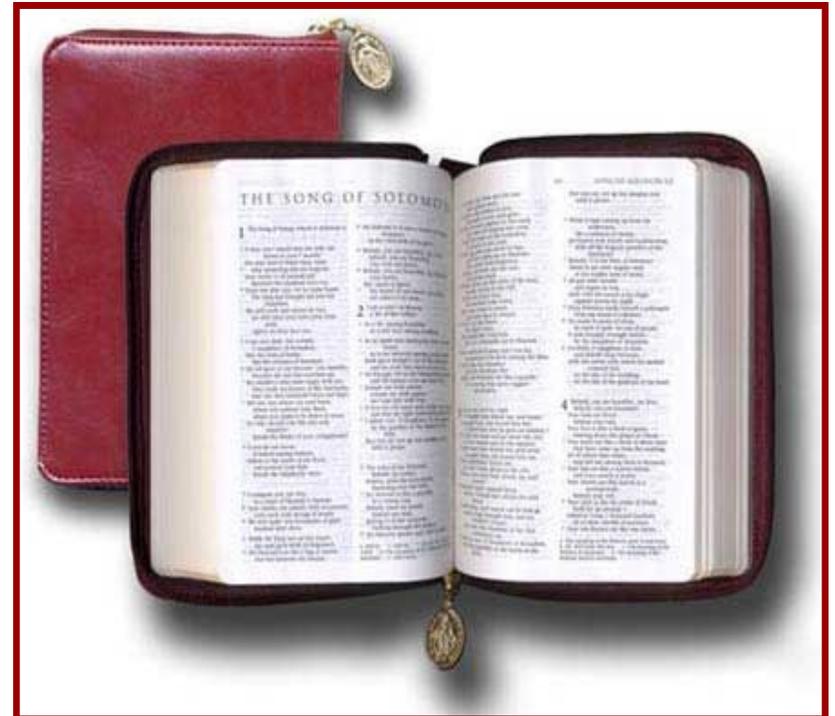




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SONG OF SONGS—42

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE INTELLECT,
FAITH
AND
CONTEMPLATION***

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 Intellect, Faith, and Contemplation

"Your neck as jewels." Normally the neck is adorned with jewels, not compared to them. For Those who wear jewelry have no beauty of their own, and must go to another source to beg its outward show that they might make it deceptively their own. But the neck of the bride is so beautiful in itself, so exquisitely formed by nature, that any external adornment is superfluous. Why load it with a pretentious coloring of strange baubles when its own native loveliness is so complete, more than equal to the splendor of any jewels that could be found to enrich it? This is what the Bridegroom wished to convey, for he did not say, as one would expect, that the jewels were suspended round her neck, but that it was "as jewels." Here we must call upon the Holy Spirit, that just as his love enabled us to discover the spiritual cheeks of the bride, so it may also reveal to us the spiritual mystery of the neck. And to my mind, for I can only say what I think, nothing seems more credible or probable than that the word neck signifies the soul's intellect. I feel that you too will support this interpretation when you examine the reason for the comparison. Do you not see that the function of the neck somehow resembles that of the intellect, by which your soul receives its vital spiritual nourishment, and communicates it to the inward faculties of the will and the affections? And so when this neck of the bride, understood as the pure and simple intellect, is radiant through and through with the clear and naked truth, it has no need of embellishment; on the contrary it is itself a precious jewel that becomingly adorns the soul, which is why it is portrayed as resembling jewels. The truth is a jewel of great excellence, so are purity and candor, and especially the power to make a sober estimate of oneself. The intellect of rationalists and heretics is not endowed with this radiance of purity and truth; hence they spend time and energy in primping and festooning it with the tinsel of words and tricks of sophistry, lest it be seen for what it is, and the shame of its falseness be revealed as well.

***"The words of the Lord are pure words:
silver refined in a crucible."***

**This is how these ministering spirits from heaven
fashion ornaments of gold studded with silver
for the bride to wear during her earthly pilgrimage.**

6. We learn from this that only too often we must interrupt the sweet kisses to feed the needy with the milk of doctrine. No one must live for himself but all must live for him who died for all. Woe to those who are gifted with the power to think and speak worthily of God if they imagine that godliness is a means for gain, if they make vain-glorious use of the talents given them for the winning of souls to God, if in their high-mindedness they refuse to associate with the lowly. Let them fear what the Lord said by the mouth of his Prophet: "I gave them my gold and my silver; but they have used my gold and my silver in the service of Baal." For your part, listen to the bride's reply when she receives on the one hand a reproof, on the other a promise. She is neither puffed up by promises nor angered by the rebuke, but exemplifies the scriptural saying: "Reprove a wise man and he will love you." With reference to gifts and promises we are also told: "The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself in all things." That she was faithful to these principles will be clear from her reply. But a discussion on this must be postponed, if you do not mind, to await another sermon, and for what has been said so far let us give glory to the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 42

