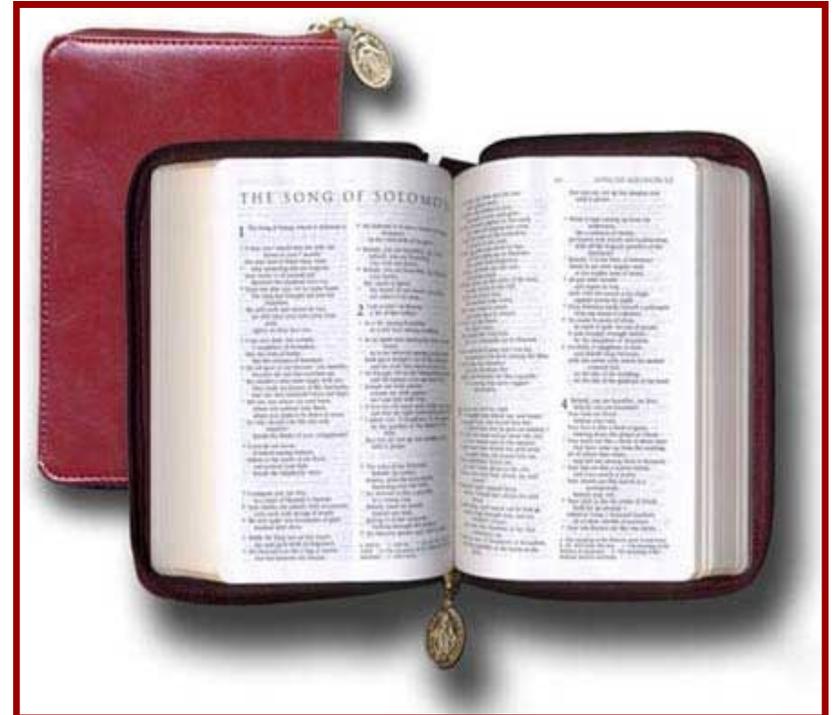




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SONG OF SONGS—11

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BREASTS
AND
THEIR PERFUMES***

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 Breasts and their Perfumes

I do not pretend that, left to myself, I can make any new discovery, for the reason that I lack sufficient depth of understanding and powers of penetration. But the mouth of Paul is a mighty and unfailing fountain, ever open to us all; and as I have often done before, so now too I draw from its resources in my attempt to interpret the breasts of the bride. "Rejoice," he said, "with those who rejoice, and be sad with those who sorrow." In these few words we find the description of a mother's affections, because she shares both health and sickness with her children. She cannot avoid being conformed to them in the depths of her being in these experiences. Therefore, following Paul's guidance, I shall assign these two affective movements to the bride's two breasts, compassion to one, joyful sympathy to the other. For if she were not prompt to rejoice with those who rejoice, and ready to be sad with those who sorrow, her breasts would still be undeveloped; she would be no more than a girl too immature to marry. Should a person devoid of these affective qualities be confided with the direction of souls, or the work of preaching, he will do no good to others and great harm to himself. How utterly shameful then, if he should intrude himself into these tasks!

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AND BE SAD WITH THOSE WHO SORROW."***

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2. But we must return to the subject of the bride's breasts, and see how the milk of one differs in kind from that of the other.

Joyful sympathy yields the milk of encouragement, compassion that of consolation, and as often as the spiritual mother receives the kiss, so often does she feel each species flowing richly from heaven into her loving heart. And you may see her unhesitatingly nourishing her little ones with the milk of these full breasts, from one the milk of consolation, from the other that of encouragement, according to the need of each. For example, if she should notice that one of those whom she begot by preaching the Good News is assailed by temptation, that he becomes emotionally disturbed, is reduced to sadness and pusillanimity and therefore no longer capable of enduring the force of the temptation, will she not condole with him, caress him, weep with him, comfort him, and bring forward every possible evidence of God's love in order to raise him from his desolate state? If, on the contrary, she discovers that he is eager, active, progressive, her joy abounds, she plies him with encouraging advice, fans the fire of his zeal, imparts the ways of perseverance, and inspires him to ever higher ideals. She becomes all things to all, mirrors in herself the emotions of all and so shows herself to be a mother to those who fail no less than to those who succeed.

