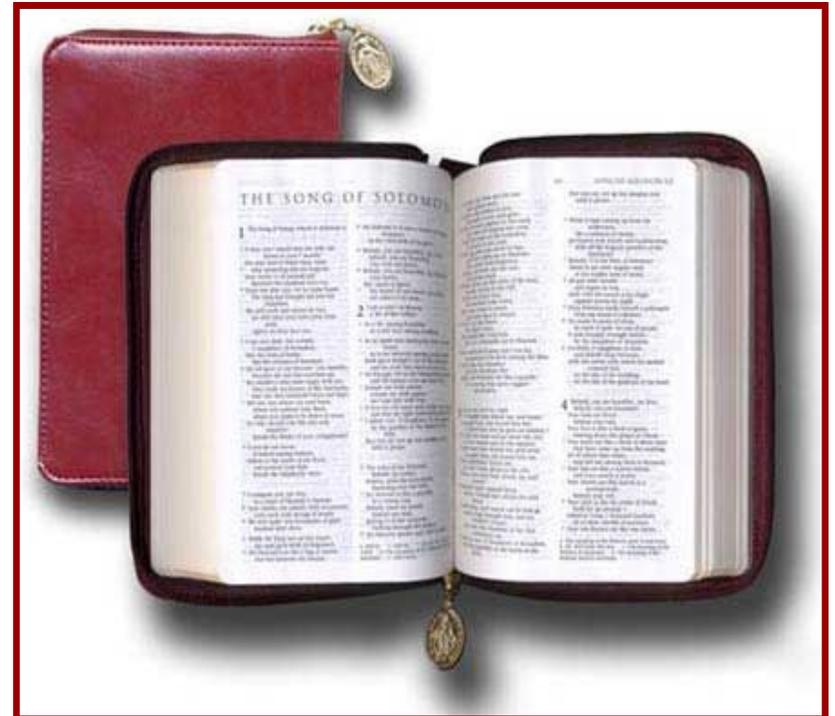




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SONG OF SONGS—28

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BEAUTY OF THE BRIDE
COMPARED TO
THE CURTAINS OF SOLOMON***

WHY SHE IS CALLED HEAVEN

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 Beauty of the Bride Compared to the Curtains of Solomon Why She is Called a Heaven

My brothers, our friend has gone back to his homeland, we have paid the full tribute of human affection to his memory, so I take up again the instruction which I then discontinued. As he is now in the state of happiness it is improper to prolong our mourning for him, it is out of place to appear in tears before a man enjoying a banquet. Even though we do shed tears in our troubles, our grief should not be excessive, or it will seem to express our regret for the service we have lost rather than our love for him. To think that the one we love is in a state of bliss must ease the pain of our bereavement; to realize that he is with God must make his absence from us more bearable. And so, trusting in the aid of your prayers, I shall attempt to throw light on the secret hidden by those curtains that portray the beauty of the bride. We touched on this, as you recall, but did not delve into it, though we had discussed and discovered how she is black like the tents of Kedar. But in what way can she be beautiful like the curtains of Solomon, as if Solomon in all his glory could even remotely resemble the beauty of the bride, or possessed anything to match the splendor of her adornment? Even if I were to say that these mysterious curtains refer to the quality of blackness as well as to the tents of Kedar, I should perhaps be correct; there are arguments to support this, as I shall show later. But if we suppose that the beauty of any sort of curtains is to be compared to the glory of the bride, then we need the help for which you have been praying, if we are to be worthy to unveil this mystery. For must not outward loveliness, no matter how radiant, seem to an enlightened mind to be cheap and ugly, when compared with the inward beauty of a holy soul? What qualities can we find within the framework of this passing world that can equal the radiance of a soul that has shed its decrepit, earthly body, and been clothed in heaven's loveliness, graced with the jewels of consummate virtue, clearer than mountain air because of its transcendence, more brilliant than the sun? So do not look back to the earthly Solomon when you wish to investigate the ownership of those curtains whose beauty delights the bride because so like her own.

