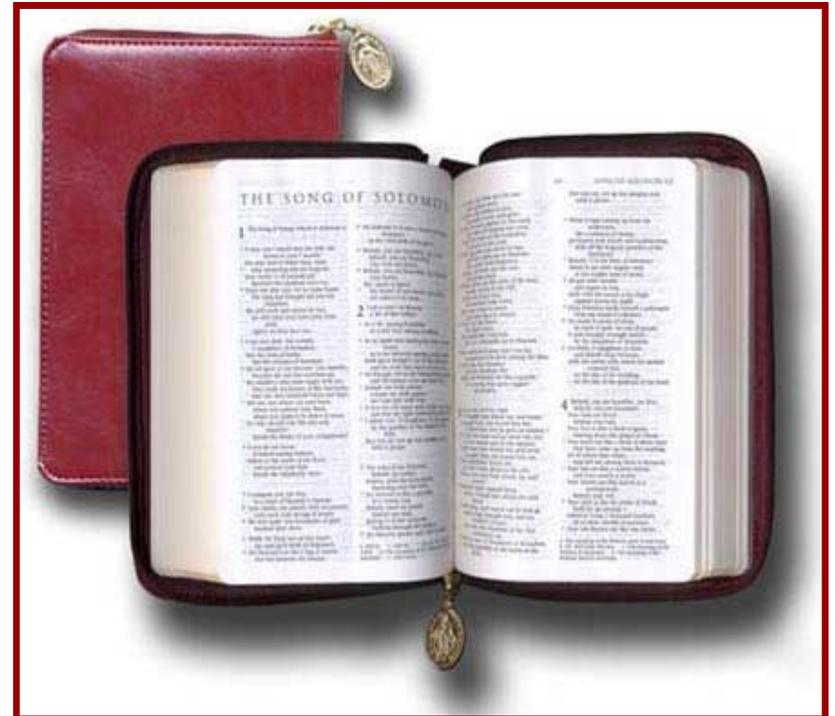




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SONG OF SONGS—87

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***IN PRAISE
OF THE
MODESTY 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.

In Praise of the Modesty of the Bride

There is no reason to ask me further why the soul should seek the Word; I have said more than enough. Let us now continue our consideration of the rest of this passage, insofar as it refers to conduct of life. First then observe the modesty of the Bride; surely nothing in human conduct can be counted lovelier. This is what I should like above all to take in my hands and pluck, like a beautiful flower, to present to all our young people -- not that it should not be held with the greatest care by everyone who is older, for the grace of modesty is an adornment to persons of all ages, but because, being tender, it shines out with greater brightness and beauty in those of tender age. What is more endearing in a young man than modesty? How lovely it is, and what a bright jewel in the life and bearing of a young man! What a true and sure indication of hope it is, the mark of a good disposition! It is the rod of discipline, chastening the affections and controlling the thoughtless actions and impulses of an age which lacks stability, and checking its arrogance. What is so far removed from evil-speaking or any kind of bad behavior? It is the sister of self-control. There is no clearer indication of dove-like simplicity, and thus it is the mark of innocence. It is the lamp which lights the unassuming mind, so that nothing dishonorable or unbecoming may attempt to dwell in it without being instantly discovered. Thus it is the destroyer of evils and the protector of its inborn purity, the particular glory of the conscience, the guardian of its reputation, the adornment of its life, the seat of virtue and its first fruits, the boast of nature and the mark of all honor. Even the blush which modesty brings to the cheeks gives grace and beauty to the countenance.

**How secretly prayer goes up in the night,
witnessed only by God
and the holy angel who receives it
to present it
at
the heavenly altar!**

2. Modesty is a quality so natural to the mind that even those who do not fear to do wrong are reluctant to let it be seen. The Lord said, 'Every man who does evil hates the light', and also, 'those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk are drunk at night'; the works of darkness which should be hidden conceal themselves in darkness. There is a difference, however, between the modesty of those who do not hesitate to commit deeds of wickedness, but are reluctant to reveal them, and that of the Bride who has no dealings with them, but rejects them and drives them away. Therefore Solomon says, 'There is a shame which brings sin, and there is a shame which is glory and grace.' The Bride seeks the Word with modesty, in her bed, at night; but this modesty brings glory, not sin. She seeks him to purify her conscience, she seeks him to obtain a testimony, so that she can say, 'This is my glory, the testimony of my conscience. In my little bed nightlong I sought him whom my soul loves.' Her modesty, you observe, is indicated both by the place and the time. What is more welcome to a modest mind than privacy? Night and her bed insures her privacy. Now when we wish to pray, we are bidden to enter our room, for the sake of privacy. This is a precaution, for if we pray when others are present, their approbation may rob our prayer of its fruit and nullify its effect. But from this injunction you may also learn modesty. What is more appropriate to modesty than the avoidance of praise or ostentation? It is clear that the Son, our teacher, has enjoined us to seek privacy when we pray, in order to promote modesty. What is so unseemly, particularly in a young man, as showing-off holiness? It is at this age that the elements of religious obedience can be best learned. Jeremiah said, 'It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth'. It is to be recommended that when you go to pray you first mention your modesty and say, 'I am small and of no importance; yet I do not forget your precepts.'

3. Anyone who wishes to pray must choose not only the right place but also the right time. A time of leisure is best and most convenient, the deep silence when others are asleep is particularly suitable, for prayer will then be freer and purer. 'Arise at the first watch of the night, and pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord, your God.' How secretly prayer goes up in the night, witnessed only by God and the holy angel who receives it to present it at the heavenly altar! How pleasing, how unclouded it is, colored with the blush of modesty! How serene, how calm, free from noise and interruption! How pure it is, how sincere, unsullied by the dust of earthly care, untouched by ostentation or human flattery! Therefore the Bride, as modest as she is cautious, when she desired to pray, that is, to seek the Word -- for they are the same -- sought the privacy of her bed at night. You will not pray aright, if in your prayers you seek anything but the Word, or seek him for the sake of anything but the Word; for in him are all things. In him is healing for your wounds, help in your need, restoration for your faults, resources for your further growth; in him is all that men should ask or desire, all they need, all that will profit them. There is no reason therefore to ask anything else of the Word, for he is all. Even if we seem sometimes to ask for material things, providing that we do so for the sake of the Word, as we should, it is not the things themselves that we are asking for, but him for whose sake we ask them. Those who habitually use all things to find the Word know this.

4. It will repay us to examine further the privacy of the bed and the time, to see if there is any hidden spiritual meaning which it will be to our advantage to reveal. If we take the bed to mean human weakness, and the darkness of night human ignorance, it follows logically that the Bride is seeking the Word, the power of God and the wisdom of God, to overcome these two ills: power to strengthen her weakness and wisdom to enlighten her ignorance. Nothing could be more fitting. But if any lingering doubt about this interpretation remains in the hearts of the simple, let them hear what the holy prophet says on this matter: 'The Lord strengthens him on his bed of sickness; it is you who make his bed in his weakness.' This is enough about the bed. Now as regards the night of ignorance, what could be clearer than what is said in another psalm: 'They have not known, they have not understood, they walk in darkness.' Does this not express perfectly the ignorance in which the whole human race was born? This is the ignorance, I think, which the blessed Apostle admits he was born in, and gives thanks that he was rescued from, when he says, 'He has snatched us from the power of darkness . Again, he says to all the elect, 'We are not children of the night or of darkness; walk as children of the light.'

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 87

Bernard of Clairvaux died in 1153,
not having completed his commentary
on the Song of Songs.