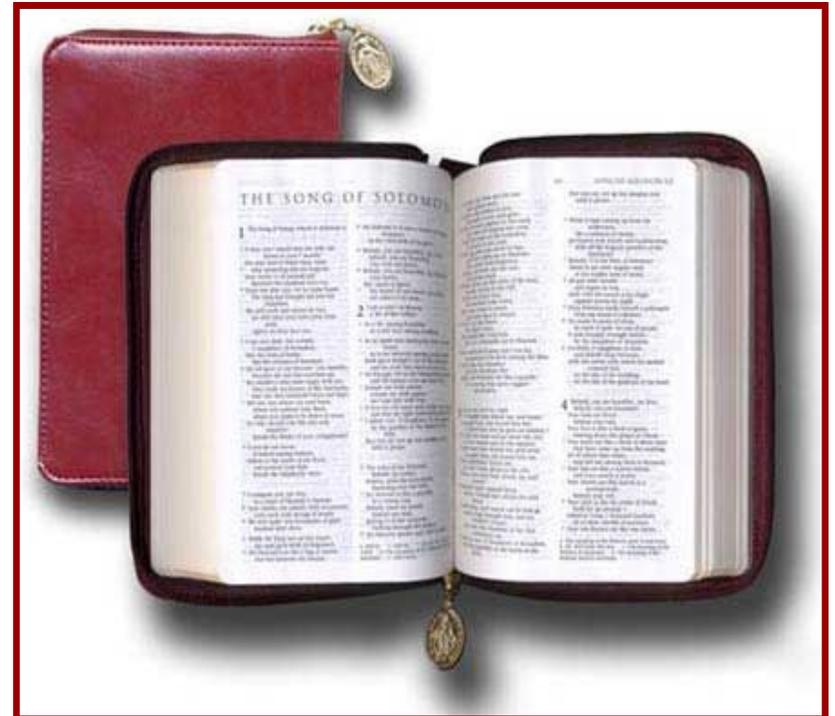




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SONG OF SONGS—36

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BRIDEGROOM
REPROVES THE BRIDE***

TWO KINDS OF IGNORANCE

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 Bridegroom Reproves the Bride - Two Kinds of Ignorance

"If you do not know yourself, go forth." What a hard and bitter reproof: "Go forth." This is the kind of language that slaves hear from masters smarting with anger, or slave-girls from mistresses they have gravely offended: "Get out of here, get away from me, clear out of my sight, away from this house." And this kind of harsh and bitter expression, extremely reproachful, is now used by the Bridegroom against his beloved, but with this condition: if she does not know herself. Nothing he could say was more warranted to frighten her than the threat that she should go forth. And you can see this if you think well on the place she is to go forth from and where she is told to go. From where and to where, if not from the spirit to the flesh, from things that are the soul's delight to desire of earthy pleasures, from the inward repose of the mind to the world's clattering bustle where worry allows no peace; in all of which there is nothing but toil and sorrow and spiritual suffering. The soul has been taught by the Lord and received the power to enter into itself, to long for the presence of God in its inmost depths, to seek his face continually -- for God is a spirit, and those who seek him ought to walk by the promptings of the Spirit rather than of the flesh, lest they live according to the flesh. Would that soul regard a temporary experience of hell as more horrible, more punitive, than having once tasted the sweetness of this spiritual desire, to have to go out again to the allurements or rather the irksome demands of the flesh, and be involved as before in the insatiable prurience of the body's senses? Ecclesiastes says: "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." Listen to a man who has experienced the things I speak of: "The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." To attempt to turn this holy man away from that good, would cause him to feel as if driven out of Paradise, from the very gateway to glory. Listen to another man with a similar experience: "My heart says to you: 'My face has sought you;' your face, O Lord, I shall seek." Whence he said: "It is good for me to adhere to God;" and he addresses his soul with the words: "Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you." Therefore I say to you: There is nothing so feared by a man who has once received this favor, than, abandoned by grace, to have to go out again to the fleshly consolations, which are really desolations, and to endure once more the tumult of physical desire.

***"THE LORD IS GOOD TO THOSE WHO WAIT FOR HIM,
TO THE SOUL THAT SEEKS HIM."***

If you pay close attention, I think you will decide that even in this life man has a lower position than the beasts. Do you not think that man endowed with reason but failing to live reasonably is more of a beast than the beasts themselves? For if the beast does not control himself by reason he has an excuse based on his very nature, for that gift was totally denied to him; but man has no excuse, because reason is a special prerogative of his nature. A man then in this condition is rightly judged to go forth from the company of other living creatures and drop to a lower level, since he is the only creature who violates the laws of his nature by a degenerate way of life. Gifted with reason, he imitates those who lack it in what he does and in what he loves. It is demonstrably clear therefore, that man is inferior to the herds, in this life by the depravity of his nature, in the next by the severity of the punishment.