15. So much for the likeness which the bride seems to postulate between her beauty and the curtains of Solomon. With regard to this same text however, we still have to explain that meaning to which I referred at the beginning of this discourse and for which I have given my promise: the extent to which the whole similitude may be applied to her blackness only. You shall not be cheated out of that promise. But it must be postponed till the next sermon, both because the length of this one demands that we do so, and in order that the customary prayers may precede all that we hope to say for the praise and glory of the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 28

13. In these curtains then we must discern the likeness of those heavenly figures whom we have just described as part of the Bridegroom's adornment. We must recognize too the queen standing at his right hand, decked with ornaments similar, though not equal, to his. For although she is endowed with no small share of glory and beauty even where she sojourns as a pilgrim," as well as in the day of her strength amid the splendors of the saints, yet the fullness and perfection of the glory of the blessed crowns her Bridegroom in a way that is different. If I do refer to the bride as perfect and blessed, she is not wholly so. In part she resembles the tents of Kedar; but she is also beautiful, both in that part of her which already reigns in heaven, and in those illustrious men whose wisdom and virtues grace her journey through the night, like a heaven spangled with stars. Hence the Prophet's words: "The wise leaders shall shine like the bright vault of heaven, and those who have guided the people in the true path shall be like stars for ever and ever."

14. How lowly! Yet how sublime! At the same time tent of Kedar and sanctuary of God; an earthly tent and a heavenly palace; a mud hut and a royal apartment; a body doomed to death and a temple bright with light; an object of contempt to the proud, yet the bride of Christ. She is black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem: for though the hardship and sorrow of prolonged exile darkens her complexion, a heavenly loveliness shines through it, the curtains of Solomon enhance it. If the swarthy skin repels you, you must still admire the beauty; if you scorn what seems lowly, you must look up with esteem to what is sublime. Indeed you must note the prudence, the great wisdom, the amount of discretion and sense of fittingness generated in the bride by that controlled interplay of lowliness and exaltation according as occasion demands, so that amid the ups and downs of this world her sublime gifts sustain her lowliness lest she succumb to adversity; while her lowliness curbs her exaltation or good fortune will bring it toppling down. These poles of her life act so harmoniously. Though of their nature opposites they will work with equal effectiveness for the good of the bride. They subserve her spiritual welfare.

2. What does she mean then by saying: "I am beautiful like the curtains of Solomon"? I feel that here we have a great and wonderful mystery, provided that we apply the words, not to the Solomon of this Song, but to him who said of himself: "What is here is greater than Solomon." This Solomon to whom I refer is so great a Solomon that he is called not only Peaceful -- which is the meaning of the word Solomon -- but Peace itself; for Paul proclaims that "He is our Peace." I am certain that in this Solomon we can discover something that we may unhesitatingly compare with the beauty of the bride. Note especially what the Psalm says of his curtains: "You have spread out the heavens like a curtain." The first Solomon, though sufficiently wise and powerful, did not spread out the heavens like a curtain; it was he, rather who is not merely wise but Wisdom itself, who both created them and spread them out. It was he, and not the former Solomon, who spoke these words of God his Father: "When he set the heavens in their place, I was there." His power and his wisdom were undoubtedly present at the establishing of the heavens. And do not imagine that he stood by idle, as merely a spectator, because he said "I was there," and not "I was cooperating." Search further on in this text and you will find that he clearly states he was with him arranging all things. Therefore he said: "Whatever the Father does, the Son does too." He it was who spread out the heavens like a curtain, a curtain of superlative beauty that covers the whole face of the earth like a huge tent, and charms our human eyes with the variegated spectacle of sun and moon and stars. Is there anything more lovely than this curtain? Anything more bejeweled than the heavens? Yet even this can in no way be compared to the splendor and comeliness of the bride. It fails because it is a physical thing, the object of our physical senses; its form will pass away. "For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