2. The text continues: "We will make you ornaments of gold, studded with silver." If it were "I will make" in the singular and not "we will make" in the plural I should declare unconditionally and unhesitatingly that the Bridegroom was the speaker here too. But perhaps it would be more appropriate to assign it to his companions, who try to console the bride with the promise that until she can see in the beatific vision him for whom she longs so ardently, they will make her beautiful and costly pendants for her ears. The reason for this I think is that faith comes by hearing: as long as she walks by faith and not by sight she must put more reliance on the ear than on the eye. It is pointless for her to strain toward this vision with eyes that the faith has not yet purified, since it has been promised as a reward to those alone who are clean of heart. It is written "By faith he cleanses men's hearts." Therefore, since faith comes by hearing, and through faith the power of vision is clarified, it is but right to concentrate on adorning her ears, because reason here tells us that hearing is a preparation for seeing. They say: "You long, O bride, to gaze on the glory of your Beloved; but that belongs to another time. For now we suspend these pendants from your ears, to console you while you wait and even to prepare you for that vision to which you lay claim." Their words echo the Psalmist's: "Hear, O daughter, and see." "You long for the power to see, but you must first listen. To listen is to move toward vision. Listen then, bow down you ear for the pendants we are making for you, that by obedient listening you may come to the splendor of the vision. We will make your listening a thing of joy and gladness. We cannot enable you to see the vision that will be the fullness of your joy and the fulfillment of your desire: to bestow that is the privilege of the person you love." To complete your happiness he will show you himself, he will fill you with gladness by letting you see his face. But for the moment, for your consolation, take these pendants that we offer you; the delights that he holds in his right hand will remain for ever."

3. We should take note of the kind of pendants they offer her: they are made of gold and studded with silver. Gold signifies the splendor of the divine nature, the wisdom that comes from above. The heavenly goldsmiths to whom this work is committed, promise that they will fashion resplendent tokens of the truth and insert them in the soul's inward ears. I cannot see what this may mean if not the construction of certain spiritual images in order to bring the purest intuitions of divine wisdom before the eyes of the soul that contemplates, to enable it to perceive, as though puzzling reflections in a mirror, what it cannot possibly gaze on as yet face to face. The things we speak of are divine, totally unknown except to those who have experienced them. While still in this mortal body, while still living by faith, while the content of the clear interior light is still not made clear, we can, in part, still contemplate the pure truth. Any one of us who has been given this gift from above may make his own the words of St Paul: "Now I know in part;" and: "We know in part and in part we prophesy." But when the spirit is ravished out of itself and granted a vision of God that suddenly shines into the mind with the swiftness of a lightning-flash, immediately, but whence I know not, images of earthly things fill the imagination, either as an aid to understanding or to temper the intensity of the divine light. So well-adapted are they to the divinely illumined senses, that in their shadow the utterly pure and brilliant radiance of the truth is rendered more bearable to the mind and more capable of being communicated to others. My opinion is that they are formed in our imaginations by the inspirations of the holy angels, just as on the other hand there is no doubt that evil suggestions of an opposite nature are forced upon us by the bad angels.

4. Perhaps, too, we have here those puzzling reflections seen by the Apostle in the mirror and fashioned, as I have said, by angelic hands from pure and beautiful images, which I feel bring us in contact somehow with the being of God, that in its pure state is perceived without any shadow of corporeal substances. The elegance of the imagery that so worthily clothes and reveals it I attribute to angelic skill. That this is so is more distinctly conveyed by another version: "We, the artificers, will make you images of gold, with silver decorations." "With silver decorations" and "studded with silver" mean the same thing. To me they seem to signify not merely that the angels produce these images within us, but that they also inspire the elegance of diction which so fittingly and gracefully embellishes with greater clarity and keener enjoyment our communication of them to the audience. And if you ask me what connection there is between speech and silver, I give you the Prophet's answer: "The words of the Lord are pure words: silver refined in a crucible." This is how these ministering spirits from heaven fashion ornaments of gold studded with silver for the bride to wear during her earthly pilgrimage.

5. Take note however that she yearns for one thing and receives another. In spite of her longing for the repose of contemplation she is burdened with the task of preaching; and despite her desire to bask in the Bridegroom's presence she is entrusted with the cares of begetting and rearing children. Nor is this the only time she has been so treated. Once before when she sighed for the Bridegroom's kisses and embraces she was told: "Your breasts are better than wine," to make her realize that she was a mother, that her duty was to suckle her babes, to provide food for her children. If indolence does not prevent you from trying, perhaps you too can discover further similar instances in other verses of this Song. Was it not prefigured long ago in the life of the holy Patriarch Jacob, when, instead of the long-awaited embraces of his desired Rachel, beautiful though barren, he was given, against his will and contrary to his plans, one who was fecund but blear-eyed? So now too, the bride, as she is eagerly enquiring to learn where her Beloved pastures his flock and rests at noon, is given instead ornaments of gold studded with silver, gifts of wisdom and eloquence, and committed to the work of preaching.