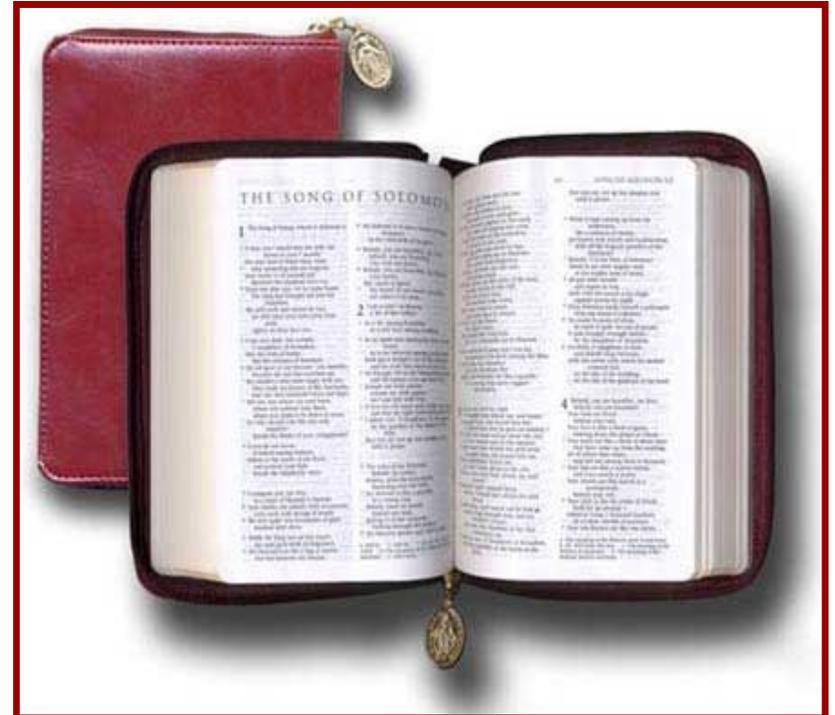




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SONG OF SONGS—46

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE WINE OF ZEAL
AND
THE OIL OF MERCY***

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 Wine of Zeal and the Oil of Mercy

“Behold, how beautiful you are, my dearest, O how beautiful, your eyes are like doves!” How beautifully said, how excellent. The bride's presumption springs from her love, the Bridegroom's anger from his love. The circumstances prove this. For correction followed the presumption, amendment the correction, and reward the amendment. The master is gone, the king has disappeared, dignity is put off, reverence is laid aside, only the Beloved is present. As love grows strong, pride melts away. And just as Moses once spoke to God as a friend to a friend and God answered him, so now the Word and the soul converse with mutual enjoyment, like two friends. And no wonder. The two streams of their love have but a single source from which they are equally sustained. Winged words honey-sweet fly to and fro between them, and their eyes like heralds of holy love, betray to each other their fullness of delight. He calls her his dearest one, proclaims her beauty, repeats that proclamation, only to win a like response from her. It is no idle repetition that gives firm assurance of love, and hints at something that demands investigation.

Humility is the soul's loveliness.

“Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be cleansed”

The herb hyssop symbolizes the humility that purifies the heart.

9. Again, this repetition may have expressed her admiration at the beauty in each of Christ's natures, the beauty of nature and the beauty of grace. How beautiful you appear to the angels, Lord Jesus, in the form of God eternal, begotten before the daystar amid the splendors of heaven, "the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature," the unchanging and untarnished brightness of eternal life? How beautiful you are to me, my Lord, even in the very discarding of your beauty! When you divested yourself of the native radiance of the unfailing light, then your kindness was thrown into relief, your love shone out more brightly, your grace was wider in its sweep. Star out of Jacob, how brilliant your rising above me! How fair the flower, as you spring from the root of Jesse! How pleasant your light as you come to me in darkness, rising from on high! How stupendous, how admirable in the sight of the angelic hosts, is your conception from the Holy Spirit, your birth from the Virgin, your sinless life, your wealth of doctrine, your glorious miracles, your revelation of mysteries. And how you rose from the heart of the earth, gleaming after your setting, Sun of Righteousness! And finally, with robes of splendor, how you ascended to the heights of heaven, the King of Glory! Because of all these marvels shall not all my bones cry out: Lord who is like you?

