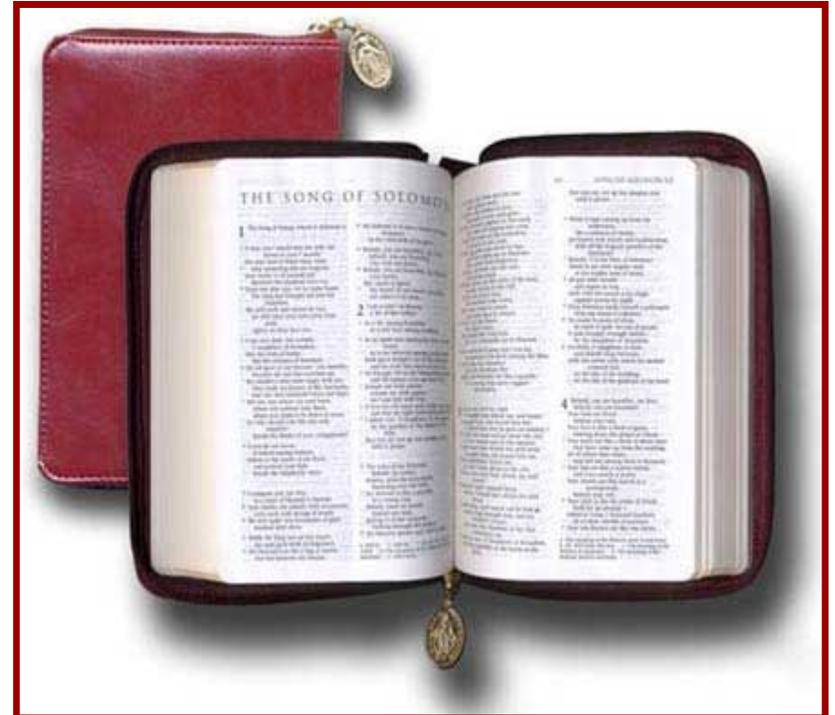




SONG OF SONGS—7

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***GOD'S INFINITE POWER,
MERCY AND JUDGMENT***

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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.

God's Infinite Power, Mercy and Judgment

In order to connect this talk with my last, let me recall to your minds what I then said. The supreme and infinite Spirit, and he alone, has no need of a bodily faculty or of any bodily assistance, in the accomplishment of all that he wishes to do or permit. We may with perfect confidence then, assert that God is truly an immaterial being, just as he is truly immortal. He alone in the world of spirits so far transcends the efficacy of all corporeal beings, that not only is he entirely independent of bodily aid in all the works that he undertakes, but by a simple gesture of his will he is able to achieve his purpose when and as he pleases. His is the sole sovereign power, therefore, that neither for intrinsic nor extrinsic reasons requires the support of a bodily form. His omnipotent will finds response that is instant and effectual. All that is lofty bends to it, all that is stubborn yields, every creature pays it court. It needs no other power, bodily or spiritual, to intervene on its behalf. He needs no tongue to teach or advise, no hand to help or uphold, no feet to run to the rescue when danger looms.

2. Our ancestors down through the ages experienced these ways of God repeatedly; his gifts pursued them without fail, but the benefactor's hand was hidden. He indeed deployed his strength from one end of the earth to the other, yet ordering all things with gentleness, but men remained insensitive to him. They enjoyed the largess the Lord poured out, but they failed to recognize him as the Lord of hosts, deceived by the tranquility that shrouded his dealings with men. Though they owed him their being they did not live in his presence. They lived through him, but not for him. What understanding they possessed was from him, but him they failed to understand. They were alienated, ungrateful, irrational. Their being, their life, their reason, all these they ascribed to nature, or, more foolishly still, to chance. Many again arrogantly assumed that the workings of God's providence were the fruit of their own labor and strength. What wonders have not deceitful spirits attributed to their own powers, what wonders are attributed to the sun and moon, to the forces of earth and water, even to the handicrafts of mere mortals! Herbs, trees and the smallest and commonest of seeds were honored as gods.

For when sin is forgiven it is certain that the devil is driven out from the sinner's heart, and for this reason Christ embraced all sinners in his statement:

"NOW SENTENCE IS BEING PASSED ON THIS WORLD, NOW THE PRINCE OF THIS WORLD IS OVERTHROWN."

9. I myself, however wretched I may be, have been occasionally privileged to sit at the feet of the Lord Jesus, and to the extent that his merciful love allowed, have embraced with all my heart, now one, now the other, of these feet. And if, as happened at times, I should grow forgetful of his mercy, and with a stricken conscience become too deeply involved in the thought of the judgment, sooner or later I was cast down in unbelievable fear and shameful misery, enveloped in a frightful gloom out of which I cried in dismay: "Who has yet felt the full force of your fury, or learnt to fear the violence of your rage?" But if on escaping from this I should cling more than was becoming to the foot of mercy, the opposite happened. I became dissipated, indifferent, negligent; lukewarm at prayer, languid at work, always on the watch for a laugh, inclined to say the wrong thing. And my interior was no steadier than my behavior. But you know what a teacher experience is; no longer of judgment alone or mercy alone, but of mercy and judgment I will sing to you, O Lord. I shall never forget your precepts, mercy and judgment will be the theme of my songs in the house of my pilgrimage, until one day when mercy triumphs over judgment, my wretchedness will cease to smart, and my heart, silent no longer, will sing to you. It will be the end of sorrow.

