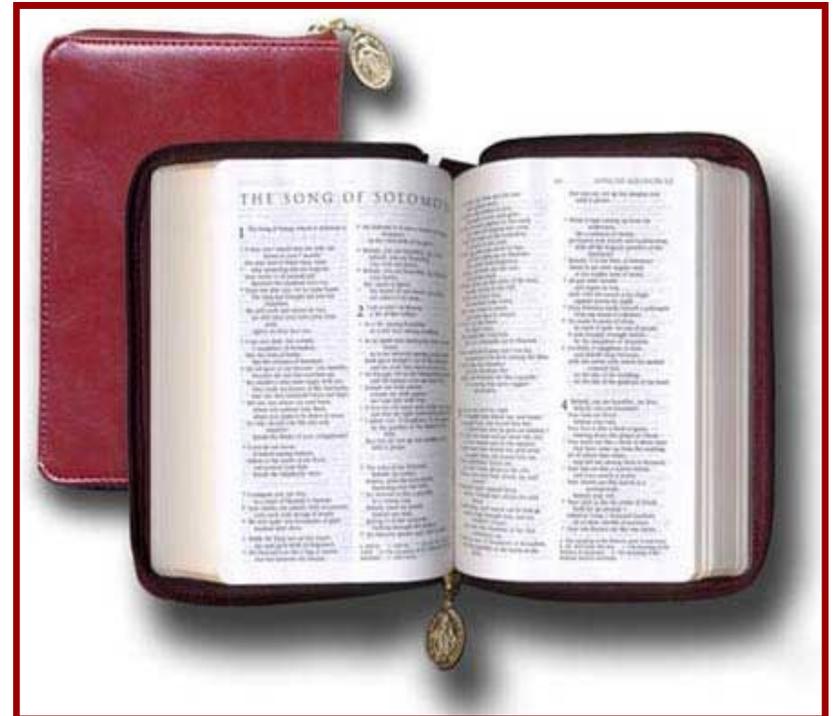




SONG OF SONGS—58

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***HE GRANTS FEAR TO SOME,
SECURITY TO OTHERS***

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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.

He Grants Fear to Some, Security to Others

'My beloved speaks to me.' Look at the ways of grace, take note of the levels of God's graciousness. Study the devotion and sagacity of the bride, with what a vigilant eye she watches for the bridegroom's coming and scrutinizes everything about him. He comes, he comes faster, he draws near, he is here, he looks about, he speaks, and not one of these details escapes the diligence or the alertness of the waiting bride. He comes in the angels, he comes faster in the patriarchs, draws near in the prophets, is here in the incarnation, looks about in his miracles, speaks in his apostles. Or again: he comes with love and desire to show mercy, he comes faster in his eagerness to help, he draws near by assuming our lowliness, he is here to his contemporaries, looks ahead to future generations, speaks by teaching and convincing men of the kingdom of God. Such is the Bridegroom's coming. The joys and gifts of salvation come with him, everything about him exudes delight, redounds with delectable and health-giving mysteries. And she who loves keeps vigil, and watches all this. Happy for her that the Lord finds her watching. He will not pass her by or ignore her, he will stand and speak to her. He will speak words of love, he will speak, indeed, as the beloved. So you have: 'And my beloved speaks to me.' Well beloved, he comes to speak words of love, not of reproach.

