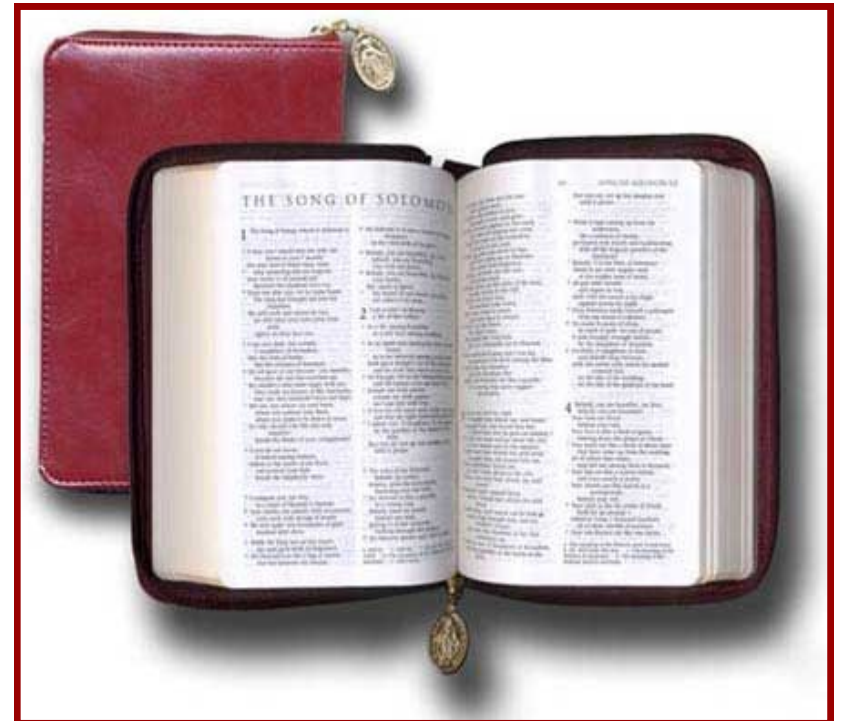




SONG OF SONGS—72

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE FEEDING
OF
THE BRIDEGROOM***

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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.

The Feeding of the Bridegroom

The end of the last sermon shall be this one's beginning. The Bridegroom, then, is a lily, but not a lily among thorns, for he who has no sin has no thorns. It is the Bride he describes as a lily among thorns, for if she said that she had no thorn, she would be deceiving herself, and the truth would not be in her. Now he has declared that he is a flower and a lily, but not among thorns; indeed he says, 'I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley'. There is no mention of thorns, because he alone among men has no need to say, 'I writhe in anguish, and a thorn pierces me.' Therefore he is never without lilies, and always without faults, because he is always radiant and fairer than the children of men. You then who hear or read these words, take care to have lilies in your soul, if you wish to have him who dwells among the lilies dwelling in you. Let the radiance and fragrance of your character show that your actions, your endeavors and your desires are lilies. For characters have their own color and fragrance, and souls have their own distinctive color and fragrance just as bodies do. Now their color is derived from conscience, and their fragrance from reputation. 'You have made our odor hateful to Pharaoh and his servants.' they say, referring to reputation. Then the intention of the heart and the judgment of the conscience gives its color to your action. Vices are black and virtue is white, and the awakened conscience distinguishes between them. When the Lord speaks of the good eye and the faulty eye he makes the same distinction, for there is as great a difference between white and black as between light and darkness. Therefore what proceeds from a pure heart and a good conscience is virtue, white and shining; and if it is followed by a good report it is a lily too, for it has both color and fragrance.

2. Even if virtue is not made greater by good report, it becomes brighter and more beautiful. If in the intention there is any blemish, what proceeds from it will not be free from blemish; for a defect in the root will appear on the branch. Consequently whatever proceeds from a defective root - be it speech, action, or prayer - may not be called a lily, even if its fragrance seems to conceal the blemish, for it lacks the bright color. How can it be a lily when it is disfigured by a blemish? Reputation cannot compensate for virtue, when conscience is aware of some defect. Virtue will be satisfied with the radiance of a good conscience, even when no fragrance of reputation can follow; but the fragrance of a good reputation cannot compensate for the stain of a bad conscience. Yet a good man will always intend what is good, not only before God but also in the sight of men, that he may truly be a lily.

'The joy of the Lord is our strength.'

