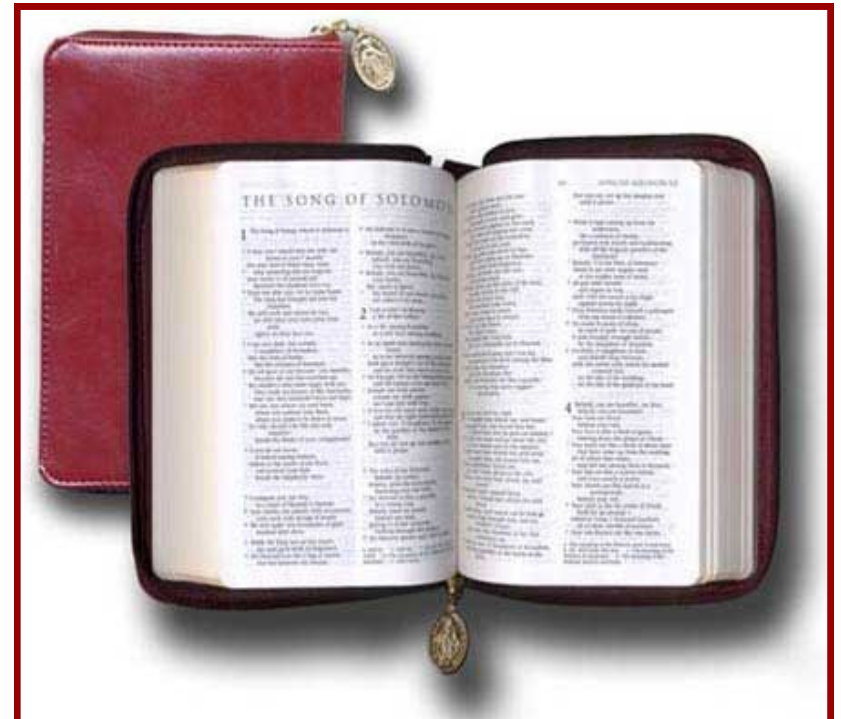




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# ***SONG OF SONGS—37***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***THE ACQUIRING  
OF  
KNOWLEDGE***

*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 Acquiring of Knowledge**

Here I am as I promised; here I am, both in compliance with your request and to give to God the service I owe him. Three reasons therefore compel me to speak to you: fidelity to my promise, brotherly love, and the fear of the Lord. If I refuse to speak, my own mouth condemns me. But what if I do speak? Then I dread a similar judgment, that my mouth will condemn me as one who speaks but fails to accomplish. Help me therefore with your prayers that I may always speak as I ought, and act in accord with my words. You are aware that I propose to speak today of ignorance, or rather of different kinds of ignorance. You remember I mentioned two kinds, one with regard to ourselves, the other with regard to God. And I warned that we must beware of these two, because both are reprehensible. It remains for me now to expound this more clearly and at greater length. But first I think we must try to discover if all ignorance is reprehensible. It seems to me that this is not true - nor does all ignorance occasion loss - since there are various and countless things of which one may know nothing without detriment to salvation. If you are ignorant of the craftsman's art, for example that of the carpenter or mason, or any other craft practiced by men for the purposes of the present life, does this prevent your being saved? But while unacquainted with any of the liberal arts— though not denying that they may be learned and practiced for honorable and useful ends - how many people are saved by living well and doing good, those whom the Apostle mentions in the Epistle to the Hebrews, men who were dear to God not because of knowledge of literature but because of a good conscience and a sincere faith? They all pleased God in their lives by the merits of their lives, not by their knowledge. Peter and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee, and all the other disciples, were not chosen from a school of rhetoric or philosophy; and yet through them the Savior made his salvation effective throughout the world. Unlike a certain holy man who made this claim for himself, it was not because their wisdom surpassed that of all other living men, but because of their faith and meekness, that he made them his friends, sanctified them, and appointed them teachers. And when they revealed to the world the paths of life, it was not with sublime language or the polished words of human wisdom. Rather it pleased God, since the world in its wisdom did not recognize him, that through the foolishness of their preaching believers should be saved.