9. That is how a man becomes accursed when he is found to be ignorant of God. Or should I say ignorant of self? I must include both: the two kinds of ignorance are damnable, either is enough to incur damnation. And do you want to know why? It should be perfectly obvious about ignorance of God if you can see that there is only one eternal life: to acknowledge the Father as true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Therefore hear the Bridegroom plainly and openly condemning the soul's ignorance of itself. For what does he say? Not "if you do not know God," but "if you do not know yourself." It is clear therefore that he who does not know will not be known, whether the ignorance refers to himself or to God. If God gives us help, it will be to our profit to speak again about this twofold ignorance. But not now: you are tired, we have not prefaced it with the customary prayers, and either I shall treat so important a matter carelessly, or you will listen with less attention to truths that should be absorbed with ardent desire. If you try to take a meal when already full and without appetite, not only is it useless but very harmful. All the more so if the food of the soul is taken with disrelish: instead of increasing knowledge it will merely trouble the mind. May Jesus Christ, the Church's Bridegroom, who is blessed forever, preserve us from this. Amen.

2. "Go forth and pasture your kids:" it is a terrible, an awe-inspiring threat. As much as to say: know yourself unworthy of that familiar and sweet contemplation of things heavenly, things of the spirit, divine things. Therefore go forth from that heart of yours which has been my sanctuary, where it was your custom to drink sweet draughts from the secret, holy teachings of truth and wisdom; be like a woman of the world, become entangled in pandering to the nourishment and delights of your flesh. Since through them sin enters the soul like death through the windows, he calls the restless, wanton senses of the body kids, which signifies sin -- at the judgment they are to be placed on the left. The words that follow in the text, "beside the shepherds' tents," agree suitably with this interpretation. For unlike lambs, kids are fed not above but beside the shepherds' tents. Even though during the days of their service here below they dwell in tents set upon the earth and made of earth, namely, their own bodies, shepherds who are worthy of the name are accustomed to feed the flocks of the Lord with food from the heavenly pastures, not from the earth; it is the Lord's will that they preach, not their own. The kids however, the bodily senses, do not need heavenly things, but staying beside the shepherds' tents, they choose their foods from all the material goods of this world, which is the body's sphere; but desire, far from being satisfied, is but stimulated by these foods.

3. What a shameful change of occupation! Her previous occupation was to nourish her exiled pilgrim soul with holy meditations, feeding on heavenly truths, to seek after God's good-pleasure and the mysteries of his will, to penetrate the heavens by the power of her love and wander in thought through the abodes of the blessed, to pay homage to the patriarchs and apostles and throngs of prophets, to admire the triumphs of the martyrs and be lost in wonder at the superb beauty of the angel choirs. Now she has to abandon all these, and subject herself to the shameful task of serving the body, of obeying the flesh; she must satisfy stomach and palate, and beg throughout the world, this world whose form is passing away, for the means to gratify in some degree her perpetually ravenous curiosity. My tears flow like streams for a soul in this plight: she who once fed so delicately now lies groveling on the dunghill. One may say with the blessed Job that she fed the barren, childless woman and did no good to the widow.

It is worth noting that he did not simply tell her to go forth, but to go after the flocks of her companions and to feed her kids. It seems to me that here he is warning us of something very important. What is that? Alas! that one who was so excellent, at one time a member of the flock and now, in wretched decline from bad to worse, is not permitted to remain with the flocks but commanded to go behind them. You ask what I mean. You yourselves can read: "When man was being honored, he did not understand; and now he is compared to senseless beasts and becomes like them." That is how one so excellent is made one of the flock. And the brutes, if they could speak, would surely say: "See, Adam has become like one of us." He who was being honored! "How honored?" you ask. His dwelling was in Paradise, he spent his days in the midst of delights. His food the sweet-smelling apples, his bed the flowered banks, he was crowned with glory and honor, made keeper of the things his Creator had made, and knew neither trouble nor want. A gift still more sublime was the divine likeness he bore, that destined him for companionship with the angel hosts, with the multitudes of heaven's armies.

