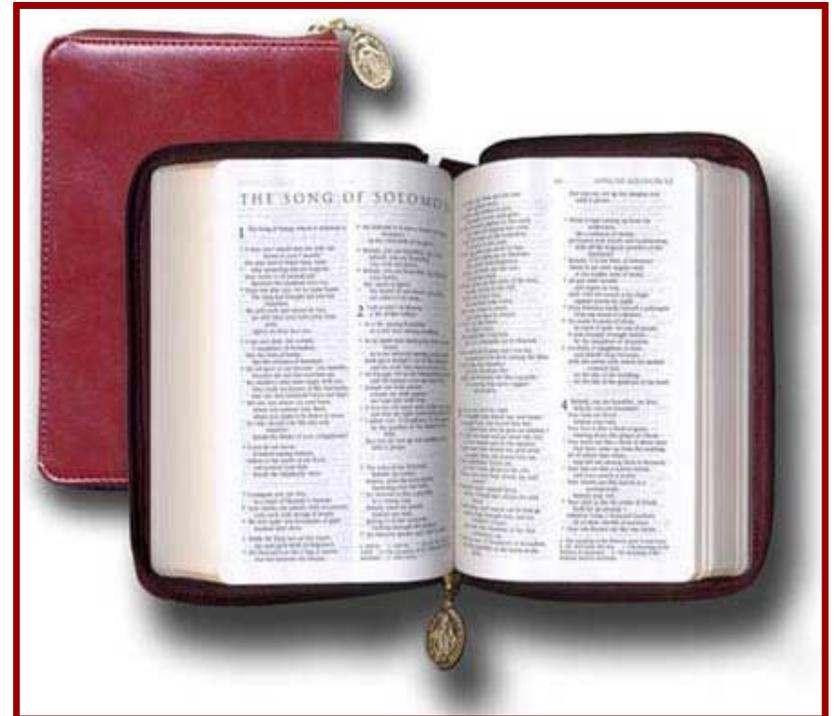




## ***SONG OF SONGS—6***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***ON THE FOUR KINDS  
OF  
SPIRITS***

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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.*

### **On the Four Kinds of Spirits**

As you know, spirits can be divided into classes: that of the animal, that of man, that of the angel, and that of God who created all the others. Each of these, with one exception, needs a body or a body's likeness, either for its own sake or for the sake of others or for both. The exception is he whom every creature, whether corporeal or spiritual, is called on to acknowledge in sentiments like the Psalmist: "You are my God because you have no need of my goods." If we consider the animal we see that its spirit, its life principle, cannot even exist without a body. When the animal dies its soul ceases to live at the same moment that it ceases to impart life. We indeed continue to live after the body's death, but only by means of the body do we gain those merits that lead to a life of blessedness. St Paul sensed this, saying: "The invisible things of God are understood through the things he has made." All creatures that he has made, creatures that possess a body and are therefore visible, can be understood by our minds only through the body's instrumentality. Therefore our souls have need of a body. Without it we cannot attain to that form of knowledge by which alone we are elevated toward the contemplation of truths essential to happiness. If one of you will object that baptized infants who die before acquiring a knowledge of the material creation are believed nevertheless to enter heaven, I shall reply briefly that this is a gift of grace, not a reward of merit. For the moment this discussion deals with normal processes, not with the special interventions of God.

2. Let us now study the case of heavenly spirits. We can be absolutely sure that these have a need of bodies from those divinely inspired words: "Are they not all spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation?" How will it be possible for them to fulfill this service without a body, especially among beings who possess bodies? Is it not true that only creatures with bodies can run to and fro and pass from place to place? Do we not know on unimpeachable authority that angels have frequently acted that way? You recall how they were seen by the patriarchs of old, how they entered their tents, shared their meal, and had their feet washed. And so we see that though both animal and angelic spirits have need of bodies, it is not for their own sakes but in order to render some service to others.

10. And who will doubt that God has less need still of those creatures that lack sense or reason? But when these do have a share in the doing of good we are reminded that all creatures are the servants of that God who can so rightly say: "The world is mine." Again, because he knows the means that best suit his purpose, he does not choose a bodily creature for the sake of the efficacy of its action but rather for the fittingness of it. Granted then that bodily agents are often and opportunely used in promoting the works of God, for example, the showers that quicken the seeds, that multiply the crops and ripen the fruit, what need has he, I ask, for a body of his own when to his least desire all bodies, both in heaven and on earth, are equally obedient? A body of his own would be superfluous to one for whom none exists outside his sway. But if I were to include in this present sermon all the points that might be dealt with on this subject, it would be unreasonably prolonged, and I should perhaps overtax the endurance of some. We shall find another occasion to discuss them.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS—6***

8. Try to understand this however, that no created spirit can of itself act directly on our minds. This means that without the mediation of a bodily instrument it cannot make contact with or infuse itself into our minds, so that thereby we either acquire knowledge or increase it, acquire virtue or improve on it. No angel, no created spirit has power to influence me in this way, nor can I influence them. Even the angels lack this power over each other.

That is a prerogative reserved to that supreme and infinite Spirit, who alone, when he imparts instruction to man or angel, does not require an ear to hear him nor a mouth to speak. He communicates himself directly to the mind, he makes himself known directly; a pure spirit himself, he is received by us in proportion to our rectitude. He alone has need of no one, he alone, by reason of his omnipotent will, is sufficient for himself and for all.

