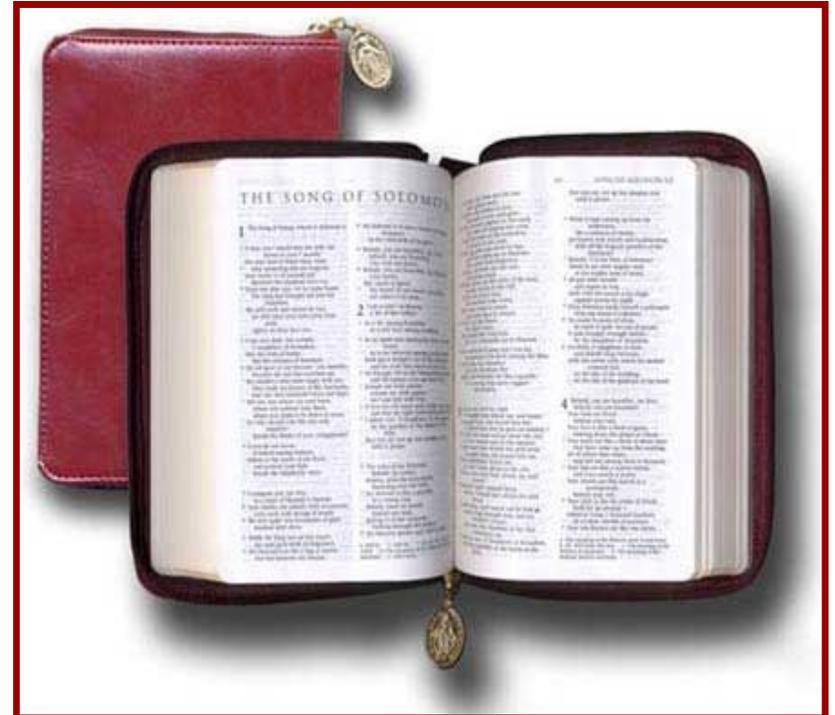




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SONG OF SONGS—5

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE KISS OF THE LORD'S
FEET, HANDS AND MOUTH
PART 2***

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 Kiss of the Lord's feet, hands and mouth-part 2

Yesterday our talk dealt with three stages of the soul's progress under the figure of the three kisses. You still remember this, I hope, for today I intend to continue that same discussion, according as God in his goodness may provide for one so needy. We said, as you remember, that these kisses were given to the feet, the hand and the mouth, in that order. The first is the sign of a genuine conversion of life, the second is accorded to those making progress, the third is the experience of only a few of the more perfect. The book of Scripture that we have undertaken to expound begins with this last kiss, but I have added the other two in the hope that you will attain a better understanding of the last. I leave it to you to judge whether this was necessary, but I do really think that the very nature of the discourse clearly suggests that they be included. And I should be surprised if you did not see that she who said: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," wished to make a distinction between the kiss of the mouth and another or several other kisses. It might have been enough for her to have said simply: "Let him kiss me." Why then should she distinctly and pointedly add: "with the kiss of his mouth," a usage that is certainly not customary? Is it not that she wished to indicate that this kiss at the summit of love's intimacy is not the sole one? People normally say, do they not: "Kiss me," or "Give me a kiss"? Nobody adds the words: "with your mouth," or, "with the kiss of your mouth." When we wish to kiss somebody, we do not have to state explicitly what we want when we offer our lips to each other. For example, St John's story of Christ's reception of the traitor's kiss simply says: "He kissed him," without adding "with his mouth or with the kiss of his mouth." This is normal procedure then both in speech and in writing. We have here three stages of the soul's growth in love, three stages of its advance toward perfection that are sufficiently known and intelligible to those who have experienced them. There is first the forgiveness of sins, then the grace that follows on good deeds, and finally that contemplative gift by which a kind and beneficent Lord shows himself to the soul with as much clarity as bodily frailty can endure.

