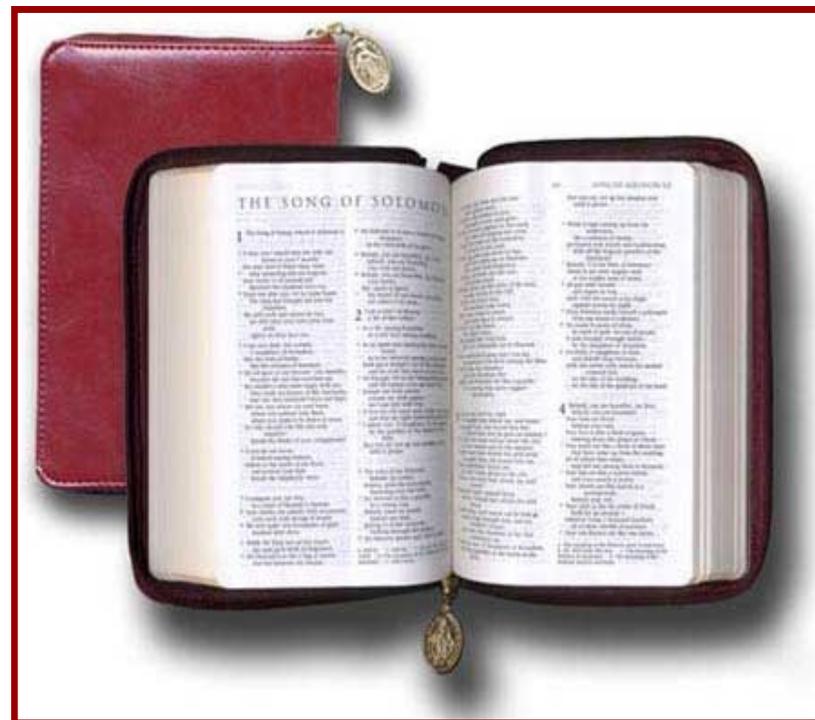




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SONG OF SONGS—40

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE DEVIL
AND
HIS ARMY***

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 Devil and his Army

"To my company of horsemen amid Pharaoh's chariots have I likened you, O my love." For a start we are free to infer from these words that the Fathers prefigured the Church, and that the mysteries of our salvation were foreshown to them. The grace of baptism that both saves men and washes sins away, is clearly expressed in the exodus of Israel from Egypt, when the sea performed that twofold marvel of service in providing a passage for the people and taking vengeance on their enemies. "Our fathers were all under the cloud," said St Paul, "and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." But as usual I must show the sequence of the words, the connection between the present text and those we have already dealt with, and draw from them as well as I can some consoling doctrine to improve our lives. So when the bride is harshly rebuked for her presumption, lest she succumb to sadness, she is reminded of the favors she has already received and promised that others are to come. He even acknowledges again her beauty and calls her his love. "My love," he says, "if I have spoken to you harshly, do not suspect me of hating you or of being spiteful, for the very gifts with which I have honored and adorned you are clear signs of my love for you. Far from intending to withdraw them I shall add still more."

Or he could say it this way: "My love, do not be disappointed that your request is not being answered now; you have already received quite a lot from me, and even greater favors will be yours if you follow my directions and persevere in my love." The text may thus be linked up with the previous ones.

9. The ruler of Egypt has still other captains whose chariots are used in their lord's service, for example Pride, who is one of the more important captains, along with that enemy of the faith, Impiety, whose position is so influential in Pharaoh's palace and kingdom. Besides these, Pharaoh's army contains many officers and nobles of inferior rank whose number is almost countless. What their names are and their duties, their armor and equipment, I leave to you yourselves to pursue as a project of study. But trusting in the prowess of these captains and their chariots, the invisible Pharaoh rushes to and fro, inspired by a tyrannical rage, as he directs his attacks with all the power he can muster against the entire family of God. Even in these very days he is persecuting the people of Israel as they escape from Egypt. And these, neither supported by chariots nor clad in armor, but strengthened solely by the hand of God, sing out with confidence: "I will sing to the Lord for he has gloriously triumphed; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." "Some boast of chariots and some of horses, but we boast of the name of the Lord our God." Now you have heard what I wished to say on the suggested comparison between the horsemen of the Lord and the chariots of Pharaoh.