3. The bride's form must be understood in a spiritual sense, her beauty as something that is grasped by the intellect; it is eternal because it is an image of eternity. Her gracefulness consists of love, and you have read that "love never ends." It consist of justice, for "her justice endures forever." It consists of patience, and Scripture tells you "the patience of the poor shall not perish forever." What shall I say of voluntary poverty? Of humility? To the former an eternal kingdom is promised, to the latter an eternal exaltation. To these must be added the holy fear of the Lord that endures for ever and ever; prudence too, and temperance and fortitude and all other virtues; what are they but pearls in the jeweled raiment of the bride, shining with unceasing radiance? I say unceasing, because they are the basis, the very foundation of immortality. For there is no place for immortal and blissful life in the soul except by means and mediation of the virtues. Hence the Prophet, speaking to God who is eternal happiness, says: "Justice and judgment are the foundation of your throne." And the Apostle says that Christ dwells in our hearts, not in any and every way, but particularly by faith. When Christ, too, was about to ride on the ass, the disciples spread their cloaks underneath him, to signify that our Savior, or his salvation, will not rest in the naked soul until it is clothed with the teaching and discipline of the apostles. Therefore the Church, possessing the promise of happiness to come, now prepares for it by adorning herself in cloth of gold, girding herself with a variety of graces and virtues, in order to be found worthy and capable of the fullness of grace.

4. Though this visible, material heaven, with its great variety of stars is unsurpassingly beautiful within the bounds of the material creation, I should not dare to compare its beauty with the spiritual and varied loveliness she received with her first robe when being arrayed in the garments of holiness. But there is a heaven of heavens to which the Prophet refers. "Sing to the Lord who mounts above the heaven of heavens, to the east." This heaven is in the world of the intellect and the spirit; and he who made the heavens by his wisdom, created it to be his eternal dwelling-place. You must not suppose that the bride's affections can find rest outside of this heaven, where she knows her Beloved dwells: for where her treasure is, there her heart is too. She so yearns for him that she is jealous of those who live in his presence; and since she may not yet participate in the vision that is theirs, she strives to resemble them in the way she lives. By deeds rather than words she proclaims: "Lord, I love the beauty of your house, the place where your glory dwells."

11. But if his love expands and continues to advance till it outgrows these narrow, servile confines, and finds itself in the open ranges where love is freely given in full liberty of spirit; when from the generous bounty of his goodwill he strives to reach out to all his neighbors, loving each of them as himself, surely one may no longer query, "What more are you doing than others? Indeed he has made himself vast. His heart is filled with a love that embraces everybody, even those to whom it is not tied by the inseparable bonds of family relationship; a love that is not allured by any hope of personal gain, that possesses nothing it is obliged to restore, that bears no burden of debt whatever, apart from that one of which it is said: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Progressing further still, you may endeavor to take the kingdom of love by force, until by this holy warfare you succeed in possessing it even to its farthest bounds. Instead of shutting off your affections from your enemies, you will do good to those who hate you, you will pray for those who persecute and slander you, you will strive to be peaceful even with those who hate peace. Then the width, height and beauty of your soul will be the width, height and beauty of heaven itself, and you will realize how true it is that he has "stretched out the heavens like a curtain." In this heaven whose width, height and beauty compel our admiration, he who is supreme and immense and glorious is not only pleased to dwell, but to wander far and wide on its pathways.

12. Do you not now see what heavens the Church possesses within her, and that she herself, in her universality, is an immense heaven, stretching out "from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth." Consider therefore, to what you may compare her in this respect, provided you do not forget what I mentioned a short while ago concerning the heaven of heaven and heavens of heavens. Just like our mother above, this one, though still a pilgrim, has her own heaven: spiritual men outstanding in their lives and reputations, men of genuine faith, unshaken hope, generous love, men raised to the heights of contemplation. These men rain down God's saving work like showers, reprove with a voice of thunder, shine with a splendor of miracles. They proclaim the glory of God, and stretched out like curtains over all the earth, make known the law of life and knowledge written by God's finger into their own lives, "to give knowledge of salvation to his people." They show forth the gospel of peace, because they are the curtain of Solomon.

