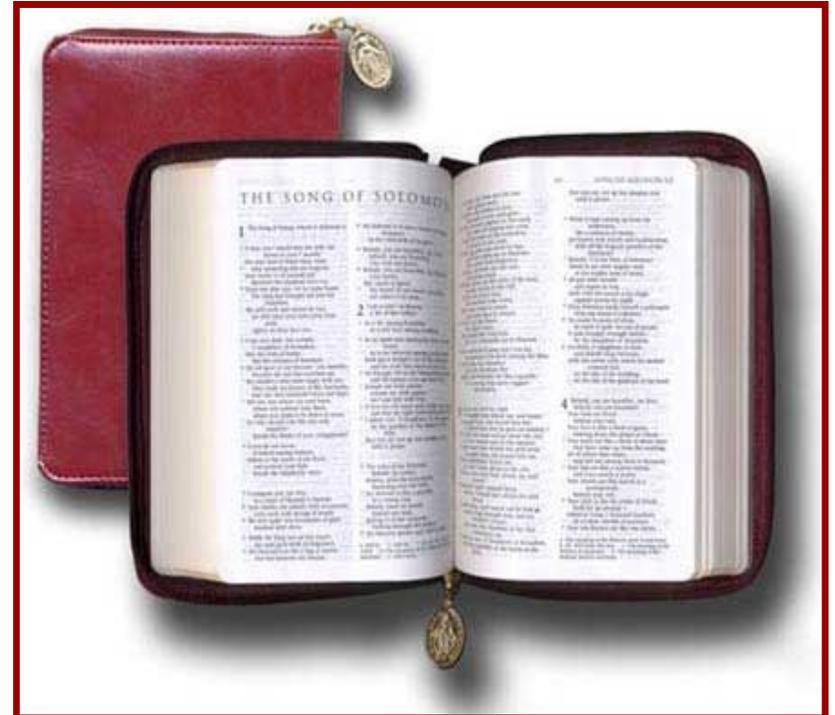




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SONG OF SONGS—56

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***HOW WE OUGHT
TO JUDGE OURSELVES
LEST WE BE JUDGED***

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.

How we Ought to Judge Ourselves Lest we be Judged

'My beloved is like a gazelle, or a fawn.' This refers to the preceding verse. She has just described him as leaping and bounding, so now she compares him to a gazelle or a fawn. Aptly, indeed, because this breed of animals leaps nimbly and runs swiftly. Besides, the word concerns the bridegroom, and the bridegroom is the Word. And the prophet says of God that 'his word runs swiftly', which fits into this context where the bridegroom, who is the Word of God, is described as leaping and bounding, and therefore resembling the gazelle and the fawn. This is the reason for the comparison. But lest any element, even the tiniest, be lacking to the comparison, remember that the gazelle excels not only in fleetness of foot but also in sharpness of sight. This refers to that part of the narrative in which the bridegroom is described as seeming not only to leap but to bound over, because only by sharp and penetrating sight would it be at all possible, especially in running, to discern where he ought to leap and over what to bound. Otherwise, a comparison with the fawn alone would have sufficed to designate the swiftness of the runner, for he is known to move with the swiftest speed. But now, while this bridegroom, in the ardor of his love, seems to rush eagerly into the embraces of the beloved, he nevertheless knows how to direct his steps, or rather his leapings, with prudent consideration, being wary as to where to place his foot. A comparison with the gazelle as well as with the fawn is therefore called for, since the latter expresses the desire to save and the former the decision to choose. Christ is righteous and merciful, of course, a savior and a judge. Because he loves he wills that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and because he judges he knows who are his, he knows whom he has chosen from the beginning.