3. And if I may speak of those who have undertaken the direction of souls, how many there are today who reveal their lack of the requisite qualities! Only with a feeling of pain can I speak of this subject at all - - how they melt down in the furnace of their covetousness the insults endured by Christ, the spittle, the scourging, the nails, the lance, the cross, his death itself, and squander them in the pursuit of shameful gain. The very price of the world's redemption is bundled into their purses; and only in this do they differ from Judas Iscariot, that he reckoned the total value of these things at a paltry sum of money, while they, with a more ravening greed, demand riches beyond counting. They display an insatiable passion for gains that they constantly fear to lose, and bewail after they have lost. In this love of money they find their rest, provided they are ever free from the anxiety of securing, or even further increasing, what they have acquired. Neither the peril of souls nor their salvation gives them any concern. They are certainly devoid of the maternal instinct. Grown fat, gross, bloated to excess on the heritage of the crucified Christ, "about the ruin of Joseph they do not care at all." There is no pretense about a true mother, the breasts that she displays are full for the taking. She knows how to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to be sad with those who sorrow, pressing the milk of encouragement without intermission from the breast of joyful sympathy, the milk of consolation from the breast of compassion. And with that I think we may desist from further discussion on the breasts of the bride and the milk that fills them.

4. Now I shall try to explain the nature of the ointments of which the breasts are redolent, and so I ask the aid of your prayers that I may benefit my hearers by a worthy expression of the thoughts that inspire me. Just as the breasts of the Bridegroom differ from those of the bride, so do the ointments with which they are perfumed. In the previous sermon I have indicated the place in which I hope to speak of the Bridegroom's breasts. Here we must concentrate on the ointments of the bride with an attention worthy of the scriptural eulogy that commends them not merely as good but as the best. I mention several kinds of ointments, so that given a choice, we may select the ones that seem especially appropriate to the breasts of the bride. There is the ointment of contrition, that of devotion and that of piety. The first is pungent, causing some pain; the second mitigates and soothes pain; the third heals the wound and rids the patient of the illness. And now let us discuss each of these more extensively.

10. But let us take a look at those who may rightly boast of possessing an abundance of it. "They left the presence of the Sanhedrin glad to have had the honor of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name of Jesus." They whose gentleness remained unshaken in the face both of reproaches and blows, had surely been filled from the overflowing richness of the Spirit. For they were rich in the charity that no amount of self-giving can exhaust; out of its resources they easily found what sufficed to offer up "fat holocausts." Those drenched hearts of theirs poured out at random a holy unction, with which they were more fully imbued, when they proclaimed in various languages, according as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech, the marvels of God. And surely we must believe that an abundance of these same ointments was lavished on those of whom St Paul says: "I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ. I thank him that you have been enriched in so many ways, in all speech and in all knowledge; the witness to Christ has indeed been strong among you, so that you will not be without any of the gifts of the Spirit." How I wish that I were able to offer thanks for similar graces on your behalf, that I might see you men rich in virtue, prompt to sing God's praises, overflowing with an increasing wealth of this spiritual-anointing in Christ Jesus our Lord.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 11

9. From all this we may conclude that the poor, the needy and the pusillanimous cannot prepare an ointment of this kind. Confidence alone can lay hold of its spices and ingredients, a confidence that is itself the fruit of liberty of spirit and purity of heart. The mind that is lacking in courage and of little faith, that is fettered by the scantiness of its own resources, is, through sheer indigence, deprived of the leisure that might be occupied with the praises of God or with that contemplation of his beneficence out of which praise is born. And if it does at times make a genuine attempt to scale the heights, almost at once it is pulled back to its native state by the pressing demands of domestic needs, and so by its very destitution it is forcibly confined within its own narrow limits. If you ask of me the cause of this miserable state, I shall reveal something that, unless I be mistaken, you will recognize as either present now in yourselves, or as having once been present. The weakness and misgiving exhibited by this type of person seem to me usually to arise from either of two causes, from the fact that he has been but recently converted, or because he lives in a lukewarm fashion even though converted for long years. Both of these conditions humiliate, depress, and agitate the mind, since either because of its lukewarmness or because of the recentness it perceives the old passions of the soul to be still alive and it is forced to concentrate on cutting out from the garden of the heart the briars of sinful habits and the nettles of evil desires. Such a man cannot get away from himself. How else can it be? Can he who is worn out with groaning exult at the same time in the praises of God? Isaiah talks of thanksgiving and the sound of music. In what manner will it sound in the mouth of a man given over to groaning and lamenting. It is just as the Wise Man says: "A tale out of time is like music in mourning." And of course thanksgiving is made after receiving a favor, not before. But the soul that still languishes in sadness is not enjoying a favor, rather it needs one. It has a good reason for offering prayers of petition, but scarcely a reason for returning thanks. How can it rejoice in the memory of a favor not yet received? Quite rightly then did I say that the man whose resources are poor is not called upon to prepare this ointment, for this is the work of one who can draw on the memory of divine favors. He whose gaze is held by the darkness cannot see the light. Bitterness holds him in its grip, the unpleasant recollection of his sins preoccupies his memory to the exclusion of every joyful thought. It is to souls like this that the Prophet says: "It is vain for you to rise before light." He points out that it is useless for you to aspire to the contemplation of truths that give delight, until the sins that disquiet you have been blotted out in the light of consolation. This second ointment therefore is not a product of impoverished souls.

