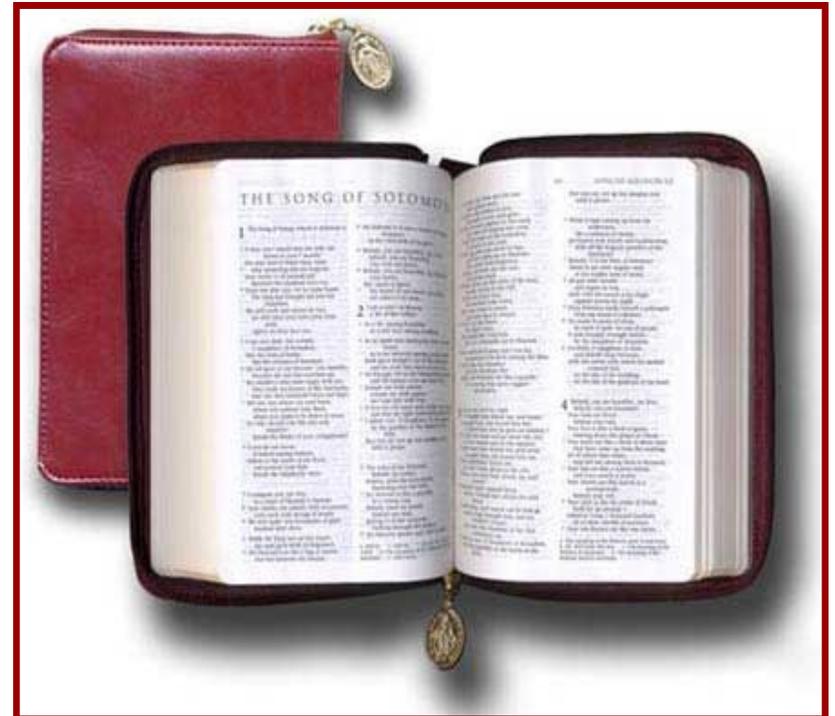




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SONG OF SONGS—21

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THREE QUALITIES
OF
LOVE***

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.

Three Qualities of Love

I would like to begin with a word from St Paul: "If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus, let him be anathema." Truly, I ought to love the one through whom I have my being, my life, my understanding. If I am ungrateful, I am unworthy too. Lord Jesus, whoever refuses to live for you is clearly worthy of death, and is in fact dead already. Whoever does not know you is a fool. And whoever wants to become something without you, without doubt that man is considered nothing and is just that. For what is man, unless you take notice of him? You have made all things for yourself, O God, and whoever wants to live for himself and not for you, in all that he does, is nothing. "Fear God, and keep his commandments," it is said, "for this is the whole duty of man." So if this is all, without this, man is nothing. Turn toward yourself, O God, this little that you have granted me to be; take from this miserable life, I beg you, the years that remain. In place of all that I lost in my evil way of living, O God, do not refuse a humble and penitent heart. My days have lengthened like a shadow and passed without fruits I cannot bring them back, but let it please you at least if I offer them to you in the bitterness of my soul. As for wisdom -- my every desire and intention is before you -- if there were any in me, I would keep it for you. But, God, you know my stupidity, unless perhaps it is wisdom for me to recognize it, and even this is your gift. Grant me more; not that I am ungrateful for this small gift, but that I am eager for what is lacking. For all these things, and as much as I am able, I love you.

As Saint John said:

"NOT THAT WE HAD LOVED HIM, BUT THAT HE FIRST LOVED US."

**He loved us even before we existed,
and in addition he loved us when we resisted him.**

2. But there is something else that moves me, arouses and enflames me even more. Good Jesus, the chalice you drank, the price of our redemption, makes me love you more than all the rest. This alone would be enough to claim our love. This, I say, is what wins our love so sweetly, justly demands it, firmly binds it, deeply affects it. Our Savior had to toil so hard in this, in fact in making the whole world the Creator did not labor so much. Then he spoke and they were made; he commanded and they were created. But in saving us he had to endure men who contradicted his words, criticized his actions, ridiculed his sufferings, and mocked his death. See how much he loved us. Add to this the fact that he was not returning love but freely offering it. For who had given him anything first, that it should be returned to him? As St John said: "Not that we had loved him, but that he first loved us." He loved us even before we existed, and in addition he loved us when we resisted him. According to the witness of St Paul: "Even when we were still his enemies we were reconciled to God through the blood of his Son." If he had not loved his enemies, he could not have had any friends, just as he would have had no one to love if he had not loved those who were not.

