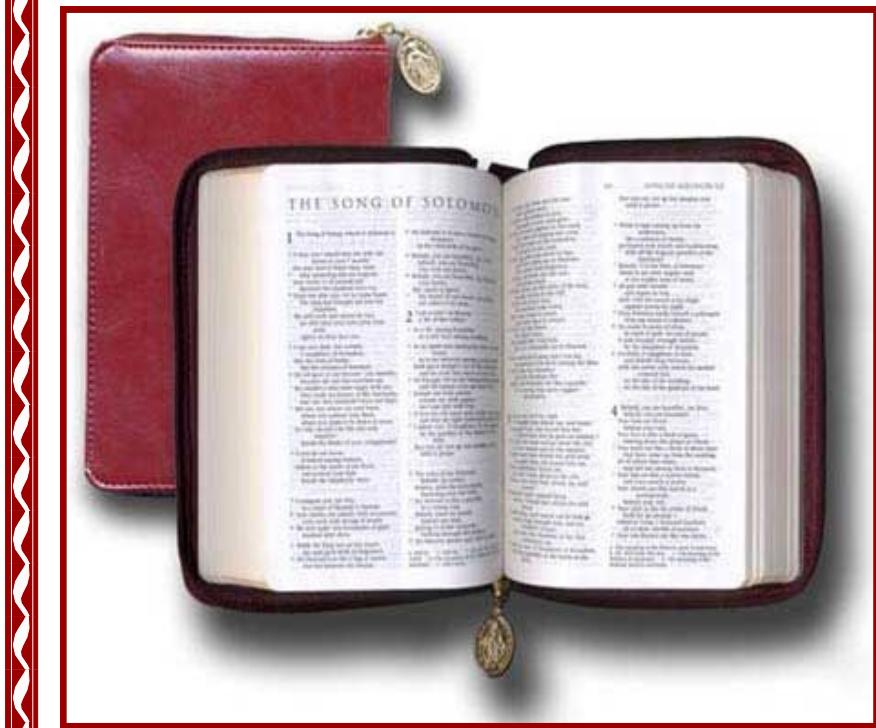




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SONG OF SONGS—12

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THANKSGIVING
FOR
CHRIST'S SAVING WORK***

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.

Thanksgiving for Christ's Saving Work

I said at the end of my last sermon, and I have no hesitation in repeating it, that I long to see you all sharing in that holy anointing, that religious attitude in which the benefits of God are recalled with gladness and thanksgiving. This involves a twofold grace: it lightens the burdens of the present life, makes them more supportable for those who can give themselves with joy to the work of praising God; and nothing more appropriately represents on earth the state of life in the heavenly fatherland than spontaneity in this outpouring of praise. Scripture implies as much when it says: "Happy those who live in your house and can praise you all day long." It was with a special reference to this anointing that the Prophet exclaimed: "How good, how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers; fine as oil on the head." These words do not seem applicable to the first anointing. Though that is good in itself, it is not by any means pleasant; because the recollection of one's sins begets bitterness rather than pleasure. Nor do those involved in it live together, since each one bewails and mourns over his own particular sins. Those, however, who are employed in the work of thanksgiving are contemplating and thinking about God alone, and so they cannot help but dwell in unity. That which they do is good because they offer to God the glory that is most rightly his; and it is also pleasant, since of its very nature it gives delight.

Remember Saint Paul's advice:

"IN ALL THINGS GIVE THANKS TO GOD,".