10. In this text he calls her his love. He was her lover even before she was freed from sin, for if he had not loved her he would not have set her free; it was through this gift of freedom that she was won over to become his love. St John's words explain it: "It was not that we loved him, but first he loved us." Recall the story of Moses and the Ethiopian woman and see that even then there was a foreshadowing of the union between the Word and the sinner. Try to identify too if you can, what you savor most in pondering on this sweetest of mysteries: the most benign gesture of the Word, or the unfathomable glory of the soul, or the unpredictable confidence of the sinner. Moses could not change the color of his Ethiopian wife, but Christ could. For the text continues: "Your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's." But this must wait for another sermon, so that always eagerly partaking of the food provided for us on the Bridegroom's table, we may continue to praise and glorify him, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

7. The chariot of Sensuality also rolls along with four vices for wheels: Gluttony, Lust, Seductive Dress and Enervation, that is, the offspring of sloth and inertia. And it is drawn by two horses, Prosperous Life and Abundance of Goods. The two coachmen are Lazy Languor and False Security, for wealth is the ruin of the slothful and Scripture says that the prosperity of fools destroys them, not because they are successful but because it gives them false security. "When people say, 'there is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them." These coachmen have neither spurs nor whips nor any instrument of this kind; instead they carry a canopy for shade and a fan to freshen the air. The canopy's name is Dissimulation, and its purpose to provide a shade to ward off the heat of human cares. A person used to soft, effeminate ways will dissemble even when faced with necessary cares, and rather than experience life's perplexing troubles he will conceal himself in the thickets of dissimulation. The fan is Permissiveness, that stirs up flattery like a breeze. For voluptuaries have liberal hands and buy with their gold the flattery of the sycophant. I shall say no more on this subject.

8. Avarice, too, has vices for its four wheels: Pusillanimity, Inhumanity, Contempt of God, Forgetfulness of Death. The beasts to which it is yoked are Obstinacy and Rapacity, and one coachman drives them whose name is Greed for Gain. Avarice is a solitary vice that cannot endure many retainers; one servant suffices. But he is a prompt and tireless executor of the task in hand, lashing his horses onward with cruel whips called Craving to Acquire and Fear of Loss.

2. Now let us see what those gifts are that he says he has bestowed on her. The first is that he has compared her to his horsemen amid Pharaoh's chariots: by putting to death all the flesh's sinful tendencies he has freed her from the bondage of sin, just as his people were freed from the slavery of Egypt when the chariots of Pharaoh were overturned and swallowed up in the sea. That is surely a very great mercy, and I shall not be foolish if I wish to glory in having received it. I speak only the truth. I declare and will go on declaring: "If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have found its dwelling in hell." I am neither ungrateful nor forgetful, I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever. But this is as far as I compare myself with the bride. As for the rest, by a unique privilege after her deliverance she has been accepted as his beloved and adorned with a splendor befitting the Lord's own bride, but for the present time only on the cheeks and neck. She has been promised necklaces for ornamentation, made of costly gold, inlaid with beautiful silver. Can anyone not be entirely pleased with such an endowment? Firstly his mercy sets her free, secondly he favors her with his love, thirdly he makes her clean and pure, and finally he promises to enrich her with gems of rarest quality.

3. I have no doubt that some of you understand what I am saying from your own experience, which enables you even to anticipate my words. But running through my mind is the verse: "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple," and because of these I feel that a little more extensive treatment is justified. For wisdom is a kindly spirit that is pleased with a teacher who is kind and diligent, who, despite his anxiety to gratify his intelligent students, does not hesitate to adapt himself to the backward ones. Wisdom herself says that they who explain her shall have life everlasting, a reward I would by no means be deprived of. For even those matters whose meaning seems obvious have certain aspects that can be obscure, and time is not wasted in discussing them in more detail with capacious and quick-witted minds.