10. These are the qualities, and others like them, that the bride contemplated in her beloved when she said: "Behold, how beautiful you are, my Love, how beautiful." And not these alone, but beyond them she must have glimpsed something of the beauty of his higher nature, something that wholly transcends our vision, that eludes our experience. And therefore repetition is her tribute to the loveliness of the two natures. Hear then how she dances at the sight and words of her Beloved, as her love spills over in song to him to celebrate their betrothal: "Our bed is covered with flowers; the beams of our houses are of cedar, the paneling of cypress." But this song of the bride we will save for a new discourse, so that when quiet rest has made us more eager we shall more willingly rejoice and be glad with her, to praise and glorify her Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

2. Let us see what is meant by the soul's twofold beauty, for that is what seems to be intimated here. Humility is the soul's loveliness. This is not my opinion merely, the Prophet has already said: "Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be cleansed," symbolizing in this lowly herb the humility that purifies the heart. He who was once both king and prophet trusts that this will wash him clean from his grave offence, and give him back the snowy brightness of his innocence. But though we are attracted by the humility of one who has gravely sinned, we may not admire it. If, however, a man retains an innocence now graced with humility, do you not think that his soul is endowed with loveliness? Mary never lost her holiness, yet she did not lack humility; and so the king desired her loveliness, because she joined humility to innocence. As she said: "He looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaid." Happy then are those who keep their garments clean, who guard their simplicity and innocence, but on condition that they strive for the loveliness of humility. One so endowed will hear words like these: "Behold, how beautiful you are my dearest, O how beautiful." Lord Jesus, if only you would once say to my soul: "How beautiful you are." Safeguard my humility! For I have poorly kept my robe of innocence. I am your servant. I cannot presume to profess myself your friend, for I fail to hear your voice repeat its witness to my beauty. It would be enough for me to hear it even once. But what if this too should be questionable: I know what I will do: servant though I am I shall have recourse to her who is the friend. In my dwarfish ugliness I shall be filled with wonder by her multiform loveliness; I shall rejoice at the voice of the Bridegroom as he too marvels at a beauty so great. Who knows but I may so find favor in the eyes of the bride, and with her support be numbered among the friends. Then as the Bridegroom's friend I shall stand and experience the greatest joy at hearing the Bridegroom's voice, the voice that is meant for the ear of his beloved. Let us listen and be glad. They are present to each other, they speak together. Let us also attend; no worldly cares, no carnal pleasures must distract us from this conversation.

3. "Behold, how beautiful you are, my dearest," he said, how beautiful." "Behold," is an expression of his admiration; the rest, his praise. And how worthy of admiration she is, in whom not the loss but the preservation of holiness fostered humility. Rightly too is this beauty praised twice over, since she lacked neither of the two sources of beauty. This is a rare bird on earth, where neither innocence is lost nor humility excluded by innocence. Consequently she who retained both is truly blessed. The proof is that though conscious of no fault she did not reject the correction. We, when we sin gravely, can scarcely tolerate reproof; she on the contrary listens with equanimity to bitter reprimands, and does not sin. If she did long to see her Bridegroom's glory, what harm in that? It is a praiseworthy desire. And yet when reproved she repented and said: "My beloved is to me a little bundle of myrrh that lies between my breasts." As much as to say: It is enough for me; I desire to know nothing any longer except Jesus and him crucified. What great humility! Though actually innocent she adopts the attitude of the penitent, and though conscious of nothing for which to repent, she still had the will to repent. But why then, you ask, was she reprimanded if she did nothing wrong? But listen now to the plan and the prudence of the Bridegroom. In the same way that Abraham's obedience was put to the test long ago, so now the humility of the bride. And just as Abraham, when he carried out the command was told: "Now I know that you fear God;" so she is equivalently told: Now I know that you are humble. What he actually says is: "Behold, how beautiful you are." And he repeats this encomium to show that the grace of humility is joined to the glory of holiness: "Behold, how beautiful you are, my dearest, how beautiful." Now I know that you are beautiful, not merely because of my love for you but also because of your humility. I am not now praising your beauty among women nor the beauty of your cheeks and neck as I have previously done. I make no comparison of your beauty, nor qualification nor any other distinction. I speak of your beauty as such.

8. When the Word therefore tells the soul, "You are beautiful," and calls it friend, he infuses into it the power to love, and to know it is loved in return. And when the soul addresses him as beloved and praises his beauty, she is filled with admiration for his goodness and attributes to him without subterfuge or deceit the grace by which she loves and is loved. The Bridegroom's beauty is his love of the bride, all the greater in that it existed before hers. Realizing then that he was her lover before he was her beloved, she cries out with strength and ardor that she must love him with her whole heart and with words expressing deepest affection. The speech of the Word is an infusion of grace, the soul's response is wonder and thanksgiving. The more she feels surpassed in her loving the more she gives in love; and her wonder grows when he still exceeds her. Hence, not satisfied to tell him once that he is beautiful, she repeats the word, to signify by that repetition the pre-eminence of his beauty.