7. Now with regard to the manner, which if you remember, we defined as God's self-emptying, I venture to offer three important points for your consideration. For that emptying was neither a simple gesture nor a limited one; but he emptied himself even to the assuming of human nature, even to accepting death, death on a cross. Who is there that can adequately gauge the greatness of the humility, gentleness, self-surrender, revealed by the Lord of majesty in assuming human nature, in accepting the punishment of death, the shame of the cross? But somebody will say: "Surely the Creator could have restored his original plan without all that hardship?" Yes, he could, but he chose the way of personal suffering so that man would never again have a reason to display that worst and most hateful of all vices, ingratitude. If his decision did involve painful weariness for himself, it was meant also to involve man in a debt that only great love can pay. Where the ease with which man was created sapped his spirit of devotion, the hardship with which he was redeemed should urge him on to gratitude. For how did man the ingrate regard his creation? "I was created freely indeed but with no trouble or labor on my Creator's part; for at his command I was made, just like every other thing. What is big about that gift if not the great facility of the word that made it?" Thus does human impiety belittle the boon of creation, and turn that which of its nature is a source of love into an occasion for ingratitude. Those who live by these sentiments share the godlessness of evil-doers. But these lying mouths are silenced. For, more obvious than the light of day is the immense sacrifice he has made for you, O man; he who was Lord became a slave, he who was rich became a pauper, the Word was made flesh, and the Son of God did not disdain to become the son of man. So may it please you to remember that, even if made out of nothing, you have not been redeemed out of nothing. In six days he created all things, and among them, you. On the other hand, for a period of thirty whole years he worked your salvation in the midst of the earth. What endurance was his in those labors! To his bodily needs and the molestations of his enemies did he not add the mightier burden of the ignominy of the cross, and crown it all with the horror of his death? And this was indeed necessary. Man and beast you save, O Lord. How you have multiplied your mercy, O God.

8. Meditate on these things, turn them over continually in your minds. Refresh those hearts of yours with perfumes such as these, hearts writhing so long under the repugnant odor of your sins. May you abound with these ointments, as sweet as they are salutary. But yet, you must beware of thinking that you now possess those superior ones that are commended to us in the breasts of the bride. The necessity of bringing this sermon to an end does not allow me to begin discussing them now. But all that has been said about the others you must retain in your memory and reveal in your way of life; and do please help me with your prayers that I may worthily portray with appropriate sentiments those superior delights of the bride, that I may fill your own souls with the love of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord.

2. And for that reason my advice to you, my friends, is to turn aside occasionally from troubled and anxious pondering on the paths you may be treading, and to travel on smoother ways where the gifts of God are serenely savored, so that the thought of him may give breathing space to you whose consciences are perplexed. I should like you to experience for yourselves the truth of the holy Prophet's words: "Make the Lord your joy and he will give you what your heart desires." Sorrow for sin is indeed necessary, but it should not be an endless preoccupation. You must dwell also on the glad remembrance of God's loving-kindness, otherwise sadness will harden the heart and lead it more deeply into despair. Let us mix honey with our absinthe, it is more easily drunk when sweetened, and what bitterness it may still retain will be wholesome. You must fix your attention on the ways of God, see how he mitigates the bitterness of the heart that is crushed, how he wins back the pusillanimous soul from the abyss of despair, how he consoles the grief-stricken and strengthens the wavering with the sweet caress of his faithful promise. By the mouth of the Prophet he declares: "For my praise I will bridle you, lest you should perish." By this he seems to say: "Lest you should be cast down by excessive sadness at the sight of your sins, and rush despairingly to perdition like an unbridled horse over a precipice, I shall rein you in, I shall curb you with my mercy and set you on your feet with my praises. Then you will breathe freely again in the enjoyment of my benefits, overwhelmed though you be by evils of your own making, because you will find that my kindness is greater than your culpability." If Cain had been curbed by this kind of bridle he would never have uttered that despairing cry: "My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon." God forbid! God forbid! His loving mercy is greater than all iniquity. Hence the just man is not always accusing himself, he does so only in the opening words of his intercourse with God; he will normally conclude that intercourse with the divine praises. You can see therefore that the order of the just man's progress is expressed in the words: "After reflecting on my behavior, I turn my feet to your decrees," that is, he who has endured grief and unhappiness in following his own ways can finally say: "In the way of your decrees lies my joy, a joy beyond all wealth." Therefore, if you are to follow the just man's example, if you are to form a humble opinion of yourselves, you must think of the Lord with goodness. So you are told in the Book of Wisdom: "Think of the Lord with goodness, seek him in simplicity of heart." You will all the more easily achieve this if you let your minds dwell frequently, even continually, on the memory of God's bountifulness. Otherwise, how will you fulfill St Paul's advice: "In all things give thanks to God," if your hearts will have lost sight of those things for which thanks are due? I would not have you bear the reproach flung at the Jews of old, who, according to Scripture, "had forgotten his achievements, the marvels he had shown them."

