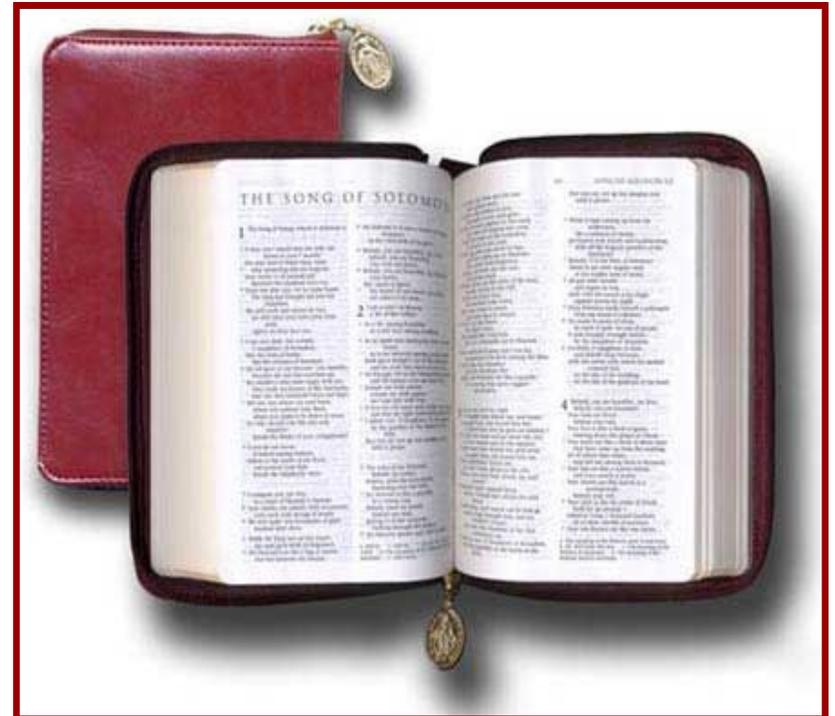




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SONG OF SONGS—69

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE CARE
OF THE
BRIDEGROOM
FOR THE BRIDE***

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 Care of the Bridegroom for the Bride

Hear now what I held over from yesterday; hear of the joy which I have experienced. Yet it is your joy also. Hear of it then and rejoice. I experienced this joy in just one word of the Bride; and I was, as it were, lapped in its fragrance; so I hid it away to bring out for you today, all the more joyfully because it is more opportune. The Bride has spoken, and has said that the Bridegroom inclines himself to her; who then is the Bride, and who is the Bridegroom? The Bridegroom is our God, and we, I say in all humility, are the Bride - we and the whole multitude of captives whom he acknowledges. Let us rejoice that this glory is ours; we are they to whom God inclines. But how unequal a partnership! What are the earth-born, the children of men, in his presence? In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, 'they are as if they were not, they are considered by him as nothing but emptiness.' What meaning can there be in a comparison between such different persons? Either the Bride glorifies herself beyond measure, or the Bridegroom loves beyond measure. How wonderful that she should claim as her own the attention of the Bridegroom when she says, 'My beloved is mine'. Nor is she yet content, but goes on to glorify herself even more, replying to him in her turn as to an equal; for she continues, 'and I am his'. A wonderful saying - 'and I am his'; and no less wonderful, 'My Beloved is mine'. But that both should be said together - that is more wonderful than either.

**There is nothing that a pure heart,
a good conscience,
and an unfeigned faith will not venture.**

2. There is nothing that a pure heart, a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith will not venture. 'He inclines to me', says the Bride. Does this great majesty incline to her thus - this majesty on whom rests the government and administration of the universe? Does the care of the world give way to the business - or rather the repose - of the love and desire of the Bride? Yes indeed, for she is the Church of the elect, of whom the Apostle Paul says, 'I endure everything for the sake of the elect'. And who can doubt that God shows grace and mercy to his saints, and is mindful of his elect. Therefore we cannot deny his providence towards the rest of his creatures; but the Bride claims his attention for herself. Is it for oxen that God is concerned? No doubt we can say the same about horses, camels, elephants, and all the beasts on earth and the fishes in the sea and the birds of the air; indeed of everything on the earth except only those to whom is said, 'Casting all your care upon him for he cares for you.' Do you not see that this is the same as saying, 'Incline to him, for he inclines to you'? And notice that the Apostle Peter, whose words these are, preserves the same order of words as does the Bride, for he says, 'Casting all your care upon him' - not 'in order that he may care for you' but 'because he cares for you,' thereby revealing not only the depth of his love for the Church of the Saints, but also its eternal quality.

3. It is obvious that what the Apostle says about oxen has no reference to the Bride; he who loves her and gave himself for her needs must care for her. Is she not that lost sheep whose care came before even that of the heavenly flock? The shepherd left the rest and came to earth to find her. He sought her diligently, and when he found her he did not lead her, but carried her back! Then on her account he called the angels together and celebrated a new and joyful festival with her. How then can it be said that he will not care for her, when he deigned to carry her on his shoulders? She is not mistaken, then, when she says, 'The Lord takes thought for me', nor is she deceived when she says, 'The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me', or when she says anything else which shows God's love for her. Thus it is that she speaks of the Lord of Hosts as her beloved, and glories that he who judges all things in tranquility cares for her. Why should she not glory? She has heard him saying to her, 'Can a woman forget her child, and not have compassion on him? And even if she does forget him, yet I will not forget you.' Again, 'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous.' Now what is the Bride but the congregation of the righteous? What is she but the generation of those who seek the face of the Bridegroom? It cannot be that he should incline to her, and she not incline to him. Therefore she says, 'He inclines to me and I to him. He inclines to me because he is good and gracious; I incline to him because I am not ungrateful. He gives me grace from his graciousness; I give him gratitude for grace. He has a care for my deliverance and my salvation; I for his honor and the fulfillment of his will. He has a care for me, and for no other, for I am his only dove; I have a care for him and for no other; I do not hear the voice of others, nor do I listen to those who say "Look, here is Christ" or "look, there he is!" ' It is the Church who speaks.