9. No need to be surprised that the Lord Jesus should be pleased to dwell in this heaven, which he not only called into being by his word like the other creatures, but fought to acquire and died to redeem. And when his passion was over the longing of his heart found echo in the words: "This is my resting-place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it." Happy therefore is the one to whom he says: "Come my chosen one, and I shall set up my throne within you." Why are you sad now, my soul, why do you trouble me? Do you not think you will find within you a place for the Lord? Which of us indeed is suited for so much glory, qualified to welcome so majestic a being? Would that I were worthy to worship at his footstool! Who will grant me at least to walk in the footsteps of some holy soul whom he has chosen as his heritage? Would that he anointed my soul with the oil of his mercy, to extend it like a curtain of skin that expands when anointed, and I should be able to say: "I have run the way of your commandments, when you enlarged my heart." Then perhaps I should find within me not so much a great dining-hall where he might recline with his discipline, as a place where he might lay his head. From afar off I gaze toward the truly blessed ones, of whom is said: "I will live in them and move among them."

10. What a capacity this soul has, how privileged its merits, that it is found worthy not only to receive the divine presence, but to be able to make sufficient room! What can I say of her who can provide avenues spacious enough for the God of majesty to walk in! She certainly cannot afford to be entangled in law-suits nor by worldly cares; she cannot be enslaved by gluttony and sensual pleasures, by the lust of the eyes, the ambition to rule, or by pride in the possession of power. If she is to become heaven, the dwelling-place of God, it is first of all essential that she be empty of all these defects. Otherwise how could she be still enough to know that he is God? Nor may she yield in the least to hatred or envy or bitterness, "because wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul." The soul must grow and expand, that it may be roomy enough for God. Its width is its love, if we accept what the Apostle says: "Widen your hearts in love." The soul, being a spirit, does not admit of material expansion, but grace confers gifts on it that nature is not equipped to bestow. Its growth and expansion must be understood in a spiritual sense; it is its virtue that increases, not its substance. Even its glory is increased. And finally it grows and advances toward "mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Eventually it becomes "a holy temple in the Lord." The capacity of any man's soul is judged by the amount of love he possesses; hence he who loves much is great, he who loves a little is small, he who has no love is nothing, as Paul said: "If I have not love, I am nothing." But if he begins to acquire some love however, if he tries at least to love those who love him, and salutes the brethren and others who salute him, I may no longer describe him as nothing because some love must be present in the give and take of social life. In the words of the Lord, however, what more is he doing than others. When I discover a love as mediocre as this, I cannot call such a man noble or great: he is obviously narrow-minded and mean.

5. She has no objection whatever to being compared to this heaven, made glorious by the marvelous and manifold works of the Creator, that reaches out like a curtain, not over mighty spaces but over the hearts of men. Any distinctions that exist there do not consist of colors but of degrees of bliss. Among its inhabitants we find Angels, Archangels, Virtues, Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. These are that heaven's sparkling stars, these are that curtain's shining glories. We are dealing with only one of the curtains of my Solomon, but the one that surpasses all in the radiance of its multiform glory. This immense curtain contains within itself many other curtains of Solomon, for every blessed and saint who dwells there is indeed a curtain of Solomon. They overflow with kindness, their love reaches out till it comes down even to us. Far from begrudging us the glory they enjoy, they want us to share it, and hence find it no burden to accompany us for that purpose, sedulously watching over us and our concerns. They are all spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation. Therefore, since the multitude of the blessed, taken as a unit, is called the heaven of heavens, so, when taken individually, they are called the heavens of heavens, because each is a heaven, and we may apply to each the words: "You have spread out heaven like a curtain." You now see, I hope, what these curtains are to which the bride so assuredly compares herself, and to which Solomon they belong.

6. Contemplate what a glory is hers who compares herself to heaven, even to that heaven who is so much more glorious as he is divine. This is no rashness, taking her comparison from whence her origin comes. For if she compares herself to the tents of Kedar because of her body drawn from the earth, why should she not glory in her likeness to heaven because of the heavenly origin of her soul, especially since her life bears witness to her origin and to the dignity of her nature and her homeland? She adores and worships one God, just like the angels; she loves Christ above all things, just like the angels; she is chaste, just like the angels, and that in the flesh of a fallen race, in a frail body that the angels do not have. But she seeks and savors the things that they enjoy, not the things that are on the earth. What can be a clearer sign of her heavenly origin than that she retains a natural likeness to it in the land of unlikeness, than that as an exile on earth she enjoys the glory of the celibate life, than that she lives like an angel in an animal body? These gifts reveal a power that is more of heaven than of earth. They clearly indicate that a soul thus endowed is truly from heaven. But Scripture is clearer still: "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying: 'Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell among them.' " But why? In order to win a bride for himself from among men. How wonderful this? He came to seek a bride, but did not come without one. He sought a bride, but she was with him. Had he then two brides? Certainly not. "My dove is only one," he says. Just as he wished to form one flock of the scattered flocks of sheep, that there might be one flock and one shepherd, so, although from the beginning he had for bride the multitude of angels, it pleased him to summon the Church from among men and unite it with the one from heaven, that there might be but the one bride and one Bridegroom. The one from heaven perfects the earthly one; it does not make two. Hence he says: "My perfect one is only one." Their likeness makes them one, one now in their similar purpose, one hereafter in the same glory.