3. We must admit though that it is impossible for any man to remember and recount all the benefits that the Lord, so merciful and tender-hearted, ceaselessly bestows on mortal men, for who can recount the Lord's triumphs, who can praise him enough? Yet one at least of his benefits, the work by which he redeemed us, his chief and greatest achievement, should by no means be allowed to slip from the memory of the redeemed. Concerning this work I wish to suggest for your consideration two important points that now occur to me, which I shall state as briefly as possible in accord with the Wise Man's saying: "Give the wise man an opportunity, he grows wiser still." The two are these: manner and fruit. The manner involved the self-emptying of God, the fruit was that we should be filled with him. Meditation on the former is the seed-bed of holy hope, meditation on the latter an incentive to the highest love. Both of them are essential for our progress, because hope without love is the lot of the time-server, and love without reward grows cold.

4. I shall add, too, that the fruit we must expect as our love's fulfillment should be worthy of the promise of him whom we love. "A full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap." And that measure, as I have heard, will be without measure.

But what I should like to know, however, is the nature of that which is to be measured out, what that immense reward is which has been promised. "The eye has not seen, O God, besides you, what things you have prepared for them that love you." Tell us then, since you do the preparing, tell us what it is you prepare. We believe, we are confident, that in accordance with your promise, "we shall be filled with the good things of your house." But I persist in asking what are these good things, what are they like? Would it be with corn and wine and oil, with gold and silver or precious stones? But these are things that we have known and seen, that we have grown weary of seeing. We seek for the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man. To search after these things, whatever they may be, is a source of pleasure and relish and delight. "They will all be taught by God, says Scripture, and he will be all in all. As I see it, the fullness that we hope for from God will be only something of God himself.

5. Who indeed can comprehend what an abundance of goodness is contained in that brief expression: "God will be all in all"? Not to speak of the body, I discern in the soul three faculties, the reason, the will, the memory, and these three may be said to be identified with the soul itself. Everyone who is "guided by the Spirit realizes how greatly in the present life these three are lacking in integrity and perfection. And what reason can there be for this, except that God is not yet "all in all"? Hence it comes about that the reason very often falters in its judgments, the will is agitated by a fourfold perturbation and the memory confused by its endless forgetfulness. Man, noble though he be, was unwillingly been subjected to this triple form of futility, but hope nonetheless was left to him. For he who satisfies with good the desire of the soul will one day himself be for the reason, fullness of light, for the will, the fullness of peace, for the memory, eternity's uninterrupted flow. O truth! O love! O eternity! Oh blessed and beatifying Trinity! To you the wretched trinity that I bear within me sends up its doleful yearnings because of the unhappiness of its exile. Departing from you, in what errors, what pains, what fears it has involved itself! Unhappy me! What a trinity we have won in exchange for you! "My heart is throbbing," and hence my pain; "my strength is deserting me" and hence my fear; "the light of my eyes itself has left me," and hence my error. O trinity of my soul, how utterly different the Trinity you have offended in your exile.

6. And still, why so downcast, my soul, why do you sigh within me? Put your hope in God. I shall praise him yet, when error will have gone from the reason, pain from the will, and every trace of fear from the memory. Then will come that state for which we hope, with its admirable serenity, its fullness of delight, its endless security. The God who is truth is the source of the first of these gifts; the God who is love, of the second; the God who is all-powerful, of the third. And so it will come to pass that God will be all in all, for the reason will receive unquenchable light, the will imperturbable peace, the memory an unfailing fountain from which it will draw eternally. I wonder if it seems right to you that we should assign that first operation to the Son, the second to the Holy Spirit, the last to the Father. In doing so, however, we must beware of excluding either the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit from any one of these communications, lest the distinction of Persons should diminish the divine fullness proper to each of them, or their perfection be so understood as to annul the personal properties. Consider too that the children of this world experience a corresponding threefold temptation from the allurements of the flesh, the glitter of life in the world, the self-fulfillment patterned on Satan. These three include all the artifices by which the present life deceives its unhappy lovers, even as St John proclaimed: "All that is in the world is the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life." So much for the fruit of the redemption.