or when he says: "I do not reckon myself to have got hold of it yet." Why should there not be a distinction between him who walks by faith and him who walks by sight? Hence the just man lives by faith, the blessed rejoices in the vision; the holy person here below lives in the shadow of Christ, the holy angel above is glorified in the splendor of his shining countenance.