7. These two then have their origin in heaven -- Jesus the Bridegroom and Jerusalem the bride. He, in order to be seen by men, "emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." But the bride -- in what form or exterior loveliness, in what guise did St John see her coming down? Was it perhaps in the company of the angels whom he saw ascending and descending upon the Son of Man? It is more accurate to say that he saw the bride when he looked on the Word made flesh, and acknowledged two natures in the one flesh. For when that holy Emmanuel introduced to earth the curriculum of heavenly teaching, when we came to know the visible image and radiant comeliness of that supernal Jerusalem, our mother, revealed to us in Christ and by his means, what did we behold if not the bride in the Bridegroom? What did we admire but that same person who is the Lord of glory, the Bridegroom decked with a garland, the bride adorned with her jewels? So "He who descended is he also who ascended," since "no one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven," the one and same Lord who as head of the Church is the Bridegroom, as body is the bride. This heaven-formed man did not appear on earth in vain, since he endowed a multitude of earthly followers with his own heavenly image.

As Scripture says: "the heavenly Man is the pattern of all the heavenly." From that time the lives of many on earth have been like the lives of heaven's citizens, as when, after the example of that exalted and blessed bride, she who came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, embraced the heavenly Bridegroom with a chaste love. Though, unlike the blessed bride, not yet united to him by vision, she is still espoused to him by faith, as God promised through the Prophet's words: "I will betroth you to me in steadfast love and mercy, I will betroth you to me in faithfulness." Hence she strives more and more to resemble her who came from heaven, learning from her to be modest and prudent, learning to be chaste and holy, to be patient and compassionate, and ultimately to be meek and humble of heart. By these virtues she endeavors, even while absent, to be pleasing to him on whom the angels long to look. With a love angelic in its fervor she shows herself to be a fellow-citizen with the saints and a domestic of God, she shows that she is beloved, that she is a bride.

8. I believe that all persons such as I have described are not only heavenly because of their origin but that each so resembles heaven as to merit being so named. Their heavenly origin is most evident since their life is centered in heaven. The holy person whose gift of faith is like a moon and whose virtues are like stars, is truly a heaven. We could mean by the sun zeal for justice and fervent love and by the moon continence. Without the sun there is no brightness in the moon, and without justice and love there is no merit in continence. Hence that saying of Wisdom: "How beautiful is the chaste generation with its love." And to call the stars virtues gives me no qualms, the aptness of the metaphor is so obvious. For just as the stars that shine by night are hidden by day, so true virtue that passes unnoticed in prosperity, becomes conspicuous in adversity. What prudence conceals, necessity forces into the open. So, if virtue be a star, the virtuous man is a heaven. But we are not to suppose that when God, speaking through his Prophet, said "heaven is my throne, he was referring to the wheeling heavens we see above us; no, in another text of Scripture we find what he meant more clearly expressed: "The soul of the just is the seat of wisdom." If you recall the Savior's teaching that God is a spirit, to be adored in spirit, you must realize that God's throne is a spiritual entity. This truth I confidently affirm, in the case of a just man no less than of an angel. My belief in its truth is further strengthened by the faithful promise of the Son: "I and the Father will come to him," that is, to the holy man, "and make our dwelling with him." I feel too that the Prophet meant this heaven when he said: "You dwell in the holy place, the praise of Israel." Finally, the Apostle says explicitly that "Christ dwells by faith in our hearts."