3. His love was sweet, and wise, and strong. I call it sweet because he took on a human body, wise because he avoided sin, strong because he endured death. Even though he took a body, his love was never sensual, but always in the wisdom of the Spirit. "A Spirit before our face is Christ the Lord," jealous of us but with the jealousy of God, not man, and certainly not like that of the first man, Adam, for Eve. So those whom he sought after in a body, he loved in the spirit and redeemed in power. How sweet it is to see as man the Creator of humanity. While he carefully protected nature from sin, he forcefully drove death from that nature also. In taking a body he stooped to me, in avoiding sin he took counsel with himself, in accepting death he satisfied the Father. A dear friend, a wise counselor, a strong helper. Should I not willingly entrust myself to the one who had the good will, the wisdom, the strength to save me? He sought me out, he called me through grace; will he refuse me as I come to him? I fear neither force nor fraud which can snatch me from his hand. He is the one who conquered all things, even death, and tricked the serpent, the seducer of the world, with a holy deception. He was more prudent than the one, more powerful than the other. He took to himself a true body but only the likeness of sin, giving a sweet consolation to weak men in the one and in the other hiding a trap to deceive the devil. To reconcile us to the Father he bravely suffered death and conquered it, pouring out his blood as the price of our redemption. His divine majesty would not have sought me in chains unless he had loved me so tenderly, but he added wisdom to his affection by which he deceived the serpent. Then he added patience with which to appease his divine Father who had been offended.

These are the qualities of love of which I promised to tell you. But I have shown them to you first in Christ, to make them so much more acceptable to you.

8. Of course this devotion to the humanity of Christ is a gift, a great gift of the Spirit. I have called it carnal with comparison to that other love which does not know the Word as flesh so much as the Word as wisdom, as justice, truth, holiness, loyalty, strength, and whatever else could be said in this manner. Christ is truly all these things. "He became for us the wisdom of God, and justice, and sanctification and redemption." Take as an example two men one of them feels a share in Christ's sufferings, is affected and easily moved at the thought of all that he suffered; he is nourished and strengthened by the sweetness of this devotion to good and honest and worthy actions. But the other is always aflame with zeal for justice, eager for the truth and for wisdom. His life, his habits are saintly, ashamed of boasting, avoiding criticism, never knowing envy, hating pride. He not only flees all human glory but shrinks from it and avoids it, every stain of impurity both in body and soul he loathes and eradicates; finally he spurns every evil as if naturally, and embraces what is good. If you would compare the feelings of these two men would it not appear how the latter was superior in respect to the former, whose love was somehow more carnal?

9. But that carnal love is worthwhile since through it sensual love is excluded, and the world is condemned and conquered. It becomes better when it is rational, and becomes perfect when it is spiritual. Actually it is rational when the reason is so strong in faith that in all things concerning Christ it strays in not even the slightest degree because of any false likeness of truth, nor by any heretical or diabolical deceit does it wander from the integrity of the sense of the Church. In the same way when speaking on its own it exercises such caution as never to exceed the proper limits of discretion by superstition or frivolity or the vehemence of a too eager spirit. This is loving God with the whole soul, as we said before. If, with the help of the Spirit, the soul attains such strength that it remains steadfast no matter what the effort or difficulty, if the fear of death itself cannot make it act unjustly, but even then it loves with the whole strength, this then is spiritual love. I think the name is very fitting for this special love because of the special fullness of the Spirit in which it excels. This is enough for those words of the bride: "Therefore the young maidens love you so much." In those things that are to follow may he open to us the treasure of his mercy, the one who guards them, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

7. Afterwards he showed them a higher degree of love when he said, "It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh profits nothing." I think Paul had reached this level when he said: "Even if we once knew Christ in the body, we know him thus no longer." Perhaps this was also true of the Prophet who said: "A Spirit before our face is Christ the Lord." When he adds: "Under his shadow we will live among the heathens," he seems to me to speak on behalf of the beginners, in order that they may at least rest in the shade since they know they are not strong enough to bear the heat of the sun. They may be nourished by the sweetness of his humanity since they are not yet able to perceive the things which are of the Spirit of God. The shade of Christ, I suggest, is his flesh which over shadowed Mary and tempered for her the bright splendor of the Spirit. Therefore in this human devotion there is in the meantime consolation for whomever does not as yet have the Spirit which gives life, at least who do not have him in the same way as those who say: "A Spirit before our face is Christ the Lord," and again: "If we once knew Christ in the flesh we know him thus no longer." For there is no love of Christ at all without the Holy Spirit, even if this love is in the flesh, and without its fullness. The measure of such love is this: its sweetness seizes the whole heart, and draws it completely from the love of all flesh and every sensual pleasure. Really this is what it means to love with the whole heart. If I prefer to the humanity of my Lord someone joined to me by ties of blood, or some sensual pleasure, this would obviously prove that I do not love with my whole heart since it is divided between its own interests and the love of the one who taught me as a man, both by his words and examples. Would I not seem to give my love partly to him and partly to my own? As he once said: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." To put it briefly, to love with the whole heart means to put the love of his sacred humanity before everything that tempts us, from within or without. Among these temptations we must also count the glory of the world, because its glory is that of the flesh, and those who delight in it without a doubt are men of the flesh.

