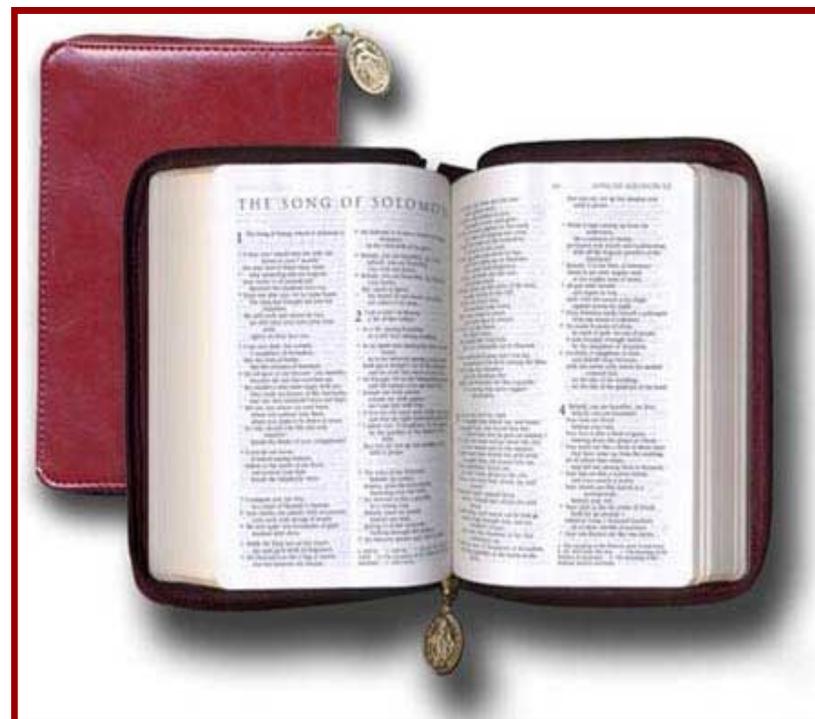




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SONG OF SONGS—49

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***AS THE LILY AMONG THORNS,
SO THE SOUL AMID SINS***

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.

As a Lily among Thorns, so the Soul Amid Sins

'As a lily among thorns so is my love among maidens.' Maidens who are vexing are not good. Consider the evil produce of this curse-laden earth of ours. 'When you till it,' he said, 'it will grow thorns and thistles for you.' Therefore while the soul is in the flesh it dwells among thorns and suffers of necessity the disquietude of temptations, the pangs of tribulation. And if, according to the Bridegroom's word, she is a lily, let her consider how vigilant and careful she should be in guarding herself, hedged all around with thorns whose sharp points threaten her on every side. For the tender flower cannot resist even the lightest prick of the thorn, it is no sooner prodded than pierced. Do you not see how rightly and unavoidably the prophet exhorts us to serve the Lord with fear, and the apostle to work out our salvation with fear and trembling? For they learned by their own experience the truth of this observation, and as friends of the Bridegroom they would never hesitate to apply to themselves the words: 'As a lily among thorns so is my love among maidens.' Or as one of them said: 'I am turned in my anguish while the thorn is fastened'. Well pierced is the one who is thereby converted. You are well wounded if you repent. Many, when they feel the pain, correct the fault. Such a one can say: 'I am turned in my anguish while the thorn is fastened.' The thorn is the fault, the thorn is the pain, the thorn is the false brother, the thorn is the bad neighbor.

'Have confidence, for I have overcome the world.'

Therefore although you foresee trials that menace you like thorns of thistles, let not your heart be afraid, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

2. 'As a lily among thorns so is my love among maidens.'
O shining lily! Tender and delicate flower! Unbelieving and seditious men surround you: see that you tread with care among the thorns. The world is full of thorns. They are in the earth, in the air, in your flesh. To live among them and not be harmed is the fruit of God's power, not of your virtue. But he said: 'Have confidence, for I have overcome the world.' Therefore although you foresee trials that menace you like thorns or thistles, let not your heart be afraid, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us'. Consider the lilies of the field, how they thrive and bloom amid the thorns. If God cares so much for the grass that today is alive and tomorrow is cast into the oven, how much more will he care for his beloved and dearest bride? In short, 'the Lord preserves all who love him'. 'As a lily among thorns so is my love among maidens.' It is no small proof of virtue to live a good life among the wicked, to retain the glow of innocence and gentleness of manners among the malicious; above all to show that you are peaceful with those who hate peace and a friend to your very enemies. That will clearly lay your claim in a special way, with a certain proprietary right, to the likeness of the lily, which does not cease to embellish and beautify with its own brightness the very thorns that pierce it. And in this way does the lily not seem to you somehow to achieve the perfection of the Gospel, by which we are commanded to pray for our calumniators and persecutors, to do good to those who hate us? Do likewise, therefore, and your soul will be the Lord's own friend and he will praise you for what you are, saying that 'as a lily among thorns so is my love among maidens'.

