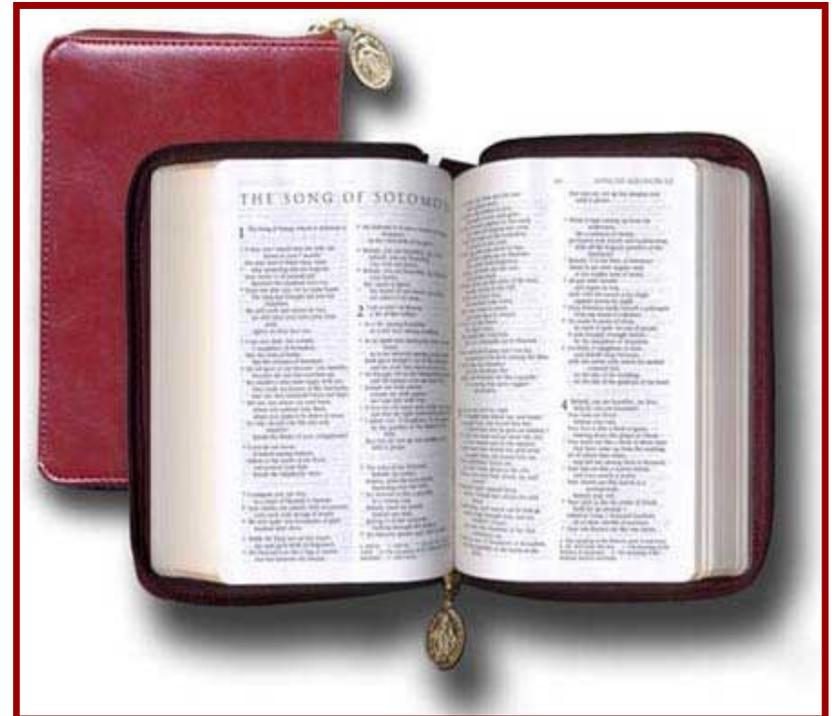




SONG OF SONGS—84

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BRIDEGROOM LOVES FIRST
AND MORE STRONGLY,
THE BRIDE MUST LOVE
WITH HER WHOLE BEING***

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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.

**The Bridegroom Loves First and More Strongly,
the Bride Must Love with her Whole Being**

During the last three days I have spent the time allotted me in showing the affinity between the Word and the soul. What was the value of all that labor? Surely this: we have seen how every soul -- even burdened with sin, enmeshed in vice, ensnared by the allurements of pleasure, a captive in exile, imprisoned in the body, caught in mud, fixed in mire, bound to its members, a slave to care, distracted by business, afflicted with sorrow, wandering and straying, filled with anxious forebodings and uneasy suspicions, a stranger in a hostile land, and, according to the Prophet, sharing the defilement of the dead and counted with those who go down into hell -- every soul, I say, standing thus under condemnation and without hope, has the power to turn and find it can not only breathe the fresh air of the hope of pardon and mercy, but also dare to aspire to the nuptials of the Word, not fearing to enter into alliance with God or to bear the sweet yoke of love with the King of angels. Why should it not venture with confidence into the presence of him by whose image it sees itself honored, and in whose likeness it knows itself made glorious? Why should it fear a majesty when its very origin gives it ground for confidence? All it has to do is to take care to preserve its natural purity by innocence of life, or rather to study to beautify and adorn with the brightness of its actions and dispositions the glorious beauty which is its birthright.

**He who is justly honored,
held in awe, and admired,
prefers to be loved.**

6. Rightly, then, does she renounce all other affections and devote herself to love alone, for it is in returning love that she has the power to respond to love. Although she may pour out her whole self in love, what is that compared to the inexhaustible fountain of his love? The stream of love does not flow equally from her who loves and from him who is love, the soul and the Word, the Bride and the Bridegroom, the Creator and the creature -- any more than a thirsty man can be compared to a fountain. Will the Bride's vow perish, then, because of this? Will the desire of her heart, her burning love, her affirmation of confidence, fail in their purpose because she has not the strength to keep pace with a giant, or rival honey in sweetness, the lamb in gentleness, or the lily in whiteness? Because she cannot equal the brightness of the sun, and the charity of him who is Charity? No. Although the creature loves less, being a lesser being, yet if it loves with its whole heart nothing is lacking, for it has given all. Such love, as I have said, is a marriage, for a soul cannot love like this and not be beloved; complete and perfect marriage consists in the exchange of love. No-one can doubt that the soul is first loved, and loved more intensely, by the Word; for it is anticipated and surpassed in its love. Happy the soul who is permitted to be anticipated in blessedness so sweet! Happy the soul who has been allowed to experience the embrace of such bliss! For it is nothing other than love, holy and chaste, full of sweetness and delight, love utterly serene and true, mutual and deep, which joins two beings, not in one flesh, but in one spirit, making them no longer two but one. As Paul says: 'He who is united to God is one spirit with him.' On this matter let us listen to her who by his anointing and by constant familiarity has become our teacher above all others. But perhaps we had better keep this for the beginning of another sermon, so that we may not compress important matter into the closing paragraph of a sermon. If you agree, I will make an end before I come to the end of the subject, so that tomorrow we may come in good time, hungry to taste the delights which are the rewards of holiness, which the souls of the blessed may enjoy with the Word and from the Word, the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