3. But there is a radiance of soul which comes from the mercy and forgiveness of God, as he himself says through the prophet Isaiah: 'Even if your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; even if they are blood-red, they shall be as white as snow.' And there is a brightness with which a man clothes himself, when he shows mercy with cheerfulness; if you look at a man whom the Psalmist describes as happy, a man who shows mercy and lends, do you not see that his joyfulness of spirit begets a radiance in his face and his deeds? But the face and deeds of a man who gives reluctant and grudging service are not radiant, but dark and gloomy. That is why the Lord loves a cheerful giver. How could he love a gloomy one? He looked favorably upon Abel because of his radiant gladness, but turned away from Cain because Cain's face was heavy, no doubt with sadness and envy. Consider what the color of sadness and jealousy must be like, for God to turn away his face from it. There is a beautiful and sensitive description of the radiant joy which lights up kindness in the writings of the poet: 'The joyful of countenance have overcome all things.' The Lord loves not only a cheerful giver but one who gives with simplicity. Simplicity also is radiance. We prove this from its contrary: duplicity is a blemish; I say more, it is a disfigurement. For what is duplicity but deception? But as for the person who practices deception in the sight of God, his wickedness is found out and hated. Indeed, 'Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no sin, and in whose spirit there is no guile.' The Lord described these disfigurements - deception and gloominess - when he said, 'Do not be gloomy, like the hypocrites'. The Bridegroom, being himself virtue, takes pleasure in virtues; being himself a lily, he abides willingly among the lilies; being himself radiance, he delights in their radiance.

4. Perhaps it is because he delights in the radiance and fragrance of virtues that he is said to feed among the lilies. In the days of his earthly life he fed at the house of Martha and Mary and took his rest physically among the lilies - for those I speak of were lilies - and likewise he refreshed his spirit with their devotion and virtues. If at that hour a prophet had entered, or an angel or any other spiritual being, knowing what majesty was reclining there, would he not have been amazed at the condescension and kindness which they saw him show to those of pure souls and chaste bodies, although they were of earthly body and belonged to the weaker sex? Would they not have given testimony, saying, 'I saw him not only abiding, but feeding, among the lilies.' The Bridegroom was found feeding flesh and spirit among the lilies, I say. But I think that he was giving them food, of a spiritual kind. He fed them in the same way as he himself was fed. In the same way he comforted the fearfulness of the women, cheered their humility, and enriched their devotion. You have seen that 'For him, to be nourished is to nourish'. Now see how the converse is true, and to nourish is to be nourished. 'Lord, you have fed me from my youth', says the holy patriarch Jacob. He is the good householder, who provides for his family, especially in bad times, so that he may give them food in times of hunger, feeding them with the bread of life and understanding, and so he brings them to eternal life. But as he feeds them, he is himself also fed, and fed with the food which he takes most gladly, that is our progress. 'The joy of the Lord is our strength.'

5. So it is that while he feeds others he is himself fed, and while he refreshes us with spiritual joy he himself joys in our spiritual progress. My penitence, my salvation, are his food. I myself am his food. Does he not eat ashes as though they were bread? For I as a sinner; it is I who am the ashes to be eaten by him. I am chewed as I am reprov'd by him; I am swallowed as I am taught; I am digested as I am changed; I am assimilated as I am transformed; I am made one as I am conformed. Do not wonder at this, for he feeds upon us and is fed by us that we may be the more closely bound to him. Otherwise we are not perfectly united with him. For if I eat and am not eaten, then he is in me but I am not yet in him. But if I am eaten and do not eat, then he has me in him, but it would appear he is not yet in me; and in neither case will there be perfect union between us. But he eats me that he may have me in himself, and he in turn is eaten by me that he may be in me, and the bond between us will be strong and the union complete, for I shall be in him and he will likewise be in me.

6. Shall I show you my meaning by a comparison? Lift your eyes then to a loftier aspect, which nevertheless has much in common with this one. If the Bridegroom himself were in the Father in such a way that the Father was not in him, or the Father in him in such a way that he was not in the Father, then I would say that the unity between them would be less than perfect, if indeed it were a unity. But since he is in the Father and the Father in him, nothing cripples their unity, but he and the Father are truly one. Thus the soul which finds its good in cleaving to God will not consider itself perfectly united with him until it perceives that he abides in her and she in him. Not even then may she be said to be one with God as the Father and Son are one, although 'he who cleaves to God is one spirit with him'. This I have read; the other I have not. I am not speaking of myself. I am nothing; but surely no-one in his senses, either on earth or in heaven, would appropriate to himself that utterance of the Only-begotten Son: 'I and the Father are one'. Yet I, though dust and ashes, relying on the words of Scripture, am not afraid to say that I am one spirit with God, if ever I shall have been convinced by sure experience that I cleave to God, after the manner of those who abide in charity, and therefore abide in God and God in them, feeding somehow upon God, and being fed by God. For I think that it was about such a union that it was said, 'he who cleaves to God is one spirit with him.' So what? The Son says, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me, and we are one'. Man says, 'I am in God, and God is in me, and we are one spirit'.

