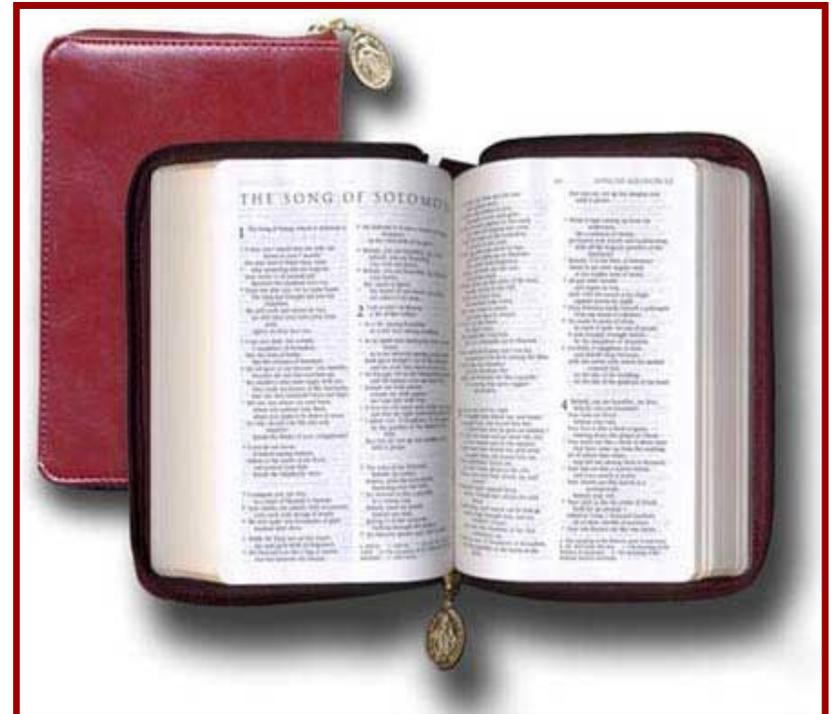




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SONG OF SONGS—78

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE KIND OF SHEPHERD
BY WHICH THE BRIDE SAYS
SHE WAS FOUND
AND THE LOVE OF TRUTH
WHICH SHE HAS LEARNED FROM THEM***

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 Kind of Shepherd by which the Bride Says She was Found and the Love of Truth Which She Has Learned From Them

Now we are free to continue. Yesterday we described the kind of guides we should choose to have on the path we travel. However, we find that the guides we have are not of this kind, but very different. Not all those whom you see today waiting on the Bride and hanging around her, as the expression is, are friends of the bridegroom. There are very few of them among all her lovers who are not concerned with their own interests. It is gifts that they love; they cannot love Christ as well, for they have given their allegiance to Mammon. See how they go about, dressed elegantly and fashionably in bright colors, like a bride coming out of her chamber. If you saw one of them in the distance, you would think it was the Bride rather than an attendant. Where do you suppose they get this wealth from, these splendid clothes and rich foods, and all these vessels of gold and silver, if it is not from the Bride? So it comes about that she is left poor, naked, and in want, her appearance piteous, unkempt, bruised, and weak. Now this is not to adorn the Bride but to despoil her; not to guard her but to destroy her. It is not to defend her but to expose her to danger; not to provide for her but to prostitute her. It is not to feed the flock, but to butcher and devour it. The Lord says of these, 'They eat up my people as though they were bread,' and, 'They have devoured Jacob and laid waste his dwelling place.' And in another place the prophet says, 'They eat up the sins of my people,' as if to say, 'They demand a price for sins, but do not bother to care for sinners as they should.' Can you mention anyone in authority who is not more concerned with emptying people's purses than rooting out their vices? Where is the man who turns away anger by his prayer, and preaches the acceptable year of the Lord? But we are speaking of comparatively trivial matters; heavier judgment waits for more important ones.

8. I would have preferred, I admit, to continue without engaging in an examination which I do not feel up to. But when I remember in how many obscure and difficult matters I have been conscious of support beyond my expectation, when you were lifting up your hearts to God, I am ashamed of my lack of faith. And suppressing my apprehension I take up the task which in my diffidence I had shunned. The help to which I am accustomed will, I hope, be at hand; if not, what I intend to say will not be idle when I have such friendly hearers. But this will form the beginning of my next sermon, for we must bring this one to a close. May he who is the Bridegroom of the Church grant that you may not only remember what you have heard, but take it to heart with love and effectually put it into practice - he who is Jesus Christ our Lord, God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 78

6. But now the Bride does not find him whom she sought, but is found by those whom she did not seek. Let this be a warning to those who are not afraid to enter the paths of life without anyone to guide and teach them, but act as their own pupils as well as their own teachers in the spiritual life. Nor are they satisfied with this; they even collect disciples, the blind leading the blind. How many have we seen wander from the right path, to their great peril, as a result of this? For their ignorance of the wiles and tricks of Satan brings it about that those who began in the spirit finish in the flesh. They are led seriously astray and fall damnably. Such men should see that they walk carefully and take warning from the Bride, who could not reach her beloved until she was met by those whose ministry she used to gain knowledge of her beloved, to learn the fear of the Lord. Anyone who pretends to give his confidence to his director will find he is giving it to a seducer. The man who sends his sheep to pasture without a guardian is a shepherd not of sheep but of wolves.