3. She continues: 'As an apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.' The bride returns the compliment of praise addressed to her by the Bridegroom; to be praised by him is to be made worthy of praise, and to praise him is to understand and wonder at his excellence. And just as the Bridegroom's praise of her was symbolized by the beautiful flower, so she for her part typifies his unique glory and excellence by a noble tree. And yet I have an impression about this tree that its excellence does not appear as great as that of some others, and that therefore it has been inappropriately adopted as an object of comparison, since it is inadequate to fulfill the role of praise. 'As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.' Indeed the bride herself does not seem to rate it highly, since she takes care to extol it only among the trees of the wood, sterile trees that bear no fruit suitable for human food. Why, when the finer and nobler trees were ignored, was the insignificance of this tree brought forward to eulogize the Bridegroom? Should he thus receive praise by measure who has not received the Spirit by measure? For to compare him with that tree seems to indicate that he who has no equal has a superior. What shall we say to this? I say the praise is little because it is praise from one who is little. Because in this place the announcement is not: 'Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised,' but, little is the Lord and greatly to be loved: the child namely, who is born to us.

7 continued

But this was his privilege. We, however, who have not yet merited to be rapt into paradise, into the third heaven, let us meanwhile be fed with the flesh of Christ, let us honor his mysteries, follow his footsteps, preserve the faith, and we will certainly be living in his shadow. 'In his longed-for shadow I am seated.' Perhaps she is priding herself on having had a happier experience in that, unlike the prophet, she says she does not live, but is seated, in his shadow. To be seated is to be at ease. It is a greater thing to be at ease in the shadow than to live there, just as to live is greater than merely to be there. The prophet therefore takes what is common to many and says: 'in his shadow we live'; the bride however, enjoying a privilege, boasts that she alone is seated beneath it. Not as he said in the plural, 'we live', did she say, 'we are seated', but in the singular 'I am seated', that you may recognize the privilege. Where we toil as we live, we who, aware of our sins serve with fear, there she, in loving commitment, is sweetly at rest. In short, fear awaits punishment, love delight. Hence she says: 'And his fruit is sweet to my taste', suggesting the taste of him she received in contemplation when sweetly inspired by love. But that was in shadow, because 'in a mirror and in a riddle'. A time will come however when the shadows will wane and even entirely fade away with the advance of dawn, and a vision is clear as it is everlasting will steal upon her, bringing not only sweetness to her taste but fulfillment to her heart, yet without surfeit: 'In his longed-for shadow I am seated, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.' Where the bride rests let us also rest, giving praise for the portion received to the Head of the family who invited us to such a banquet, to the Church's Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is over all things, God, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS —49

7. You see that faith is both life and the shadow of life. On the other hand, a life spent amid pleasures, since it is not by faith, is both death and the shadow of death. 'A widow given over to self-indulgence', says the apostle, 'is dead even while she lives.' 'To set the mind on the flesh is death.' It is also the shadow of death, of that death which torments into eternity. We too once sat in darkness and the shadow of death, following the way of the flesh and not living by faith, already indeed dead to righteousness and on the point of being swallowed up by the second death. For as close as the shadow is to the body of which it is the shadow, so close, for sure, did our life come near hell. Then, 'if the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have dwelt in hell.' Now how ever we have passed from the shadow of death to the shadow of life, or rather we have passed from death to life and live in the shadow of Christ, provided we are alive and not dead. Nor do I imagine that everyone who is in his shadow lives in it, because obviously not everyone who has the faith lives by faith. Now 'faith apart from works is dead,' it cannot impart a life of which it is totally devoid. Therefore when the prophet said: 'A spirit before our face is Christ the Lord', he was not content to go on and say, 'we are in his shadow', but: 'in his shadow we live among the pagans'. Be careful therefore that you live in his shadow as the prophet did, so that one day you may reign in his light. For he not only possesses a shadow, he also has light. Through his flesh he is the shadow of faith, through his spirit he is the light of the mind. He is flesh and he is spirit. He is flesh to those who remain in the flesh, but 'a spirit before our face', that is, in the future, provided we forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead, where on arriving we may experience exactly what he said: 'The flesh is of no avail; it is the spirit that gives life. 'Nor am I unaware that the apostle while still living in the flesh said: 'Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now'.