4. Christian, learn from Christ how you ought to love Christ. Learn a love that is tender, wise, strong; love with tenderness, not passion, wisdom, not foolishness, and strength, lest you become weary and turn away from the love of the Lord. Do not let the glory of the world or the pleasure of the flesh lead you astray; the wisdom of Christ should become sweeter to you than these. The light of Christ should shine so much for you that the spirit of lies and deceit will not seduce you. Finally, Christ as the strength of God should support you so that you may not be worn down by difficulties. Let love enkindle your zeal, let knowledge inform it, let constancy strengthen it. Keep it fervent, discreet, courageous. See it is not tepid, or temerarious, or timid. See for yourself if those three commands are not prescribed in the law when God says: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole strength." It seems to me, if no more suitable meaning for this triple distinction comes to mind, that the love of the heart relates to a certain warmth of affection, the love of the soul to energy or judgment of reason, and the love of strength can refer to constancy and vigor of spirit. So love the Lord your God with the full and deep affection of your heart, love him with your mind wholly awake and discreet, love him with all your strength, so much so that you would not even fear to die for love of him. As it is written: "For love is strong as death, jealousy is bitter as hell." Your affection for your Lord Jesus should be both tender and intimate, to oppose the sweet enticements of sensual life. Sweetness conquers sweetness as one nail drives out another. No less than this keep him as a strong light for your mind and a guide for your intellect, not only to avoid the deceits of heresy and to preserve the purity of your faith from their seductions, but also that you might carefully avoid an indiscreet and excessive vehemence in your conversation. Let your love be strong and constant, neither yielding to fear nor cowering at hard work. Let us love affectionately, discreetly, intensely. We know that the love of the heart, which we have said is affectionate, is sweet indeed, but liable to be led astray if it lacks the love of the soul. And the love of the soul is wise indeed, but fragile without that love which is called the love of strength.

5. See how many examples support what we say. When the disciples were sad at the departure of their Master just before his ascension, after they had heard him talk about this subject, they heard him say: "If you loved me you would rejoice because I am going to the Father." How can he say this? Didn't they love him when his departure made them so sad? In a way they loved him, and in another way they did not. Their love was more tender than prudent, it was sensual but not reasonable; they loved with the whole heart but not with the whole soul. What they loved was not for their own welfare, and so he said to them: "It is good for you that I am going," correcting not their feelings but their foresight. When he was speaking in the same way about his approaching death, Peter who loved him so dearly, tried to stand in the way. When, as you remember, he rebuked him, what was it but his imprudence that he was correcting? Finally what did he mean in saying: "You do not mind the things of God," except: you do not love wisely, you are following your human feeling in opposition to the divine plan. He even called him Satan because although it was in ignorance, he was impeding salvation in trying to prevent the Savior's death. Peter, who had been corrected, later when the sad prophecy was repeated, no longer objected to death but promised he would die with him. But he could not fulfill this promise because he had not yet reached that third degree where he would love with all his strength. Taught to love with his whole soul, Peter was still weak. He was well instructed but not well prepared, aware of the mystery but afraid of bearing witness to it. Obviously that love was not as strong as death which still yielded before it. Later, robed with strength from on high according to the promise of Jesus Christ, Peter began to love with such strength that when forbidden by the Council to proclaim the holy Name, he boldly answered those who gave the order: "We must obey God rather than men." Then finally he attained the fullness of love, when for love's sake he would not spare even his own life. Truly "greater love than this no man has, than that he lay down his life for his friends." Even if Peter did not actually surrender his life then, he did offer it.

So then, to love with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole strength means not being led astray by allurements, or seduced by lies, or broken by injuries.

6. Notice that the love of the heart is, in a certain sense, carnal, because our hearts are attracted most toward the humanity of Christ and the things he did or commanded while in the flesh. The heart that is filled with this love is quickly touched by every word on this subject. Nothing else is as pleasant to listen to, or is read with as much interest, nothing is as frequently in remembrance or as sweet in reflection. The soul prepares the holocausts of its prayers with this love as if they were the fattened offerings of bullocks. The soul at prayer should have before it a sacred image of the God-man, in his birth or infancy or as he was teaching, or dying, or rising, or ascending. Whatever form it takes this image must bind the soul with the love of virtue and expel carnal vices, eliminate temptations and quiet desires. I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love. Were they not at just this level when they said: "See, we have left everything and have followed you"? It was only by the love of his physical presence that they had left everything. They could not even bear to hear a word of his approaching passion and death, although this was to be their salvation. Even after it had all happened they could not gaze upon the glory of his ascension without deep sorrow. This is why Christ said to them: "Because I have said this to you sadness has filled your hearts." So it was only by his physical presence that their hearts were detached from carnal loves.