14. I fear there may be some among us whose gifts the Bridegroom does not accept because they lack the fragrance of lilies; for if my fasting reflects my own self-will, it will not be acceptable to him, and he will find no fragrance in my fasting, since its odor is not that of the lily of obedience, but the weed of self-will. And the same thing, I feel, must be true not only of fasting but of silence, vigils, prayer, spiritual reading, manual labor, and indeed of every detail of the monk's life when self-will is found in it instead of obedience to his masters. Such observances although good in themselves are not, I think, to be accounted as among the lilies, that is, among the virtues; but such a man will hear addressed to him the word of the prophet Isaiah: 'Is this the fast that I chose?' says the Lord. And he will add, 'In the day of your good deeds you will find your pleasures.' Self-will is a great evil and through it your good deeds become not good for you. Therefore such deeds need to become lilies, for he who feeds among the lilies will not taste of anything which is defiled by self-will. Wisdom it is who reaches the ends of the world in purity, and whom no defilement can touch. Therefore the bridegroom loves to feed among the lilies, that is, among hearts which are pure and undefiled. But how long shall this be? 'Until the day breathes forth life and the shadows lie prostrate.' This passage is full of obscurities and difficulties; we may not enter the forest of this deep mystery except by the clear light of day. Now, I have talked too long, the day has come to an end and we unwillingly withdraw from the lilies. I have not been carried away by talking; the fragrance of the flowers would turn aside its weariness. Little seems to remain of the verse we are considering; but that little is full of mystical meaning, like all the rest of this song, but he who opens the doors to mysteries will be at hand, I trust, when we knock, and will not shut the mouths of those who speak of him; for he is more wont to open those which are closed, he who is the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

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13. But hear how the word declares he is fed: 'My food,' he says, 'is to do the will of my Father.' This word of the Word shows clearly that doing good is his food, and if he finds it among the lilies it is among the virtues. If any is found outside even if it seems to be in itself good food, he who feeds among the lilies will not touch it. For example, he does not receive alms from the hand of a robber or a usurer, nor indeed from a hypocrite who has a trumpet sounded before him when he gives alms that he may be praised by men. Nor will he by any means hear the prayer of someone who loves to pray at the street-corners so as to be seen by men. For the prayers of the sinners will be hateful to him. The man who knows that his brother has anything against him would offer his gift at the altar in vain. God would not look upon the sacrifice of Cain because he did not walk righteously with his brother. On the evidence of the prophet Isaiah, the Sabbaths of the Jews, their new moons, and their sacrifices, were such an abomination to him that he protested openly that he hated them from his soul, and he said, 'When you come to appear before me, who has required this at your hands?' Those hands, I think lack the fragrance of lilies, and therefore he rejected their gifts. Since he has been used to feeding among the lilies, and not among the thorns, were their hand not full of thorns to whom he said, 'Your hands are full of blood?' And the hands of Esau were hairy, as though covered with thorns. Therefore they were not permitted to wait upon the Holy One.

7. But do the Father and the Son not feed upon each other, that they may be in each other, just as God and man, by feeding mutually upon each other, abide as one spirit even though they are not one? Not so; for they do not indwell the one the other in the same way, nor is their unity the same. For the Father and the Son are in one another, they are, in a not only ineffable but Incomprehensible way, capable equally of containing and of being contained, but capable of containing each other without being divisible, and of being contained without being divided. For as the Church sings in a hymn;

'The Word in God the Father one,
The Father perfect in the Son.'

8. The Father is in the Son in whom he is well pleased, and the Son is in the Father from whom he has never been separated, just as there has never been a time when he was not begotten. Now through charity man is in God and God in man; for St John says 'He who dwells in charity dwells in God and God in him. This is the harmony by which they are two in one spirit, or indeed are one spirit. Do you see the distinction? For to be of the same substance is not the same as to be of the same will. If you consider the matter, their difference in unity is indicated by the words Unum and unus, for unus, one person, cannot be applied to the Father and to the Son, nor unum, one substance, to man and to God. The Father and Son cannot be said to be one person, because the Father is one and the Son is one. Yet they are said to be, and they are, one, because they have and are one substance, since they have not each separate substance. On the contrary, since God and man do not share the same nature or substance, they cannot be said to be a unity, yet they are with complete truth and accuracy, said to be one spirit, if they cohere with the bond of love. But that unity is caused not so much by the identity of essences as by the concurrence of wills.