4. What shall we say, each one of us? Do we think that there is any among us to whom the Bride's words can be applied? Do I say 'Any among us'? I think myself that any inquiry would show that there is no member of the Church to whom it may not be applied in some degree. But one does not deal with an individual in the same way as with many people. It was not for one soul, but for many who should be gathered up into the one Church, his only Bride, that God wrought so great a work at so great a cost, 'working salvation in the midst of the earth'. She is the only one, the dearest of all to him, embracing him as no other spouse, as he gives himself to no other Bride. What may she not ask from so generous a love? What may she not hope for from one who came from heaven to seek her, who called her to him from the ends of the earth, and bought her at a price - the price of the blood of him who bought her. Moreover, her confidence is the greater when she looks to the future and knows that the Lord has need of her. Do you ask why? To see the prosperity of his chosen ones, to rejoice in the gladness of his people, to glory with his heritage. You must not think that this is a small matter. I tell you that none of his works will reach perfection if this one fails. Does not the end of all things depend on the condition and consummation of the Church? Take away this, and the lower creation will wait in vain for the revelation of the sons of God. Take away this, then neither patriarchs nor prophets will come to perfection, for Paul says that God has ordained for us that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Take away this, and the very glory of the holy angels will be impaired if their numbers are not complete, nor will the City of God rejoice in its wholeness.

5. How then shall the design of God find fulfillment, that mystery of his will and sacrament of his mercy? How shall I be given those babes and suckling's out of whose mouth God has perfected praise? It is not heaven, but the Church, where these children are found, to whom is said, 'I feed you with milk, not solid food'. And they are invited to complete, as it were, the glory of God, in the words of the prophet, 'Praise the Lord, you children'. Do you imagine that God will receive all the praise due his glory before the coming of those who shall sing in the presence of the angels, 'We rejoice for the days in which you have humiliated us, for the years in which we have seen evil'? Even the heavens do not know this kind of joy, except through the children of the Church; no-one experiences joy like this unless he has known what it is to be without joy. Joy is most welcome after sadness, rest after toil, harbor after shipwreck. Everyone enjoys security, but no-one so much as one who has known fear. Light is pleasant to everyone, but particularly to someone who has escaped from the tyranny of darkness. To have passed from death to life doubles the beauty of life. This is my offering to the common life of heaven, and it is something of which the blessed spirits have no knowledge. I would even dare to say that the very life of the blessed lacks that blessedness which is mine, unless they acknowledge that they enjoy it through charity in me and through me. Something of my own bliss seems to be added even to that perfection, and this is no small matter, for the angels rejoice at a sinner's repentance. And if my tears are a joy to the angels, what must my joy be? All they do is in praise of God; but something is lacking in that praise if there is none to say 'We passed through fire and water, and you led us to a place of refreshment'.

6. Happy then is the Church in her completeness, yet all her praise is unequal to him who occasions it, not only for the blessings she has received, but also for those yet to be given her. Why should she be anxious about her merits, when she has a stronger, surer reason for exultation in the purpose of God? God cannot contradict himself, nor cause not to be done what he has done, for, as the Scripture says, 'He has done what is to be'. He will do so, he will do so; he will not fail in his purpose. Therefore you have no need to ask on what merits we base our hope, especially when you hear the word of the prophet Ezekiel: 'It is not for your sake that I do this, but for my own,' says the Lord. It is enough for merit to know that merit is not enough. But as merit must not presume on merit, so lack of merit must bring judgment. Furthermore, children re-born in baptism are not without merit, but possess the merits of Christ; but they make themselves unworthy of these if they do not add their own - not because of inability, but because of neglect; this is the danger of maturity. Henceforward, take care that you possess merit; when you possess it, you will know it as a gift. Hope for its fruit, the mercy of God, and you will escape all danger of poverty, ingratitude, and presumption. The lack of merit is a poverty which destroys, but presumption of spirit is false riches. Therefore the wise man says, 'Give me neither poverty nor riches'. Happy is the Church which does not lack merits free from presumption nor presumption free from merits. She has grounds for presumption, but they are not her merits. Merits she has, but they are to be earned, not presumed upon. Not to presume upon anything: is this not to have a claim upon it? So she is more secure in presuming upon that which she does not presume upon, and she has no cause to find difficulty in the expression of her exultation, since she has much ground for exaltation. The mercies of God are many, and his truth endures forever.

7. Why should she not exult in safety, since mercy and truth are met together as a proof of her glory? Therefore whether she says 'My beloved is mine', or 'I waited for the Lord and he inclined to me', or even 'The Lord takes thought of me' or uses some other such words which seem to express God's love and singular favor towards one of his creatures, she will find none of these things foreign to her, since the ground of her confidence is the nature of God. Then, too, she sees no other Bride, no other Church, in whom can be fulfilled what must be fulfilled. Therefore, as far as the Church is concerned, it is clear that she will in no way hesitate to claim all these promises for herself. You may ask whether it is permissible for any one soul, however spiritual and holy, to venture to act thus; for surely all the favors ordained for the great body catholic may not be claimed for herself by one soul, of whatever degree of sanctity, out of all that great number. So I feel it may be somewhat difficult, if indeed it is possible, to find how this may be permitted. Therefore I think this must be dealt with in another sermon, and we must not now enter the toils of so intricate a subject, whose outcome we do not yet know, without first making our prayer on this profound matter to him who opens and no-one closes, the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.