**'It is not the man who
commends himself
that is accepted', the apostle says,
'but the man whom the Lord commends.'**

2. Nor is she one of those who are rightly blamed by the Lord for not knowing how to judge the look of the sky while being unaware of the time of his coming. So sagacious is she, so experienced, so keenly vigilant, that she spied him coming a long way off, she heeded him leaping as he sped along, bounding over the proud, that through lowliness he might draw near to her lowly person. This she observed with the utmost watchfulness. And when he finally stopped and hid behind the wall she nevertheless recognized his presence and was acutely aware that he was looking through the windows and lattices. Now as a reward for her great devotion and holy excitement, she hears him speak. If he had looked and had not spoken she could have suspected that this look implied censure rather than love. He looked at Peter, without saying a word; perhaps he wept because He remained silent when He looked. But she, because he addressed her after looking, not only does not weep but cries out with happiness and boasts: 'my beloved speaks to me.' You see, the gaze of the Lord, though ever in itself unchanged, does not always produce the same effect. It conforms to each person's deserts, inspiring some with fear but bringing solace and security to others. For 'he looks on the earth and it trembles,' whereas he looks on Mary and fills her with grace. 'He has looked upon his lowly handmaid,' she said, 'and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed.' These are the words of a happy girl, not of one who weeps in dread. In like manner he looks at the bride, but she does not tremble or weep like Peter, for unlike him she is not earthly-minded. Instead he filled her heart with joy, revealing by his words the affection with which he looked at her.

3. Hear then the words he speaks, words surely of a lover, not of a censurer.

He says: 'Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one.' Happy the conscience which deserves to hear these words! Who among us, do you think, is so vigilant, so attentive to the time of his visitation and the Bridegroom's coming that he every moment scans every detail of his approach, so that when He comes and knocks, he opens the door to Him right away? These words are not so applied to the Church as to exclude any one of us, who together are the Church, from a share in its blessings. For in this respect we are all, universally and without distinction, called to possess the blessings as our heritage. Hence the psalmist dared to say to the Lord: 'Your testimonies are my eternal heritage, they are the joy of my heart,' a heritage, I think, by which he saw himself as a son of the Father who is in heaven. For if a son then an heir, an heir of God and a fellow heir with Christ. And he boasts that in this heritage he has acquired a great boon: the testimonies of the Lord. Would that I deserved to possess even one testimony of the Lord about myself, because the psalmist is glorying not in one but in many testimonies! He even says somewhere else: 'I delight in the way of your testimonies as much as in all riches.' And indeed what are the riches of salvation, what are the delights of the heart, what is the true and safe security of the mind except the attestations of the Lord? 'It is not the man who commends himself that is accepted', the apostle says, 'but the man whom the Lord commends.'

4. Why do we continue to defraud ourselves of these divine commendations or testimonies, and deprive ourselves of our paternal heritage? We fail to recall that he has in any way commended us, or that he has uttered any testimony in our favor, as if he had not voluntarily made us his children by the word of truth. What of what the apostle said, that the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are sons of God? How are we sons if deprived of the inheritance? Our very impoverishment surely convicts us of negligence and indifference. For if any one of us, following the wise man's word, sets his heart fully and perfectly to rise early to seek the Lord who made him, and pleads in the presence of the Most High, if he strives at the same time with all diligence, following the prophet Isaiah's advice, to prepare the ways of the Lord, to make straight the paths of our God, if he can say with the psalmist: 'My eyes are ever on the Lord', and 'I keep the Lord always before me', shall that person not receive a blessing from the Lord and mercy from God his saviour? He will be visited often, and never be unaware of the time of the visit, even though he who visits in spirit comes secretly and stealthily like a shy lover. The sober-minded soul who keeps careful watch will see him coming a long way off and will discover everything that we have shown the bride taking note of so cleverly and so clearly in the approach of her beloved, for he said: 'Those who seek me eagerly shall find me.' She will perceive the desire of the hastening lover, and will immediately be aware when he is near, and when actually present. She will detect with happy eyes the eye that gazes on her like a sun-ray piercing through the windows and lattices of the wall, and at last she will hear the voices of jubilation and in love will call out: 'my love, my dove, my beautiful one.'