2. Why then does it not set to work? There is a great natural gift within us, and if it is not allowed full play the rest of our nature will go to ruin, as though it were being eaten away by the rust of decay. This would be an insult to its Creator. This is why God, its Creator, desires the divine glory and nobility to be always preserved in the soul, so that it may have within itself that by which it may always be admonished by the Word, either to stay with him or to return to him if it has strayed. It does not stray by changing its place or by walking, but it strays -- as is the nature of a spiritual substance, in its affections, or rather its defections, and it degenerates and becomes unlike itself when it becomes unlike him in its depravity of life and manners; but this unlikeness is not the destruction of its nature but a defect, for natural goodness is increased as much by comparison with itself as it is spoiled by communication with evil. So the soul returns and is converted to the Word to be reformed by him and conformed to him. In what way? In charity -- for he says, 'Be imitators of God, like dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also has loved you.'

3. Such conformity weds the soul to the Word, for one who is like the Word by nature shows himself like him too in the exercise of his will, loving as she is loved. When she loves perfectly, the soul is wedded to the Word. What is lovelier than this conformity? What is more desirable than charity, by whose operation, O soul, not content with a human master, you approach the Word with confidence, cling to him with constancy, speak to him as to a familiar friend, and refer to him in every matter with an intellectual grasp proportionate to the boldness of your desire? Truly this is a spiritual contract, a holy marriage. It is more than a contract, it is an embrace: an embrace where identity of will makes of two one spirit. There need be no fear that inequality of persons should impair the conformity of will, because love is no respecter of persons. It is from loving, not revering, that love receives its name. Let someone filled with horror or stupor or fear or wonder be content with reverence; where there is love all these are unimportant. Love is sufficient for itself; when love is present it absorbs and conquers all other affections. Therefore it loves what it loves, and it knows nothing else. He who is justly honored, held in awe, and admired, prefers to be loved. He and the soul are Bridegroom and Bride. What other bond or compulsion do you look for between those who are betrothed, except to love and be loved?

This bond is stronger even than nature's firm bond between parents and children. 'For this', it says in the Gospel, 'a man will leave his father and his mother and cleave to his bride.' You see how strong this feeling is between bride and bridegroom -- it is stronger not only than other affections, but even than itself.

4. Now the Bridegroom is not only loving: he is love. Is he honor too? Some maintain that he is, but I have not read it. I have read that God is love, but not that he is honor. It is not that God does not desire honor, for he says, 'If I am a father, where is my honor?' Here he speaks as a father, but if he declares himself to be a husband I think he would change the expression and say, 'If I am a bridegroom, where is my love?' For he had previously said, 'If I am the Lord, where is my fear?' God then requires that he should be feared as the Lord, honored as a father, and loved as a bridegroom. Which of these is highest or most lofty? Surely it is love. Without it fear brings pain, and honor has no grace. Fear is the lot of a slave, unless he is freed by love. Honor which is not inspired by love is not honor but flattery. Honor and glory belong to God alone, but God will receive neither if they are not sweetened with the honey of love. Love is sufficient for itself; it gives pleasure to itself, and for its own sake. It is its own merit and own reward. Love needs no cause beyond itself, nor does it demand fruits; it is its own purpose. I love because I love; I love that I may love. Love is a great reality, and if it returns to its beginning and goes back to its origin, seeking its source again, it will always draw afresh from it, and thereby flow freely. Love is the only one of the motions of the soul, of its senses and affections, in which the creature can respond to its Creator, even if not as an equal, and repay his favor in some similar way. For example, if God is angry with me, am I to be angry in return? No, indeed, but I shall tremble with fear and ask pardon. So also, if he accuses me, I shall not accuse him in return, but rather justify him. Nor, if he judges me, shall I judge him, but I shall adore him; and in saving me he does not ask to be saved by me; nor does he who sets all men free, need to be set free by me. If he commands, I must obey, and not demand his service or obedience. Now you see how different love is, for when God loves, he desires nothing but to be loved, since he loves us for no other reason than to be loved, for he knows that those who love him are blessed in their very love.

5. Love is a great reality; but there are degrees to it. The bride stands at the highest. Children love their father, but they are thinking of their inheritance, and as long as they have any fear of losing it, they honor more than they love the one from whom they expect to inherit. I suspect the love which seems to be founded on some hope of gain. It is weak, for if the hope is removed it may be extinguished, or at least diminished. It is not pure, as it desires some return. Pure love has no self-interest. Pure love does not gain strength through expectation, nor is it weakened by distrust. This is the love of the bride, for this is the bride with all that means. Love is the being and the hope of a bride. She is full of it, and the bridegroom is contented with it. He asks nothing else, and she has nothing else to give. That is why he is the bridegroom and she the bride; this love is the property only of the couple. No-one else can share it, not even a son.

Thus it is to his sons that he cries, 'Where is my honor?' He does not say, 'Where is my love?', for he guards the Bride's prerogative. Then, too, a man is bidden to honor his father and his mother; nothing is said about love -- not because children should not love their parents but because most children are inclined to honor their parents rather than love them. It is true that the king's honor loves judgment, but the love of a bridegroom -- or rather of the Bridegroom who is love -- asks only the exchange of love and trust. Let the Beloved love in return. How can the bride -- and the bride of Love -- do other than love? How can Love not be loved?