5. A soul entangled in many sins can prepare for itself a certain ointment once it begins to reflect on its behavior, and collects its many and manifold sins, hems them together and crushes them in the mortar of its conscience. It cooks them, as it were, within a breast that boils up like a pot over the fire of repentance and sorrow, so that it can exclaim with the Prophet: "My heart became hot within me. As I mused the fire burned." Here then is one ointment which the sinful soul should provide at the beginning of its conversion and apply to its still smarting wounds, for the first sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit. And even though the sinner be poor and in want, devoid of the means to compound a better and more precious ointment, let him make sure in the meantime to prepare at least this one, no matter how degenerate the materials, because God will not scorn this crushed and broken heart. The more despicable he believes his offering to be because of his consciousness of sin, the more acceptable it will appear to God.

6. However, if we say that this invisible and spiritual ointment was symbolized by the visible ointment with which the sinful woman, as the Gospel describes, visibly anointed the corporeal feet of God, we cannot regard it as entirely worthless. For what do we read in the Gospel? "The house," it says, "was full of the scent of the ointment." It trickled from the hands of a courtesan, pouring over the feet, the body's extremities; and yet it was not so paltry, not so contemptible, as to prevent the house's being filled with the power of its aroma, the sweetness of its scent. So if we consider how great the fragrance with which the Church is perfumed in the conversion of one sinner, what a sweet smell of life leading to life each penitent can become! Provided that his repentance is wholehearted and visible to all, may we not with equal assurance say of him: "The house was full of the scent of the ointment." We can even say that this perfume of repentance reaches to the very abodes of the blessed in heaven because we have the witness of Truth itself that there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner. Rejoice then, you penitents; do not be afraid, you fainthearted ones. I am speaking to those of you who have recently come to us from the world, who have renounced your sinful ways and are inevitably gripped by the bitterness and confusion of the repentant soul that, like the pain of fresh wounds, torment and distract beyond bearing. Safely may your hands drip with the bitterness of myrrh in the course of this salutary anointing, because God will not scorn this crushed and broken spirit. This kind of anointing, that not only inspires men to amend their lives but even makes the angels dance for joy, must not be easily spurned nor cheaply priced.

7. But there is another ointment, more precious still, compounded of far superior elements. To obtain the elements of the former we do not have to travel far, we find them to hand without any trouble, and may cull them from our little gardens as often as necessity demands. For does not every man know, unless he deceives himself, that he has it within the power of his will to commit manifold sins and iniquities? But these, as you recognize, are the elements of the ointment we have just described." The spices of this second ointment, on the contrary, are not produced on our earth at all, we seek to gain them for ourselves from afar. I mean that all that is good, everything that is perfect, is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light. For this ointment is made from the gifts of God bestowed on the human race. Happy the man who makes it his business to gather these carefully for himself and keep them in mind with due thanksgiving. When they shall have been pounded and refined in the heart's receptacle with the pestle of frequent meditation, all of them fused together in the fire of holy desire, and finally enriched with the oil of gladness, you will have an ointment more excellent than the former, and far more precious. Enough proof can be found in the words of him who said: "Whoever makes thanksgiving his sacrifice honors me." No one doubts that the recalling of favors is an incentive to praise.

8. Furthermore, since the only thing that Scripture says of the former ointment is that God does not despise it, it follows that the second one, which especially glorifies him, is the more highly commended. Therefore the former is applied to the feet, the latter to the head. St Paul says: "God is the head of Christ," so in speaking of Christ we may understand the head as referring to his divinity, and it is beyond doubt that he who offers thanks anoints the head, because he makes contact with God, not man. I do not mean that he who is God is not also man, for the one Christ is both God and man; I mean that all things which are good, even those of which man is the agent; really come from God rather than man. "It is the spirit," we are told, "that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer." Hence there is a curse on the man who puts his trust in man, for although our whole hope rightly depends on God made man, it is not because he is man but because he is God. Therefore the first ointment is applied to the feet, the second to the head, because the humiliation of a broken heart fittingly corresponds to the lowliness of the flesh, and honor is owed to majesty. See then what an ointment I have been describing for you, with which he before whom even the Principalities stand in awe, does not disdain to be anointed on the head. Rather does he regard it as a matter of signal honor, for he says: "Whoever makes thanksgiving his sacrifice honors me."