11. With a certain boldness I also maintain that the soul of any one of us here, if it keeps a similar vigil, will similarly be greeted as friend, consoled as the dove, embraced as a beauty. Each person shall be counted perfect in whom these three endowments shall be seen to unite in due order and degree, so that he will know how to mourn for his sins and to rejoice in God, and at the same time possess the power to assist his neighbors. He will please God, watch out for himself, and be of service to his friends. But who is up to all of these? Please God they may be preserved down the years among us all, if not all three in each one at least singly in different persons! For we discover Martha as the Savior's friend in those who do the daily chores. We find Lazarus, the mourning dove, in the novices just now dead to their sins, who toil with fresh wounds and mourn through fear of the judgment. 'Like the slain that lie in the grave, like those you remember no more', so they amount to nothing until Christ's command removes the burden of fear that crushes them like a block of stone, and they can breathe again with the hope of pardon. We find a contemplative Mary in those who, co-operating with God's grace over a long period of time, have attained to a better and happier state. By now confident of forgiveness they no longer brood anxiously on the sad memory of their sins, but day and night they meditate on the ways of God with insatiable delight, even at times gazing with unveiled face, in unspeakable joy, on the splendor of the Bridegroom, being transformed into his likeness from splendor to splendor by the Spirit of the Lord. We shall examine in another sermon to what purpose he urges the bride to arise and make haste, he who shortly before had forbidden that she be aroused from sleep. May he himself be with us, to reveal to us the meaning of this mystery, he the Church's Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God over all things, blessed for ever.

10. But see too whether these three endowments of the one soul may be related to those three persons living in one house, the Savior's intimate friends. I refer to Martha as serving, to Mary in repose, and to Lazarus groaning beneath the stone, beseeching the grace of resurrection. These remarks are based on the skill and vigilance with which the bride observes the ways of the Bridegroom, for the time and the speed of his coming to her cannot be hidden from her. No sudden intervention can distract her from knowing when he is far off, when he is near and when he is present, and so she deserves not only to be looked upon tenderly but to be gladdened by his words of love and 'to rejoice greatly at the Bridegroom's voice'.

5. 'Shall the wise understand these words', that he may rightly distinguish and mark off each from the other, and explain them in a way that men will be able to grasp? If you expect this from me I should prefer you to hear it from an adept, from one accustomed to and experienced in these things. A person of this kind however chooses rather to hide in modest silence what he has perceived in silence, to keep his secret to himself as the safer course. But as one bound in duty to speak, one who may not be silent, I relate to you whatever I know on this subject from my own or from others' experience. Since many can easily verify it, I leave deeper truths to those competent to comprehend them. If therefore I am warned, either outwardly by some person or inwardly by the Spirit, to maintain what is righteous and uphold what is reasonable, this wholesome counsel will be to me a presage of the Bridegroom's speedy coming, a preparation for the proper reception of the heavenly visitor. The prophet tells me this when he says: 'Righteousness will go before him'; or as he says to God: 'Righteousness and justice are the preparation of your throne'. But a similar hope will gladden me if the discourse speaks of humility or patience, or of brotherly love and obedience to authority, but especially of the need to strive for holiness and peace and purity of heart, because Scripture says that 'holiness befits your house O Lord', that 'his place is in peace', and that 'the pure in heart shall see God'. Whenever I am reminded of these or any other virtues, therefore, it will mean for me, as I said, that the Lord of virtues is about to visit my soul.

6. Even if 'a good man strike or rebuke me in kindness' I shall draw a similar inference, knowing that the zeal and benevolence of a good man make a pathway for him who ascends above the downfalling sun. Happy that downfall when at the reproof of a good man his fellow is raised up and error is thrown down and the Lord ascends above it, treading it under foot to crush it lest it rise again. We must not therefore despise the good man's rebuke which destroys sin, gives healing to the heart and makes a path for God to the soul. No discourse whatsoever that promotes devotion or the virtues or moral perfection is to be heard with indifference, because that too is a way by which God's salvation is revealed. And if the discourse sounds sweet and agreeable, if antipathy is banished by eagerness to listen, then not only is the Bridegroom believed to be on the way but to be speeding, that is, coming in one's desire. His desire gives rise to yours; and because you are eager to receive his word he is hastening to enter your heart; for he first loved us, not we him. Moreover, if you listen to a fiery discourse and your conscience burns in a consequence at the memory of your sins, remember then what Scripture says of him: 'fire goes before him', and be assured that he is near. In short, 'the Lord is close to those who are brokenhearted'.