9. Nevertheless, there are boundless and countless achievements that he carries through by means of his subject creatures, whether corporeal or spiritual, but he uses them as master rather than as suppliant. For example, he now employs my tongue for his purpose of instructing you, when he could certainly impart the same knowledge directly with greater facility on his part and more pleasure for you. This mode of acting that he has chosen represents an indulgence on his part, not indigence. He makes this promotion of your welfare an occasion of merit for me; it does not mean that he needs my assistance. This is a truth that every man should remember when he does good deeds, lest he give glory to himself and not to the Lord for the fruits of grace. There is furthermore the case of the person, be he bad angel or bad man, who performs good deeds against his will. It is plain that the good of which he is the agent does not benefit himself since no good can benefit one whose will is set against it. He is therefore merely a dispenser of good, but, I know not why, we seem to feel that the good which comes to us through an evil agent is on that account more gratifying and pleasurable. This is the reason why God makes use of the wicked to benefit the just; it by no means implies that he needs their help in doing good.

3. The animal kingdom is destined by nature to serve, and that service is fulfilled in alleviating the temporal and physical needs of man; the animal spirit or soul is limited by time, it dies with the body. You know then "the slave does not continue in the house forever," but those who treat him well will discover that the usage of this temporal service will redound to eternal rewards. The angel, however, in the freedom of his spirit, applies himself with eagerness to the demands of his duty, which is to bring prompt and swift assistance to us mortals in our striving for the blessings that are to come. He knows that we are destined to be fellow-citizens with him; and co-heirs of the bliss of heaven. Therefore both the animal and the angel need bodies that they might be of help to us, the first that he may give us the service appropriate to his nature, the second that he may lovingly support us. What benefit they themselves may derive from a body I cannot see, at least with regard to eternal life. The spirit of the animal can indeed perceive corporeal things by means of the body, but is this body of such potential value to him that the material world which he experiences through the senses enables him to advance to a knowledge of spiritual and intellectual truths? Surely not. On the other hand, within the limits of its corporeal and temporal service, the body does provide a gateway to a knowledge of these truths for those who transmute their usage of the things of time into coin of eternal reward, "dealing with this world as though they had no dealing with it."

4. We must understand too that if the angel can soar to a grasp of the highest truths and penetrate their profoundest depths, he does so by the vital force and kinship of his nature rather than with the aid of a body, or with the awareness of things that bodily senses provide. St Paul implied this when he said: "The invisible things of God are understood through the things he has made," adding the qualification, "by the creature of the world." Because this is not so for the creature of heaven. For, what the spirit clothed in flesh and dwelling on the earth strives to achieve gradually and little by little, through the knowledge it derives from the senses, that same the dweller of the heavens attains with all speed and ease, because of the native fineness and sublime quality of its being. No prop of bodily sense sustains its poise, no bodily member ministers aid to its effort, no bodily medicine whatsoever contributes to its vision. Why should they search for spiritual meanings among bodily substances when they can find them in the book of life without any discordance, and understand them without any hardship. Why should a man work his sweat out winnowing grain from the chaff, pressing wine from grapes and oil from olives if he has an abundance of all these things ready to hand? Who will beg his food from door to door when his own house is stocked with bread? Will he bother to dig a well, to explore with might and main for springs of water in the bowels of the earth, for whom a burbling fountain pours out full-flowing, limpid streams? Neither angelic nor brute spirit therefore can benefit from corporeal aids in acquiring the knowledge that makes a spiritual being happy. The brute's natural stupidity renders him incapable of that knowledge, while the angel, by a prerogative of splendor and excellence, has no need of a bodily intermediary.

5. We come now to the spirit of man. This, since it holds a middle place between the extremes of bestial and angelic spirits, manifestly has a twofold need of a body: without it the soul can act neither for its own advantage nor for the benefit of others. For, to say nothing of the other members of the body or of the duties they perform, how, I ask, can you instruct the listener if you have no tongue, or receive instruction if you have no ear ?

6. Therefore, since without the support of the body the brute spirit cannot offer the service it owes, nor the heavenly spirit fulfill its labor of love, nor the rational spirit of man succeed in providing for its own and its neighbor's salvation, it follows that every created spirit certainly has a need of bodily faculties whether it be mercy to assist others, or, as in the case of man, to assist as well as being assisted. What then if there be some living things whose existence seems to confer no benefit on themselves, nor to minister in any obvious way to the needs of humanity? Well, are they not good to look at, if not to use? They are for the mind's study rather than the body's utility, there their advantage lies. Even if injurious, and an obstacle to human welfare in this world, their bodies still serve a purpose for all those whom he had called according to his purpose to be saints. If these creatures do not provide food or perform a service, they certainly make man use his wits in accord with that progress in understanding common to all who enjoy the use of reason, by which the mysteries of God may be apprehended and contemplated through the things he has made. For both the devil and his satellites, whose intentions are always evil are ever bent on hurting those who do what is right. To these latter St Peter said "Who can hurt you if you are determined to do only what is right?" God forbid that they should be able to harm you. The truth rather is that in spite of themselves they benefit the good.

7. As for the rest, whether the bodies of angels be natural to them as bodies are to men; whether, immortal though they be, their bodies have an animal nature like man's, which in this life is not immortal; whether they change these bodies and turn them into whatever form and figure suits them when they wish to become visible, imparting to them the density and solidity that fits their purpose, while at the same time, in the reality of their own nature with its essential subtlety, they remain impalpable to us and beyond our power of vision; or whether again, while continuing to exist as simple spiritual substances, they merely assume bodies when they find a need for them and then, once the need has passed, allow them to dissolve again into the elements from which they were formed— all these are questions which I prefer that you should not ask me. The Fathers seem to have held divergent views on the problem, and I must confess that I cannot come to a decision about the view I might be justified in teaching. But I am of the opinion that knowledge of these matters would not contribute greatly to your spiritual progress.