7. You can see now how each of these kinds of knowledge is so necessary for your salvation, that you cannot be saved if you lack either of them. If you lack self-knowledge you will possess neither the fear of God nor humility. And whether you may presume to be saved without the fear of God and humility, is for you to judge. The murmuring that I hear among you shows me quite clearly that this is not your idea of wisdom, or rather not your way of being foolish, so we need not linger over what is obvious. But there are other things to attend to, or should we come to an end for the sake of those who are asleep down there? I thought that with one sermon I should fulfill my promise about the two kinds of ignorance, and I would have, but it is already too long for those who are tired of it. Some, I can see, are yawning, and some are asleep. And no wonder, for last night's vigils were prolonged; that excuses them. But what shall I say to those who were asleep then, and now sleep again? I am not now going to add to their shame, it is enough to have mentioned it. But for the future they must be on the alert, or they will have to endure the sting of further reproach. With this hope in view I pass over the matter for the moment; and though reason demands that I continue the sermon, out of charity for them I shall postpone it to another time, making an end where there is no end. And they, because of the mercy shown them, must give glory along with us to the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 37***

I wish therefore that before everything else a man should know himself, because not only usefulness but right order demand this. Right order, since what we are is our first concern; and usefulness, because this knowledge gives humility rather than self-importance, it provides a basis on which to build. For unless there is a durable foundation of humility, the spiritual edifice has no hope of standing. And there is nothing more effective, more adapted to the acquiring of humility, than to find out the truth about oneself. There must be no dissimulation, no attempt at self-deception, but a facing up to one's real self without flinching and turning aside. When a man thus takes stock of himself in the clear light of truth, he will discover that he lives in a region where likeness to God has been forfeited and groaning from the depths of a misery to which he can no longer remain blind, will he not cry out to the Lord as the Prophet did: "In your truth you have humbled me"? How can he escape being genuinely humbled on acquiring this true self-knowledge, on seeing the burden of sin that he carries, the oppressive weight of his mortal body, the complexities of earthly cares, the corrupting influence of sensual desires; on seeing his blindness, his worldliness, his weakness, his embroilment in repeated errors; on seeing himself exposed to a thousand dangers, trembling amid a thousand fears, confused by a thousand difficulties, defenseless before a thousand suspicions, worried by a thousand needs; one to whom vice is welcome, virtue repugnant? Can this man afford the haughty eyes, the proud lift of the head? With the thorns of his misery pricking him, will he not rather be changed for the better? Let him be changed and weep, changed to mourning and sighing, changed to acceptance of the Lord, to whom in his lowliness he will say: "Heal me because I have sinned against you." He will certainly find consolation in this turning to the Lord, because he is "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort."

6. As for me, as long as I look at myself, my eye is filled with bitterness. But if I look up and fix my eyes on the aid of the divine mercy, this happy vision of God soon tempers the bitter vision of myself, and I say to him: "I am disturbed within so I will call you to mind from the land of the Jordan. This vision of God is not a little thing. It reveals him to us as listening compassionately to our prayers, as truly kind and merciful, as one who will not indulge his resentment. His very nature is to be good, to show mercy always and to spare. By this kind of experience, and in this way, God makes himself known to us for our good. When a man first discovers that he is in difficulties, he will cry out to the Lord who will hear him and say: "I will deliver you and you shall glorify me." In this way your self-knowledge will be a step to the knowledge of God; he will become visible to you according as his image is being renewed within you. And you, gazing confidently on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, will be transformed into that same image with ever increasing brightness, by the work of the Spirit of the Lord.