If what Scripture says is true:

"OUR INIQUITIES HAVE MADE A GULF BETWEEN US AND GOD,"

**Then peace can be attained
only when the intervening gulf is bridged.**

2. Perhaps I should here attempt a better explanation of my reason for calling the first two favors kisses. We all know that the kiss is a sign of peace. If what Scripture says is true: "Our iniquities have made a gulf between us and God," then peace can be attained only when the intervening gulf is bridged. When therefore we make satisfaction and become reconciled by the re-joining of the cleavage caused by sin, in what better way can I describe the favor we receive than as a kiss of peace? Nor is there a more becoming place for this kiss than at the feet; the amends we make for the pride of our transgressions ought to be humble and diffident.

3. But when God endows us with the more ample grace of a sweet friendship with him, in order to enable us to live with a virtue that is worthy of such a relationship, we tend to raise our heads from the dust with a greater confidence for the purpose of kissing, as is the custom, the hand of our benefactor. It is essential however that we should not make this favor the occasion of self-glorification, we must give the glory to him from whom it comes. For if you glory in yourself rather than in the Lord, it is your own hand that you kiss, not his, which, according to the words of Job, is the greatest evil and a denial of God. If therefore, as Scripture suggests, the seeking of one's own glory is like kissing one's own hand, then he who gives glory to God is quite properly said to be kissing God's hand. We see this to be the case among men. Slaves beg pardon of their offended masters by kissing their feet, and the poor kiss their benefactor's hand when they receive an alms.

4. This poses a problem for you? God is spirit, his simple substance cannot be considered to have bodily members, so then, you say, show us what you mean by the hands and feet of God; explain to us the kiss of these hands and feet. But if I in turn put a question to my critic about the mouth of God - for, after all, Scripture does speak of the kiss of the mouth - will he tell me that this of course does refer to God. Surely if we attribute a mouth to God we may also attribute hands and feet, for, if he lacks these latter he must lack the former too.

But God has a mouth by which "he teaches men knowledge," he has a hand with which "he provides for all living creatures," and he has feet for which the earth is a footstool." When the sinners of the earth are converted from their ways, it is in abasement before these feet that they make satisfaction. I allow of course that God does not have these members by his nature, they represent certain modes of our encounter with him. The heartfelt desire to admit one's guilt brings a man down in lowliness before God, as it were to his feet; the heartfelt devotion of a worshiper finds in God renewal and refreshment, the touch, as it were, of his hand, and the delights of contemplation lead on to that ecstatic repose that is the fruit of the kiss of his mouth. Because his providence rules over all, he is all things to all, yet, to speak with accuracy, he is in no way what these things are. If we consider him in himself, his home is in inaccessible light, his peace is so much greater than we can understand, his wisdom has no bounds. No one can measure his greatness, no man can see him and live. Yet he who by his very nature is the principle through whom all creatures spring into being, cannot be far from any of us, since without him all are nothing. More wonderful still, though no one can be more intimately present to us than he, no one is more incomprehensible. For what is more intimate to anything than its own being? And yet, what is more incomprehensible to any of us than the being of all things? Of course when I say that God is the being of all things, I do not wish it to be understood in the sense that he and they are identical, but rather in the sense of the words of Scripture: "All that exists comes from him, all is by him and in him." He is the creator, the efficient cause, not the material, of every creature. Such is the way the God whose majesty is so great has decided to be present to his creatures: as the being of all things that are, as the life of all things that live; a light to all those who think, virtue to all who think rightly and glory to those who prevail in life's battle.

In this work of creation, of government, of administration, of imparting motion, of steering toward particular ends, of renewal and strengthening, he has no need of bodily instruments. By his word alone he had made all things, both corporeal and spiritual. Souls have a need for bodies, and bodies in turn a need for senses, if they are to know and influence each other. Not so the omnipotent God, who by the immediate act of his will, and that alone both creates and governs at his good pleasure. His influence touches whom he wills, as much as he wills, without calling on the aid or service of bodily powers. What possible help could he receive from bodily senses when he decides to take cognizance of the things he brought into beings. Nothing has the remotest chance of hiding from him, or of escaping that light of his that penetrates everywhere; sense awareness can never be the medium of his knowledge. Not merely does he know all things without a body's intervention, he also makes himself known to the pure in heart without the need for recourse to it. I have spoken extensively on this point in order to make it more plain for you, but now pressure of time demands that I come to an end, so we must postpone further discussion till tomorrow.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 5 (PART TWO)