**I am utterly terrified of falling into the hands
of the living God;
I prefer to be presented before his angry face judged
rather than to-be-judged.**

**'The spiritual man judges all things,
but is himself judged by no one.'**

**I shall judge my evil deeds, therefore I shall judge even my
good deeds.**

2. Meanwhile therefore let us be aware that these two gifts, mercy and judgment, are commended to us by the Holy Spirit in those two animals, so that in witnessing to the integrity and perfection of our faith, we too may imitate the prophet and sing of mercy and judgment to the Lord. I have no doubt that those who are inquisitive and well-informed about such things can point to other qualities of these animals that may profitably and suitably be applied to the bridegroom; but these are enough, I think, to explain the given comparison. But how beautiful that the Holy Spirit drew the comparison not from the stag but from the fawn. By it he calls to mind both the Fathers who are Christ's ancestors according to the flesh, and the Savior's infancy. For the child who was born to us appeared as a fawn. But you who long for the advent of the Savior are afraid of the Judge's scrutiny, afraid of the eyes of the gazelle, afraid of him who says by the prophet: 'On that day I will search Jerusalem with lamps.' His sight is sharp: his eye will leave nothing unexplored. He will scrutinize minds and hearts, man's very thought will open up to him. If Jerusalem is to be scrutinized, what is safe in Babylon? For I think that in this passage the prophet indicates by the name Jerusalem those who lead a religious life in this world, imitating as far as they can the ways of the heavenly Jerusalem by an upright and orderly life-style, and do not, like the citizens of Babylon, waste their life in a chaos of vices and the turmoil of crimes. Their sins are obvious, going before them to the judgment. They do not need to be scrutinized but to throw themselves on his mercy. But I, a monk and a Jerusalemite, have sins that are definitely hidden, overshadowed by the name and habit of a monk; and consequently it is necessary to probe them with an exacting investigation, and bring them from darkness to light, as it were by the aid of lamps.

3. We can quote also from the psalm to confirm what has been said about the examining of Jerusalem. It says in the person of the Lord: 'when I have set the time, I - justice - will judge.' Unless I am mistaken, he says he will discuss and examine the ways and actions of the just. We must be very much afraid that, when that time comes, under so exacting a scrutiny much of our righteousness may show up as sin. There is only one thing to do: if we shall have judged ourselves we shall not be judged. How good the judgment that withdraws me and hides me from the strict judgment of God. I am utterly terrified of falling into the hands of the living God; I prefer to be presented before his angry face judged rather than to-be-judged. 'The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself judged by no one.' I shall judge my evil deeds, therefore I shall judge even my good deeds. I shall strive to correct the evils by better conduct, to wash them away with tears, to chastise them with fastings and other exercises of the holy discipline. Where good is concerned I shall think humbly of myself and, in accord with the Lord's commandment, regard myself as a useless servant who did no more than I was bound to do. I shall endeavor not to offer cockle for grain, nor chaff with the grain. I shall scrutinize my habits and pursuits, so that he who will examine Jerusalem with lamps may find nothing in me unexamined or untested. For he will not judge the same thing twice.

4. Who will enable me to search out thoroughly and punish all my sins, that I may have no reason to fear the eyes of the gazelle, have no cause to blush in the light of the lamps? Now I am seen, but I do not see. The eye is present to which all things are visible, though which is itself invisible. A time will come when I shall know even as I am known. But now I know in part, though I am known not partially but totally. I am afraid of the appearance of that watcher who stands behind the wall. Scripture adds the following about him whom it compares to a gazelle for his sharpness of sight: 'Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.' We shall look at this in its place. And so I fear this hidden watcher of hidden things. The bride fears nothing, because she is not aware of anything against herself. What should she, his friend, his dove, his beautiful one, be afraid of? Further on you read: 'And my beloved speaks to me.' He does not speak to me, and therefore I dread his appearance, because I lack credentials. You, his bride, what do you hear about yourself? What does your beloved say to you? 'Arise,' he says, 'make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one.' But this too I shall reserve for another sermon. I will not compress too briefly things that demand industrious care, lest I be burdened with further guilt if you do not find yourselves built up in the knowledge and love of the Church's bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God over all things, blessed for ever. Amen.