7. Yet if you are not only filled with sorrow by the discourse but totally converted to the Lord, vowing and determining to keep his just decrees, you will know again that he is present, especially if you feel yourself aglow with his love. These two things are written of him - that fire goes before him and that he himself is fire. For Moses said of him that he is a devouring fire. They differ, however, because the fire that goes before has heat but no love. It boils up but does not boil dry, it moves but does not move forward. It is sent on before only to arouse and prepare you, to make you realize what you are of yourself, that afterwards you may the more sweetly relish what God's action makes of you. The fire that is God does indeed devour but it does not debase; it burns pleasantly, devastates felicitously. It is a coal of desolating fire, but a fire that rages against vices only to produce a healing unction in the soul. Recognize therefore that the Lord is present both in the power that transforms you and in the love that sets you aglow. The Lord's right hand has shown its power. But understand that this change from God's right hand takes place only in fervor of spirit and genuine love. Then you will be a man who can say: 'My heart became hot within me, as I mused the fire burned.'

8. Furthermore, when this fire has consumed every stain of sin and the rust of evil habits, when the conscience has been cleansed and tranquillized and there follows an immediate and unaccustomed expansion of the mind, an infusion of light that illuminates the intellect to understand Scripture and comprehend the mysteries - the first given for our own satisfaction, the second for the instruction of our neighbors - all this undoubtedly means that his eye beholds you, nurturing your uprightness as a light and your integrity as the noonday, as Isaiah says: 'Your light shall break forth as the dawn', etc. But as long as this mere crumbling wall of the body stands this ray of intense brightness will pour itself in not through open doors but through chinks and crevices. You are wrong if you hope otherwise, no matter how great your purity of heart, because the greatest of contemplatives, Paul, says: 'Now we see only in a riddle and in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face.'

9. After this glance, so full of graciousness and kindness, comes the soothing voice that gently insinuates God's will. It is no other than love itself, which cannot be idle, but invites and urges us along the ways of God. The bride too hears the call to arise and make haste, surely for the welfare of souls.

It is characteristic of true and pure contemplation that when the mind is ardently aglow with God's love, it is sometimes so filled with zeal and the desire to gather to God those who will love him with equal abandon that it gladly foregoes contemplative leisure for the endeavor of preaching. And then, with its desire at least partially satisfied, it returns to its leisure with an eagerness proportionate to its successful interruption, until, refreshed again with the food of contemplation, it hastens to add to its conquests with renewed strength and experienced zeal. Quite often though the mind is tossed to and fro amid these changes, fearful and violently agitated lest it cling more than is justified to one or the other of these rival attractions and so deviate from God's will even momentarily. Perhaps holy Job endured this when he said: 'When I lie down I say, "when shall I arise?" And then I look forward to the evening.' That is, when at prayer I accuse myself of indifference at work; when at work of upsetting my prayer. You see here a holy man violently tossed between the fruit of action and the quiet of contemplation: through all the time involved in what is good he is ever repenting of imaginary sins, every moment seeking for the will of God with tears. For this man the only remedy, the last resort, is prayer and frequent appeals to God that He would deign to show us unceasingly what he wishes us to do, at what time, and in what measure. In the three words here designated and commended you have, I think, these three things: Preaching, prayer and contemplation. For she is fittingly addressed as his 'friend' who zealously and loyally works for the advantage of her Bridegroom by preaching, by counseling, by serving. Fittingly as his 'dove', for though she prays with sighing and supplication for her sins, she never fails to win the gift of mercy. Fittingly as his 'beautiful one', for though radiant with a longing for heaven, she clothes herself with the beauty of divine contemplation only at those times when she may do so suitably and conveniently.