END OF SONGS—7

3. How sad indeed that men should degrade and exchange the one who was their glory for the image of a grass-eating ox. But God had mercy on their errors: coming forth from his shady and thickly covered mountains he pitched his tent in the sun. He became incarnate for the sake of carnal men, that he might induce them to relish the life of the Spirit. In the body and through the body he performed works of which not man but God was the author. He showed by his commands that chance events, were subject to his law. He revealed the foolishness of human wisdom, and overthrew the tyranny of evil spirits, thereby manifestly showing that when these things were done in past ages they were done by him. In the body, I repeat, and through the body, he performed wonderful deeds with an authority that was obvious. He proclaimed the message of salvation and endured outrage, thus clearly demonstrating that he it was whose invisible power created the world, whose wisdom governed it, and whose benevolence protected it. And finally, by preaching the good news to thankless crowds, by proving himself with signs to men without faith and praying for those who crucified him, did he not plainly declare himself to be that same person who, in union with the Father, daily causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike? For this is what he himself said: "If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no need to believe me."

4. See him then, instructing the disciples on the mountain by word of mouth at the same time that he enlightens heaven's angels in silence. See how at the touch of a fleshly hand a leper is healed, blindness is dispelled, the deaf are empowered to hear, the dumb to speak, the sinking disciple is rescued on the lake and you will surely recognize him as the one to whom David long ago uttered the words: "You open your hand, you satisfy the desire of every living thing;" And again: "When you open your hand all are filled with your goodness." See how, prostrate at his human feet, the penitent finds assurance as she is told; "Your sins are forgiven." She knows that he is the one of whom she had read in words composed long ago: "The devil shall go forth before his feet." For when sin is forgiven it is certain that the devil is driven out from the sinner's heart, and for this reason Christ embraced all sinners in his statement: "Now sentence is being passed on this world, now the prince of this world is overthrown." God removes the sin of the one who makes humble confession, and thereby the devil loses the sovereignty he had gained over the human heart.

5. Again you find him with those feet of flesh walking on the waters, him of whom the Psalmist long before the incarnation said: "You strode across the sea, you marched across the ocean," by which he meant: you tread under foot the puffed up hearts of the proud, you repress the surging passions of sensual men; the wicked are won over to goodness, the haughty to lowliness. And because God acts invisibly in accomplishing this, the sensual man fails to perceive the doer. So the Psalmist adds: ". . . but your steps could not be seen." In connection with this we may understand the Father's words to his Son: "Sit at my right hand and I will make your enemies a footstool for you," that is, I shall subjugate to your will all those who spurn you, either against their will, and then they will be miserable, or with that willingness which will make them blessed. Because carnal men did not perceive this work of the Spirit -- "the animal man does not perceive anything of the Spirit of God" -- it was necessary that the sinner should receive pardon for her sins while lying prone at God's feet of flesh, kissing these same feet with her lips of flesh. In this way that change of the right hand of the Most High, by which in a wonderful but invisible manner he leads the wicked to repentance, is made manifest to those in bondage to the senses.

6. However, I must not omit to speak of those spiritual feet of God to which the penitent's first kiss, understood in a spiritual sense, ought to be directed. Well do I know the inquisitive bent of your minds, that allows nothing whatever to pass without scrutiny. Nor must we disdain to consider what are those feet by which Scripture so frequently draws our attention to God. At one time he is described as standing: "We will adore in the place where his feet stood;" at another time as walking: "I will dwell in the midst of them and I will walk among them;" and again as running: "He exulted like a hero to run his race." If it seemed right to St Paul to describe Christ's head in terms of the divinity, it should not seem unreasonable to us to ascribe the feet to his humanity. Let us call one of these feet mercy, the other judgment. You are familiar with these two words, they both occur together, as you remember, in several passages of Scripture. That God assumed the foot of mercy in the flesh to which he united himself, is taught in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which speaks of Christ as one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin, that he might become merciful. And the other foot that is called judgment? Does not God made man plainly point out that this also belongs to the assumed humanity where he declares: "Because he is the Son of Man the Father has appointed him supreme judge."

7. With these two feet, therefore, so aptly united and controlled by the divine head, he who was the invisible Emmanuel is born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, appears on earth and moves among men. It is on these feet that, in a spiritual, invisible manner, he still goes about doing good and curing all who have fallen into the power of the devil. With these very feet he finds his way into the souls of his lovers, tirelessly enlightening and searching the hearts and loins of the faithful. See if these are not those legs of the Bridegroom, which the bride so magnificently praises in subsequent verses, comparing them, if I mistake not, to "alabaster columns set in sockets of pure gold." How beautiful this is, because in very truth, in the incarnate wisdom of God, signified by the gold, mercy and truth have met each other. Therefore all the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth.

8. Happy is the man then in whose soul the Lord Jesus once sets these feet of his. There are two signs by which you may recognize such a one, for he cannot but bear upon him the imprint of these divine footsteps. These signs are fear and hope, the former presenting the imprint of judgment, the latter that of mercy. Truly, the Lord takes pleasure in them that fear him, and in them that hope in his mercy, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, hope the growth of wisdom. Its perfection charity reserves to itself. If all this be true, then obviously this first kiss, given to the feet, brings forth no small fruit. But of one thing you must beware, that you do not neglect either of these feet. If, for instance, you feel deep sorrow for your sins along with the fear of the judgment, you have pressed your lips on the imprint of truth and of judgment. But if you temper that fear and sorrow with the thought of God's goodness and the hope of obtaining his pardon, you will realize that you have also embraced the foot of his mercy. It is clearly inexpedient to kiss one without the other; a man who thinks only of the judgment will fall into the pit of despair, another who deceitfully flatters God's mercy gives birth to a pernicious security.