9. Now if I am not mistaken, not only the difference of kind but also the difference of degree in these unities is clear enough; for the one exists in one mode of being and the other between different modes. What can be as different as the unity of one being and the unity of more than one? For as I have said, the expressions unus and unum indicate the distinction between the types of unity, for unum denotes that the unity of the Father and the Son is one of essence, while unus denotes not that, but the concurrence of wills in charity. Nevertheless by an extension of meaning the Father and the Son can truly be said to be unus, one, in that there is one God, one Lord, and there are other characteristics which may be attributed to each and not to one in particular. For their Godhead, their majesty, is no more distinct than their substance or their nature or mode of being. And all these things, if considered rightly, are not diverse or divided in one and the other but are unum.

I have said too little. They are unum with one other also. What of that unity in which we read that many hearts and souls are one? They are not, I think, to be considered as a true unity compared to this one, which does not unite many, but signifies one uniquely. Therefore since that unity is not brought about by the act of uniting, but exists from all eternity, it is unique and supreme, nor is it brought about by that spiritual feeding which I have spoken of, since it has no cause, but has existence. Even less should it be thought of as brought about by some conjunction of essences or some agreement of wills since there are none of these. There is in them, as has been said, one essence and one will, and where there is only one, there can be no agreement or combining or incorporation or anything of that kind. For there must be at least two wills for there to be agreement, and two essences for there to be combining or uniting in agreement. There are none of these things in the Father and the Son since they have neither two essences nor two wills. In them each of these things are one, or rather, as I remember saying before, these two things are one (unum) in them and one with them, and thus, as they abide in each other in a way beyond comprehension or comparison, they are truly and uniquely one. But if anyone would affirm that there is agreement between the Father and the Son, I do not contest it provided that it is understood that there is not a union of wills but a unity of will.

10. But we think of God and man as dwelling in each other in a very different way, because their wills, and their substances are distinct and different; that is, their substances are not intermingled, yet their wills are in agreement; and this union is for them a communion of wills and an agreement in charity. Happy is this union if you experience it, but compared with the other, it is no union at all.

There is a saying by one who experienced it, 'For me it is good to cleave to God.' Good indeed, if you cleave wholly to him. Who is there who cleaves perfectly to God, unless he who, dwelling in God, is loved by God and, reciprocating that love, draws God into himself. Therefore, when God and man cleave wholly to each other - it is when they are incorporated into each other by mutual love that they cleave wholly to each other - I would say beyond all doubt that God is in man and man in God. Yet man truly abides in God from all eternity, for he is loved from all eternity, if he is one of those who say that God loved us and accepted us in his beloved Son before the foundation of the world; and God truly abides in man, when he is loved by man. And if this is so, man is indeed in God, even when God is not in man; but God is not in the man who is not in God. For he cannot abide in love even if he loves for a time yet is unloved. Nor can he yet love, though already loved; otherwise what is the meaning of the saying: 'Since he first loved us'? But when he who was already loved begins to love, then man is in God and God in man. But the man who does not love has clearly never been loved; it follows that he is not in God nor God in him. These things have been said to show the difference between the relationship which is the unity of the Father and the Son, and the one which makes the man who cleaves to God one spirit with him, lest perhaps when you read that a man abides in love because he abides in God and God in him, and that the Son is in the Father and the Father in him, you should imagine that the prerogative of the adoptive Son is the same as that of the Only begotten.

11. Now that we have dealt with these matters, we must return to 'him who feeds among the lilies' because that was where we were when we made this digression. Whether that has been of value you must judge. I had already suggested two explanations of this passage; first, that he who is virtue and radiance feeds upon the virtue of those on whom his radiance has shone; then, that he receives penitent sinners in penitence into his body, which is the Church, and that he who never sinned made himself sin to unite them with himself, so that the body of sin in which the sinners had once been implanted might be destroyed, and that they might be justified by grace and become righteousness in him.

12. I would add a third which comes to mind, and I think it will suffice not only for an explanation of this passage but for an end to this sermon: The word of God, the Bridegroom, is truth. This you know; now hear the rest. When it is heard but not obeyed, it remains empty and, as it were, fruitless, altogether full of sorrow, and complaining that it has been uttered in a void. But do you not see that if it is obeyed the word seems to grow weightier, because deed is added to word, as it is strengthened by the fruits of obedience, the harvest of righteousness? This is why he says in the Apocalypse, 'Behold I stand at the door and knock, if any man hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me'. The word of the Lord by the prophet Isaiah seems to give approval to this interpretation where he says that his word shall not return to him empty but shall prosper and accomplish that for which he sent it. 'It shall not return to me empty,' he says, 'but as though prospering in all things it shall be filled with the good deeds of those who shall obey it in love.' For in common parlance a word is said to be fulfilled when it has produced its effect; but until it has discharged its task it is meaningless and barren, and somehow starved.