4. But he "exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." That is why the bread of angels became like grass in the manger, set before us for the beasts that we are. For the Word was made flesh, and according to the Prophet, all flesh is grass. But the grass of the Word has not been withered nor has its bloom turned pale, because the Spirit of the Lord has rested upon him. And even though the grass may wither and the flower fade, the Word of the Lord remains forever. Therefore if the grass is the Word, and the Word remains forever, the grass too of necessity remains forever. How could it bestow eternal life if it did not itself remain forever?

5. Let us ponder together on the voice of the Son addressing the Father in the words of the Psalm. "You will not allow your Holy One to see corruption." He is obviously speaking of the body that lay lifeless in the tomb. This is that same Holy One of whom the angel spoke when he announced to the Virgin Mary: "The Holy One to be born of you will be called the Son of God." How could it be possible for that holy grass to see corruption, sprouting as it was in the spring-like meadows, perpetually green, of an incorruptible womb? It can even hold fast the eager eyes of the angels in a joy that will never grow weary. The grass will lose its freshness only if Mary will lose her virginity. And so he who is food for man has changed himself into fodder for beasts, because man has been changed into a beast. Alas! a sad and pitiable change, that man, a native of Paradise, lord of the earth, citizen of heaven, member of the household of the Lord of hosts, a brother of the blessed spirits and co-heir of the heavenly powers, finds himself lying in a stable by a sudden transformation due to his own weakness, in need of grass because of his animal likeness, and tied to the manger because of his untamed roughness. As it is written: "Curbed by bit and bridle, the jaws of those who will not stay close to you." Acknowledge, O ox, your owner and you, ass, your Lord's crib, that God's Prophets may be found trustworthy in their foretelling of these wonderful works of God. Acknowledge, Beast, him whom in your human condition you did not acknowledge; adore in the stable him from whom you fled in Paradise; pay honor now to the crib of one whose rule you scorned; eat now as grass him for whom as bread, the Bread of angels, you lost all taste.

6. You ask: "What is the cause of this debasement?" Simply that when man was in honor he lacked understanding. What did he not understand? The Psalmist does not explain, but let me explain. Placed in a position of honor, he was so intrigued by the dignity of his rank that he did not understand that he was but clay, and soon experienced in himself what a member of the captive race both wisely noted and truly expressed at a much later date: "If anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself." Woe to that first unhappy man that no one was then present who could say to him: "Dust and ashes, why are you proud?" From then on this fairest of creatures was reduced to the level of the herd; from then on the likeness of God was changed to the likeness of a beast; from then on association with the animals took the place of fellowship with the angels. You see how careful we must be to shun this ignorance that has brought evils by the thousands on the whole human race! For the Psalmist compares man to the senseless beasts, for the reason that he lacked understanding. We must avoid ignorance at any cost, or if we are found to be still without understanding even after chastisement, more serious evils than the former will multiply upon us and it will be said of us: "We tried to cure Babylon; she has gotten no better." And rightly so, if the chastisement has failed to make us understand what we have heard.

7. And see if perhaps it was not for this reason that the Bridegroom, in order to fill his beloved with a fear of this ignorance by the thunder of his threatening, did not say "Go forth with the flocks," or "go forth to the flocks," but "Go forth after the flocks of your companions." Why does he speak in this manner? Surely for the purpose of showing that the second ignorance was more to be feared, to be ashamed of, than the first, for the first brought man to a level with the beasts, the latter made him lower. Because men, unaccepted or reprobated on account of their ignorance, have to stand before the dreaded judgment seat and be committed to the unquenchable fire, but not so the beasts. Men of this type will fare worse in relation to the beasts than if they did not exist at all. "It would have been better for that man," he said, "if he had not been born." He does not mean if he had not been born at all, but if he had not been born a man; better to have been a beast or any other irrational creature, which, since it lacks the faculty of judging, will not be brought to judgment, nor through this to punishment. The rational soul then, that is ashamed of its first ignorance, should remember that though it has beasts for companions in the enjoyment of earthly goods, it will not have their company in its endurance of hell's torments; that it will ultimately be banished with shame even from the flocks of its bestial companions; that it will not travel with them but plainly after them; for when they shall have ceased to feel any evil, it will be exposed to evils of all kinds from which it will never be set free, if indeed it has added the second ignorance to the first. Accordingly man goes forth and walks alone after the flocks of his companions, since he alone is thrust into the pit of hell. Does he not seem to you to hold the last place who is bound hands and feet and thrown out into the dark? The last state of that man will obviously be worse than the former, for then he was on terms of equality with the beasts, now he is reduced to a lower condition.