4. But now let us take a look at the comparison drawn from Pharaoh and his army and the horsemen of the Lord. The comparison is not between the two armies, they are merely the basis of it. For light and darkness have nothing in common, the faithful no partnership with the unfaithful. But there is a clear comparison between the person who is holy and spiritual and the horsemen of the Lord, and between Pharaoh and the devil and both their armies. And do not be surprised that one person is compared to a company of horsemen, for if that one person is holy an army of virtues is at hand: well-ordered affections, disciplined habits, prayers like burnished weapons, actions charged with energy, awesome zeal, and finally unrelenting conflicts with the enemy and repeated victories. Hence in later texts we read: "Terrible as an army set in array," and "What shall you see in the Shulamite but the companies of the camps?" If this explanation fails to satisfy you, then recall that the spiritual person is never without a company of angels who display a divine jealousy in guarding her for her husband, to present her to Christ as a pure bride. And do not say to yourself: "Where are they? Who has seen them?" The prophet Elisha saw them and obtained by his prayers that Gehazi should see them, too. You do not see them because you are neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. The patriarch Jacob saw them and exclaimed: "This is God's camp." The Teacher of the Nations saw them and said: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation? "

5. The bride therefore, progressing on her course with the support of ministering angels, with the aid of the heavenly host, does resemble the horsemen of the Lord that by a stupendous miracle of divine power once triumphed over the chariots of Pharaoh. If you pay careful attention, the wonder aroused in you by the magnificent achievements in the Red Sea can still be aroused by the achievements of today. Rather her victories today are even more magnificent, for the physical exploits of that occasion find spiritual fulfillment now. Surely you see that greater courage is shown and greater glory achieved in overthrowing the devil rather than Pharaoh, in conquering spiritual powers rather than Pharaoh's chariots? There the battle was waged against flesh and blood; here it is waged against sovereignties and powers, against the forces that control this world's darkness, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens. Let us examine together the details of this comparison. There you have a people rescued from Egypt, here man is rescued from the world; there Pharaoh is vanquished, here the devil; there Pharaoh's chariots are overturned, here the passions of the flesh that attack the soul are being undermined; there it was the waves that triumphed, here our tears; the former with the sea's might, the latter in bitterness. If the demons encounter a soul of this quality I can hear them now crying out: "Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord is fighting for him."

Would you wish me to designate some of Pharaoh's captain's by their proper names, and describe his chariots for you, so that you may discover for yourselves if there be any others like them: One mighty captain of the spiritual and invisible king of Egypt is Malice, another is Sensuality, another Avarice. Each of them possesses, under his king, the territory assigned to him. Malice therefore is in command wherever the wicked commit their crimes, Sensuality presides over shameful rites of lust, while thievery and fraud are within the domain of Avarice.

6. And now let us look at the chariots prepared by Pharaoh for his princes to persecute the people of God. Malice has a chariot with four wheels named Cruelty, Impatience, Recklessness and Impudence. This chariot's swift sorties mean the shedding of blood, nor can it be stopped by innocence, nor delayed by patience, nor checked by fear nor inhibited by shame. It is drawn by two vicious horses ready to destroy as they go, earthly Power and worldly Pomp. They are the source of its dazzling speed, for Power gallops where evil beckons, and Pomp courts popular favor in pursuit of dishonest ends. Hence the Psalmist says that the sinner is praised for his evil desires and the dishonest man gets a blessing; hence, too, the other words: "This is your hour and the power of darkness." And these two horses are driven by two coachmen called Arrogance and Envy; Arrogance drives Pomp, Envy urges on Power. The former is borne rapidly along by a diabolical love of vain display that fills his heart. But the man with genuine self-possession, who is prudently circumspect, seriously concerned about modesty, firmly established in humility, wholesomely chaste, will never be lightly carried away by this empty wind. In like manner the beast of earthly Power is driven by Envy, urged on by jealousy's spurs, by worry about possible failure and the fear of being surpassed. One spur is the haunting fear of being supplanted, the other the fear of a rival. These are the goads by which earthly Power is ever disquieted. This is what one finds in the chariot of Malice.