7. But perhaps you are thinking and asking yourselves with increasing doubt: "How can the words of the Word be spoken to the soul and those of the soul to the Word, so that she hears his voice telling her that she is beautiful, and she in return offers a similar compliment to him? How can this happen? It is not the word that speaks, it is we who speak the word. So too, the soul has no means of uttering speech unless the body's mouth forms and speaks the words." It is a good question; but take note that it is the Spirit who speaks, and whatever is said must be spiritually understood. So whenever you hear or read that the Word and the soul converse together, and contemplate each other, do not imagine them speaking with human voices nor appearing in bodily form. Listen, this is rather what you must think about it: The Word is a spirit, the soul is a spirit; and they possess their own mode of speech and mode of presence in accord with their nature. The speech of the Word is loving kindness, that of the soul, the fervor of devotion. The soul without devotion is a speechless infant that can never enjoy such intercourse with the Word. But when the Word addresses such a soul, desiring to speak to it, that soul cannot but hear, for "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit." And again when the soul decides to speak, much less can the Word hide from it, not merely because he is present everywhere, but rather because without his inspiration the soul will lack the devotion that urges speech.

4. He continues: "Your eyes are like doves." He is still obviously paying tribute to her humility. He takes account of the fact that when he disapproved of her ambitious enquiry she did not hesitate for a moment but turned her mind to matters less exalted. She exclaimed: "My beloved is to me a little bundle of myrrh." There is a vast difference between the vision of his glory and the little bundle of myrrh; and therefore an unmistakable sign of humility in her acceptance of the summons from the one to the other. So, "your eyes are like doves." You no longer occupy yourself with great affairs or marvels beyond your scope, but like that guileless bird who builds her nest in the crevices of the rock, you are content to be unpretentious, to linger near my wounds, happy to contemplate with dove-like eyes the mysteries of my Incarnation and Passion.

5. However, since the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of this bird the vision commended to us under the sign of a dove is not mere simple gazing but spiritual contemplation. I think too that we should refer this present text back to the one where the companions promise to make ornaments for her ears, not, as I pointed out, with the purpose of adorning her bodily ears but to prepare the ear of her heart. As a consequence, with a heart made purer by the faith that comes from hearing, she is more fully equipped to see where previously she failed. And since by accepting the ornaments she notably acquired a keener power of spiritual understanding, she became pleasing to the Bridegroom who always prefers to be seen in a spiritual manner. Adding this to the list of her praises he says: "Your eyes are like doves." "From now on," he says, "contemplate me in the spirit, because Christ the Lord is a spirit before your face. And you have the power to do this, for 'your eyes are like doves.' Formerly you did not have it, and so you incurred a rebuke; now you may gaze as you please, because 'your eyes are like doves,' they are spiritually enlightened. Admittedly this is not the favor that you sought, for even now you are not equipped for that, but it suffices for you in the meantime. You will be led on from brightness to brightness, so exert to the full the power you now possess, and when you can, you will see more."

6. My brothers, I do not think that this kind of vision is to be lightly esteemed, nor that it is common to all, though it cannot match the one destined for us in the next life. Note carefully then what is to follow. The bride speaks in her turn: "Behold, how beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful." See how she takes her stand on the heights, see how her loftiest aspirations reach into the heavens, how with a personal right she claims as her beloved him who is Lord of the universe. Take note that she does not simply say "love," but "my love," as if insisting on a special prerogative. A tremendous vision indeed that endows her with such confidence and prestige that she greets this Lord of all things not as her lord but as her beloved. For I believe that in this vision images of his flesh, or of the cross, or in any way suggestive of physical frailty, were not imprinted on her imagination, since the Prophet tells us that under these forms he possessed neither beauty nor majesty. But as she now contemplates him, she declares him both beautiful and majestic, making it clear that her present vision transcended all others. He speaks to her face to face as once he spoke to Moses, and she for her part sees God plainly, not through riddles and symbols. Her words declare what her mind perceives in that sublime vision so full of delight. Her eyes beheld the king in his beauty, though to her he was not king but her beloved. One man has seen him sitting on a lofty and exalted throne, another testifies that he appeared to him face to face; but for me this vision of the bride surpasses them, for there we read that he was seen as Lord, here as the beloved. One text runs: "I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne;" another: "I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved." But he says: "If I am a master, where is my fear?" If the revelation accorded to them was accompanied by fear, since where the Lord is there too is fear of him, I for my part, given the choice should embrace with greater willingness and love the vision seen by the bride, because it comes about through a more wonderful passion, that of love. For to fear is to expect punishment, but perfect love casts out fear. There is a vast difference between him who appears so terrible in his deeds among men, and him who surpasses men in beauty of form. "Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely." These words are vibrating with love, not fear.