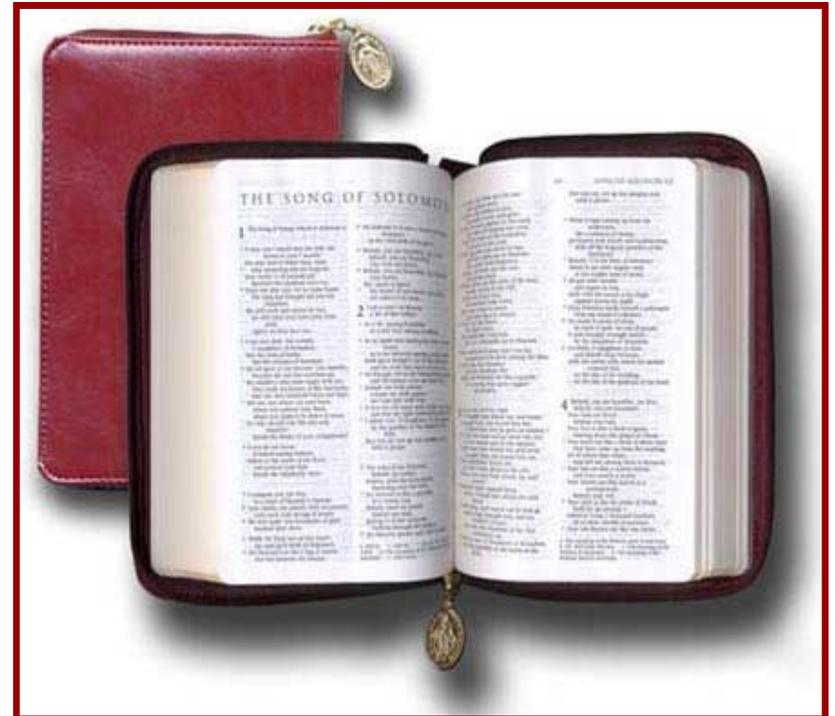




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—83***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***HOW THE SOUL,  
TORN BETWEEN DESPAIR AND HOPE,  
GROWS IN ITS DESIRE FOR GOD  
AND TO BE LIKE HIM***

*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.*

### **How the Soul, Torn Between Despair and Hope, Grows in its Desire for God and to be Like Him**

What do you think? Shall we return to our exposition at the point where we digressed, that is, the affinity between the Word and the soul? We might do that, I think, were it not that I have the impression that you have still some little uncertainty about what has been said. I do not wish to deprive you of anything, so I would not willingly pass over anything I thought might be of value to you. Indeed, I would not dare to do that, especially in matters which I hold in trust for you. I know a man who, in the course of a sermon, kept something back which the Spirit was putting into his mind, not because he distrusted the Spirit so much as because he lacked complete confidence, and wanted to save something to be sure to have something to say later. He seemed to hear a voice saying to him, 'As long as you hold that back you will receive no more.' Supposing he had kept it back, not as an insurance against his own inadequacy, but because he grudged advancement to his brethren, would he not deserve to have taken from him even what he seemed to have? May God keep your servant from such a thing, as he always has done. So the unfailing fountain of saving wisdom will deign to spring forth for me, since I have always shared everything with you ungrudgingly, and whatever he has condescended to pour out for me I have poured out again for you. If I defrauded you, how could I expect not to be defrauded by others, even by God?

8. Or, if you prefer, it is a cry of admiration. It is assuredly a thing most marvelous and astonishing, that likeness which accompanies the vision of God, and is itself the vision. I can only describe it as subsisting in charity. This vision is charity, and the likeness is charity. Who would not be amazed at the charity of God in recalling someone who has spurned him? How deserving of censure is the unrighteous man who was mentioned earlier as appropriating to himself the likeness of God, but who by choosing unrighteousness becomes incapable of loving either himself or God. You know the words, 'He who loves iniquity hates his own soul.' When the iniquity which is partly the cause of unrighteousness is taken away, there will be a oneness of spirit, a reciprocal vision, and reciprocal love. When what is perfect comes, what is partial will be done away with; and the love between them will be chaste and consummated, full recognition, open vision, strong unity, Indivisible fellowship and perfect likeness. Then the soul will know as it is known and love as it is loved, and the Bridegroom will rejoice over the Bride, knowing and known, loving and loved, Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 83***