7. Now let us turn to the Bride and hear what she means when she says she was found. The word seems to me to be used in a rather unusual sense. She speaks as though the Church had come from one place, whereas, according to the word of the Lord, it came from the east and from the west, and from all the ends of the earth. But it has never at any time been gathered together in one place where it could be found by the apostles or the angels, to be led or directed to him whom its soul loves. Was it found before it was gathered together? It was not, for it did not exist. Therefore if she had said that it was gathered together, or had met, or (a term more applicable to the Church) been called together by those who preach the Gospel, I should have simply passed it by without any comment. For they are fellowworkers with God, and are heard to say, 'He who does not gather with me scatters.' I should not think it strange if anyone said that it was founded or built up by them, for they acted in union with him who says in the Gospels, 'Upon this rock I will build my church,' and, 'It was founded upon a rock.' But now she says none of these things, but makes the strange claim that she was found, and she causes us to hesitate a while, suspecting some hidden meaning which we ought to examine more carefully.

2. It is pointless to spend time on such as these, for they do not listen to us. If what we say is written down, they scorn to read them or, if they do happen to read them, they launch a diatribe against me, although they might more properly direct it against themselves. Let us then leave these, for they do not find the Bride, but sell her, and let us consider those who the bride says have found her, those whose office and ministry the others we mentioned have inherited, but not their zeal. Everyone wants to be their successors, but few their imitators. Would that they were found as meticulous in discharging their duties as they are eager in running after their dignities! Then they would watch over and take care of the bride who has been found and entrusted to their care. Indeed, they would watch over themselves, and not allow it to be said of them, 'My lovers and kinsmen approached and stood aloof from me.' This complaint is altogether just, and it cannot be applied to any age more justly than to ours. For not content with not watching over us, our guardians do us actual harm, being sunk in so deep a sleep that they do not wake at the thunder of divine wrath, and therefore do not tremble at their own peril. So it is that they care neither for themselves nor for their people, and they perish with those they destroy.

3. But who are those watchmen by whom the bride says that she has been found? Indeed they are apostles, apostolic men. These are the ones who guard the city, that is the Church which they have found, and they watch over her the more diligently when they see her in danger from evil which attacks her from within her own household. It is written, 'a man's enemies are those within his own household.' For they who have defended her with their own blood will surely not leave her without their protection, but will guard her and keep her safe by day and night, in life and in death. And if 'in the sight of the Lord the death of his saints is precious,' I have no doubt that they exercise their guardianship as much more powerfully in their deaths, as their authority is greatly strengthened by it.

4. But you may say, 'You speak as though you have seen these things with your own eyes; but such things are hidden from human view.' I would answer: 'You trust the witness of your own eyes; the witness of God is greater. For he says, "I have set watchmen upon your walls, O Jerusalem. They shall never be silent by day or night". 'But,' you say, 'that referred to the angels.' 'I do not deny it; "they are all ministering spirits".' But who shall say that I should not include with them those who are equal in authority to the angels themselves, but are perhaps nearer to us in affection and compassion, since they have greater kinship with us? Also, they have endured the same sufferings and miseries as we now endure for a time. Will these holy souls therefore not be filled with greater care and pity because they must remember experiencing the same troubles? Is it not their voice which says 'we have passed through fire and water, and you have brought us into a place of refreshment'? Would they leave us in the midst of the flames and great waters which they have passed through, without taking the trouble to stretch out a hand to us, their children? Surely not. It is well with you, mother Church, it is well with you in this place of pilgrimage: help comes to you from heaven and earth. Your guardians do not slumber or sleep. Your guardians are the holy angels, your watchmen are the spirits and souls of the righteous. Anyone is correct in feeling that you have been found by both alike, and by both alike you are guarded. And they each have their special care for you: the saints because they will not themselves be made perfect without you; the angels because without you their full number cannot be restored, for, as you all know, when Satan and his myrmidons fell from heaven, the number of the heavenly host was greatly diminished. Thus all things await their consummation from you, some the completion of their numbers, others the fulfillment of their desires. Be sure then that it is your voice which says in the Psalm, 'The just wait for me, until you reward me.'

5. Notice now that it is not said that she has found them, but rather that she has been found by them - and that, I suspect, is because they have been called for this very purpose. 'How shall they preach unless they are sent?' And there is a saying in the gospels: 'Lo, I send you forth,' and, 'Go, preach the gospel to every creature.' And so it was; she sought the bridegroom, and this was not hidden from him, for he himself had urged her on to seek him, and given her the desire to fulfil his commands and follow his way of life. But there must be someone to instruct her and teach her the way of prudence. Therefore he sent out, as it were, gardeners to cultivate and water his garden, to train and strengthen her in all truth, that is, to teach her and give her sure tidings of her beloved, since he is himself the truth which she seeks and which her soul truly loves. Indeed, who is the faithful and true lover of the soul if not he through whom the truth is loved? I am endowed with reason; I am capable of receiving truth, but this would be vain if I lacked the love of truth. He is the fruit of this vine, and I am the root. I am not safe from the axe if I am found apart from him. It is doubtless by nature's endowment that the divine likeness shines forth, and in this I am superior to all living creatures. Therefore my soul ventures to respond to the chaste embraces of truth, and so to rest in the complete assurance of his love and sweetness, provided that it finds favor in the eyes of so great a bridegroom, and that he accounts it worthy to attain to his glory, and even presents it to himself as a bride without spot or wrinkle or anything of that kind. What judgment, what penalty do you suppose a man will deserve if he shows indifference to so great a gift of God? But we will speak of this another time.