2. Perhaps you think that I have sullied too much the good name of knowledge, that I have cast aspersions on the learned and proscribed the study of letters. God forbid! I am not unmindful of the benefits its scholars conferred, and still confer, on the Church, both by refuting her opponents and instructing the simple. And I have read the text: "As you have rejected knowledge, so do I reject you from my priesthood;" read that the learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven, and those who have instructed many in virtue as bright as stars for all eternity. But I recall reading too that knowledge puffs up, and "the more the knowledge, the more the sorrow." There are then different kinds of knowledge, one contributing to self-importance, the other to sadness. Which of the two do you think is more useful or necessary to salvation, the one that makes you vain or the one that makes you weep? I feel sure you would prefer the latter to the former, for vanity but pretends to health whereas pain expresses a need. Anyone who thus demands is on the way to being saved, because the one who asks receives. Furthermore, Paul tells us that he who heals the brokenhearted abhors the proud: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Paul also said, "By the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think more than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." He does not forbid thinking, but inordinate thinking. And what is meant by thinking with sober judgment? It means taking the utmost care to discover what are the essential and primary truths, for the time is short. All knowledge is good in itself, provided it be founded on the truth; but since because of the brevity of time you are in a hurry to work out your salvation in fear and trembling, take care to learn, principally and primarily, the doctrines on which your salvation is more intimately dependent. Do not doctors of medicine hold that part of the work of healing depends on a right choice in the taking of food, what to take first, what next, and the amount of each kind to be eaten? For although it is clear that all the foods God made are good, if you fail to take the right amount in due order, you obviously take them to the detriment of your health. And what I say about foods I want you to apply to the various kinds of knowledge.

3. I prefer though to let you consult the Master. The doctrine I have preached is not really mine but his; though mine as well insofar as it is the word of him who is Truth. For Paul said: "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know." He does not approve of the well-read man who observes no scale of values in the knowledge he possesses. See how the fruit and usefulness of knowledge is determined by the manner in which one knows. And what does that manner imply? It implies the order, the application, and the sense of purpose with which one approaches the object of study. The order implies that we give precedence to all that aids spiritual progress; the application, that we pursue more eagerly all that strengthens love more; and the purpose, that we pursue it not through vain-glory or inquisitiveness or any base motive, but for the welfare of oneself or one's neighbor.

For there are some who long to know for the sole purpose of knowing, and that is shameful curiosity; others who long to know in order to become known, and that is shameful vanity. To such as these we may apply the words of the Satirist: "Your knowledge counts for nothing unless your friends know you have it." There are others still who long for knowledge in order to sell its fruits for money or honors, and this is shameful profiteering; others again who long to know in order to be of service, and this is charity. Finally there are those who long to know in order to benefit themselves, and this is prudence.

4. Of all these categories, only the last two avoid the abuse of knowledge, because they desire to know for the purpose of doing good. People with sound judgment act in this way. Let all others heed the warning: he who knows what he ought to do and fails to do it, commits sin; just as food eaten but not digested is injurious to one's health. Food that is badly cooked and indigestible induces physical disorders and damages the body instead of nourishing it. In the same way if a glut of knowledge stuffed in the memory, that stomach of the mind, has not been cooked on the fire of love, and transfused and digested by certain skills of the soul, its habits and actions - since, as life and conduct bear witness, the mind is rendered good through its knowledge of good— will not that knowledge be reckoned sinful, like the food that produces irregular and harmful humors? Is not sin a humor of evil? Are not bad habits humors of evil? Will not a man in this condition suffer in his conscience inflammations and torments, since he does not act as he knows he should? And will he not find within himself the threat of death and damnation as often as he calls to mind the saying of God, that the man who knows what his Lord wants, but fails to respond as he should, will receive many strokes of the lash? Perhaps the Prophet was lamenting in the guise of such a man when he said: "There is an anguish within me, anguish within!" Or perhaps the repetition of the woes hint at a different meaning that I ought to follow up. It is possible that the Prophet spoke these words in his own person when, filled with a knowledge and overflowing with a love that he longed with all his soul to communicate, he found no one who wanted to listen; the knowledge that he could not impart became a burden on his mind. This holy teacher of the Church therefore, bewails both those who scorn to learn how to live, and those who, knowing the truth, yet live evil lives. This could explain the prophet's repetition of those words.

5. Do you not see then, how truly the Apostle perceived that knowledge puffs up?