6. Why is it that a free creature does not make himself master of his passions and rule them, but instead trails after them and is subject to them like a slave? Yet they are not called by nature to exercise freedom, but have been put under subjection to be slaves to their animal natures and obey their appetites. Surely God rises in wrath at being compared to such a creature, and considered like him! He said, 'You thought, wicked man, that I was like yourself,' and also, 'I will reprove you, and lay a charge against you.' A soul which knows itself is not likely to imagine God to be like itself, particularly if it is a soul like mine, sinful and unrighteous. It is such a soul to which is uttered the reproof, 'You thought, wicked man' - he does not say, 'You thought, O soul,' or 'you thought, O man, that I would be like you.' But if the wicked man is made to look at himself and to stand face to face with the deathly and decaying appearance of his inner self until he cannot disguise or disown the uncleanness of his conscience, but must, even against his will, see the foulness of his own sins and look upon the deformity of his vices, he will certainly not be able to think that God is like him; he will be in despair when he sees the great difference between them, and I think he will cry out, 'Lord, who is like you?' - which was indeed said in recognition of that new but voluntary unlikeness. But the primal likeness remains, and this increases the soul's distress at the unlikeness. How good the one is, how evil the other! And the nature of each is shown more clearly as they are seen side by side.

7. When the soul perceives this great disparity within itself, it is torn between hope and despair, and can only cry, 'Lord, who is like you?' It is drawn towards despair by so great an evil, but it is recalled to hope by such great goodness. Thus it is that the more it is offended by the evil it sees in itself, the more ardently it is drawn to the good which it likewise sees in itself, and the more it desires to become its true self, simple and righteous, fearing God and turning from evil. Why can it not turn from that which it could approach? Why can it not approach what it could turn away from? But I must insist that we can only dare to undertake either of these things by grace, not by nature, nor even by effort. It is wisdom which overcomes malice, not effort or nature. There is no difficulty in finding grounds for hope: the soul must turn to the Word. The great dignity of the soul's relationship with the Word, which I have been talking of for three days, is not without effect - and its enduring likeness bears witness to this relationship. The Spirit courteously admits into its fellowship one who is like him by nature. Certainly in the natural order like seeks like. This is the cry of one who seeks: 'Return, O Shunamite, return, that we may look upon you.' He would not see her when she was unlike him, but when she is like him he will look upon her, and he will allow her to look upon him. 'We know that when he will appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' So think of the question, 'Lord, who is like you?' in terms of difficulty, not of impossibility.

2. Now there is one point made which I fear may cause offence unless it is explained. If I am not mistaken, there are some standing here who will be somewhat irritated by what I have to say. Do you remember that when I attributed to the soul a threefold likeness to the Word, I said it would be more accurate to say it was impressed into the soul? Now this may seem to conflict with some passages in the Scriptures, as, for example, that one in the Psalms: 'Although a man is held in honor, he has no understanding; he is compared to foolish beasts and has become like them;' and again: 'They changed their glory into the likeness of a calf who eats hay', and what has been said plainly by the Person of God: 'You thought, wicked man, that I was like you.' There are many other passages which seem to state that God's likeness in man was utterly destroyed by sin. What shall we say to that? Are we to deny that these attributes exist in God at all, and say that we must look for others in which to find this likeness? Or can we say that they do exist in the soul, but not necessarily, and therefore they are not inseparable from it? Far from it. They do exist both in God and in the soul, and do so always. And we need have no regrets for anything we have said; it is all supported by unquestionable and absolute truth.

Now when Holy Scripture speaks of the unlikeness that has come about, it says not that the likeness has been destroyed, but concealed by something else which has been laid over it. The soul has not in fact put off its original form but has put on one foreign to it. The latter is an addition; the former has not been lost. This addition can hide the original form, but it cannot blot it out. The Apostle Paul said, 'Their foolish heart was darkened,' and the Prophet Jeremiah said, 'How has the gold grown dim, and its pure color faded?' The gold laments that it has grown dim, but it is still gold; its pure color is faded, but the base of the color is not altered. The simplicity of the soul remains unshaken in its fundamental being, but it is not seen because it is covered by the disguise of human deception, pretence, and hypocrisy.