4. Majesty, therefore, is not being exalted here, but humility worthily and reasonably commended, because the weakness and foolishness of God is preferred to the strength and wisdom of men. These are the fruitless woodland trees, for according to the prophet: 'they have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one.' 'As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.' Alone among the trees of the wood the Lord Jesus is the tree that bears fruit, as a man although more perfect than men, yet lower than the angels. In a wonderful way he both subjected himself as man to the angels and, remaining God, retained the angels as his subjects. As he said: 'You will see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,' since in one and the same Christ Jesus they both support his weakness and gaze in awe at his majesty. Since therefore his littleness gives sweeter relish to the bride, she more willingly extols his grace, proclaims his mercy, is lost in wonder at his kindness. She has been happy to contemplate him as a man among men, not as God among the angels: just as an apple tree is superior among the trees of the wood and not obviously among the plants of the garden. Nor does she consider that his praises are diminished when his loving goodness is lauded in terms of his frailty. And if, from one viewpoint, she moderates her praise, from another she praises all the more, dilating less on the glory of his excellence in order that the grace of his kindness may stand revealed. Just as the apostle, therefore, says that the foolishness and weakness of God is wiser and stronger than men, but not than angels, and as the prophet proclaims him the fairest of the sons of men, and not of angels, so she, speaking certainly in the same Spirit, wished to make known here, under the image of the fruitful tree amid the woodland trees, that God made man surpasses all human greatness, but not the excellence of the angelic nature.

5. 'As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.' And fittingly 'among the sons', because although he was the only Son of his Father, he made it his aim to acquire for him without envy many sons whom he is not ashamed to call brothers, that he might be the first-born among many brothers. But he who is son by nature is rightly preferred to all those adopted by grace. 'As an apple tree among the trees of the wood so is my beloved among the sons.' Justly 'as an apple tree', since after the manner of a fruit-bearing tree he casts a refreshing shadow and yields excellent fruit. Is that not truly a fruit-bearing tree whose flowers are the fruit of honor and uprightness? In short 'he is the tree of life to those who lay hold of him'. All the trees of the wood shall not be compared to him, because although they are trees, great and beautiful trees which seem to provide help by praying, ministering, teaching, assisting by good example, Christ alone, the Wisdom of God, is the tree of life, he alone the living bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

6. Therefore she says: 'In his shadow, for which I longed, I am seated, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.' Justly did she long for the shadow of the one from whom she would receive both refreshment and nourishment. For the other trees of the wood may indeed provide a comforting shadow, but not a life giving food, not the enduring fruits of salvation. There is only one 'author of life', 'one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus', who says to his bride: 'I am your deliverance'. 'It was not Moses,' he said, 'who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.' Consequently she longed most specially for the shadow of Christ, because he alone would not only refresh her from the fever-heat of vices, but would fill her too with delight in the virtues. 'In his longed-for shadow I am seated.' His shadow is his flesh; his shadow is faith. The flesh of her own Son overshadowed Mary; faith in the Lord overshadows me. And yet why should his flesh not overshadow me too, as I eat him in the sacrament? And even the holy Virgin herself experienced the shadow of faith, for to her was said: 'Blessed are you who believed.' 'In his longed-for shadow I am seated.' The prophet says: 'A spirit before our face is Christ the Lord, in his shadow we live among the pagans.' In the shadow among the pagans, in the light with the angels. We are in the shadow as long as we walk by faith and not by sight; and therefore the righteous man who lives by faith is in the shadow. But happy is he who lives by his understanding, because he is no longer in the shadow but in the light. David was a righteous man and lived by faith, for he said to God: 'Give me understanding and I shall live', knowing that understanding would follow on faith, that the light of life would be revealed to the understanding, and life to light. The first thing is to come to the shadow, and then to pass on to that of which it is the shadow, because he says: 'Unless you believe you will not understand.'