3. How incongruous is the mixture of simplicity and duplicity! How unworthy is so base an addition to so pure a foundation! This was the kind of duplicity which the serpent used when he offered himself as a counsellor, making out that he was a friend. And when the inhabitants of paradise were seduced by him, this was what they put on in their attempt to cover their embarrassing nakedness with the shade of a leafy tree, an apron of leaves, and words of excuse. How widely has the poisonous infection of deceit spread through all their posterity ever since that time! Which of the sons of Adam can you think of who can bear, much less wish, to be seen for what he is? Yet the original simplicity persists in every soul along with the duplicity, and the co-existence of these increases the confusion. Its immortality continues also, but in an obscure and debased form, with the dark clouds of physical death of the body overshadowing it. For although it is not deprived of life, yet the gift of life cannot preserve it in the body. What shall I say of anyone who does not even preserve the life of his spirit? 'The soul that sins shall die.' Now when that two-fold death comes upon it, whatever immortality it retains is surely somewhat gloomy and unhappy. Its attachment to earthly things - which all tend to destruction - makes the darkness deeper, until a soul which lives this way has only a pallid appearance, the very image of death. Why does the soul, being immortal, not desire things which, like itself, are immortal and eternal, so that it may appear as what it really is, and live the life for which it was made? But it finds its pleasure in things which are contrary to these, and desires them, giving its allegiance to transitory things. Thus its life is debased and the brightness of immortality is darkened by the dingy defilement of its pernicious way of life. Why then do the passions treat something which is immortal as though it were mortal, and turn it into something quite unlike its immortal self? 'The man who touches pitch,' says the Preacher, 'will be defiled by it.' By its taste for things which are mortal it clothes itself in mortality; but its robe of immortality, though stained with the likeness of death, has not been cast away.

4. Consider Eve, and how her immortal soul of immortal glory was infected by the stain of mortality through her desire for mortal things. Why did she not spurn mortal and transitory things, when she was immortal, and satisfy herself with the immortal and eternal things which were proper to her? 'She saw that the tree was pleasing to the eyes and pleasant to look upon and its fruit sweet to the taste,' that is what the Scriptures say. But that sweetness, pleasantness and beauty is not yours, O woman. Even if it is yours in the sense that you also are part of the earth, it is not yours alone, but you have it in common with all living creatures. What is truly yours is of a different kind, and comes from a different source, for it is eternal and comes from eternity. Why do you imprint upon your soul a different form - or rather deformity? For what it delights to possess, it fears to lose, and this fear is a stain which colors and covers its freedom, and makes it like itself. How much more worthy of its divine origin if it were free from desire and fear, and thus preserved the freedom which is its birthright, and kept its pristine strength and beauty! Alas, it is not so. Its pure color is faded. You run away, you go into hiding, you hear the voice of the Lord God, and you hide yourself. Why do you do this except because you fear him whom you used to love, and the splendor of your freedom has been swept away and replaced by the form of a slave?

5. Now this necessity, incurred voluntarily, and the rebellious law which has descended upon the members, which I spoke of in the last sermon, weighs upon that freedom, and binds the creature which is free by nature, subjecting it to slavery by its own will. Then it covers it with ignominy, so that it will serve the law of sin in its flesh, though unwillingly. Thus it has neglected to protect its natural purity by innocence of life. It is not thereby stripped of its freedom, but, by the righteous judgment of its creator, it is covered with confusion as with a cloak. It is well said 'as with a cloak,' which is a garment which is folded, for as the soul retains its freedom by virtue of the will, yet it conducts itself as a slave; and this imposes compulsion on it. What is said of the immortality of the soul may also be said of its simplicity and, if you reflect, you will find nothing in that which is not similarly covered with the folds of likeness and unlikeness. Is deceit not like the folds of a cloak, being not inborn but put on and, so to speak, with the needle of sin stitched on to simplicity, as death is to immortality, and compulsion to freedom? Duplicity of heart does not wipe out essential simplicity; nor does death - whether the voluntary death due to sin or the necessary death of the body - destroy the immortality of nature; again, the compulsion of voluntary servitude does not extinguish free will.

So these evils are accidental, and do not result from the good gifts which are natural, but are superimposed on them; they defile but do not wipe them out; they bring confusion upon them, but not destruction. So it is that the soul is unlike God and consequently unlike itself as well. So it is that it is compared to foolish beasts, and indeed becomes like them. So it is that we read that its glory is changed into the likeness of a calf that eats hay. So it is that men, like foxes, have dens of deceit, and, since they have played the part of foxes, they shall have the portion of foxes. As Solomon said, the same fate awaits man and beast. Why should they not share the same fate, when they lived the same way? Man has occupied himself with earthly things, like beasts; he shall leave the earth like a beast. Again, is it strange that we should be allotted the same way of leaving life, when we shared the same way of entering it? For it is only because of men's likeness to beasts that they have such ungovernable passion in mating, and such excessive pain in giving birth. Man, then, is comparable to foolish beasts in mating and birth, in life and death; and he has become like them.