

11. Now the foolish virgins - whom I do not think to have been foolish in other respects than by believing themselves wise they became silly - they, I tell you, will hear God saying, 'I do not know you.' So those who have made use of grace to perform miracles to enhance their own reputation will likewise hear the same condemnation, 'I do not know you.' From this it is quite clear that grace brings no profit where there is no truth in one's intention, but rather brings harm. Both are found in the Bridegroom's presence. 'Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ,' says John the Baptist. If then the Lord Jesus knocks at my door, with one of these gifts and not the other and he is the word of God, the Bridegroom of the soul - he will enter not as a bridegroom but as a judge. God forbid that this may ever happen! 'Enter not into judgment with your servant.' May he enter as one who brings peace, joy, and gladness; but may he also enter with the gravity of maturity, to purify my joy and control my arrogance with the stern gaze of truth. May he come as a leaping fawn and a sharp-eyed roe, to pass over my offences and look at them only with pity and forgiveness. May he come down as from the mountains of Bethel, full of joy and radiance, descending from the Father, sweet and gentle, not scorning to become and to be known as the Bridegroom of the soul who seeks him, for he is God, blessed above all for ever.

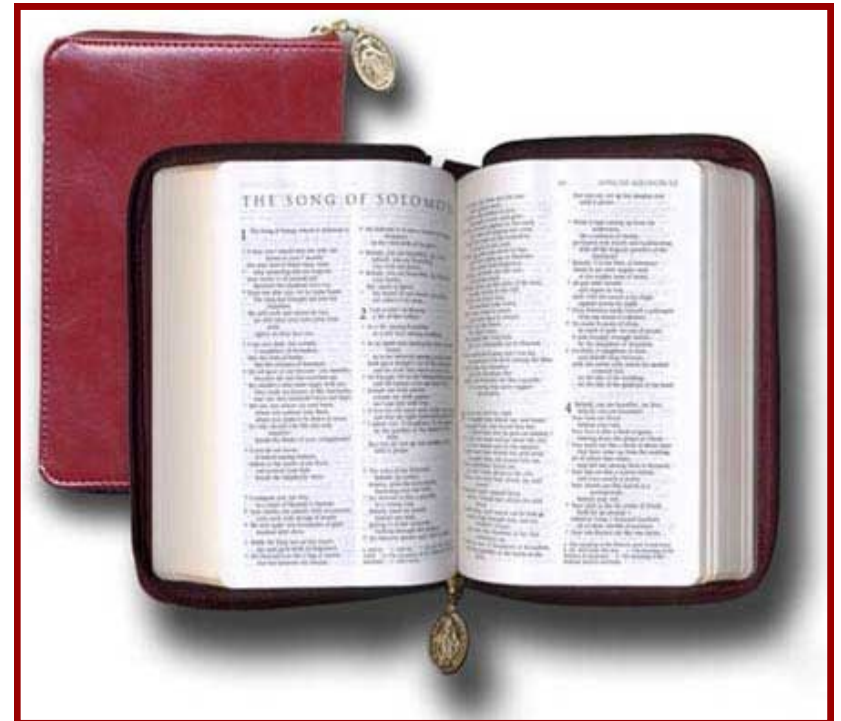
END OF SONG OF SONGS — 75



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SONG OF SONGS—75

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE ROE
AND
THE YOUNG FAWN***

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 Roe and the Young Fawn

‘Return,’ she says. Clearly he whom she calls back is not there, yet he has been, not long before, for she seems to be calling him back at the moment of his going. So importunate a recall shows great love on the part of the one and great loveliness on the part of the other. Who are these who are so taken up with charity, these unwearingly lovers, whose passion drives them on and gives them no rest? It is my task to fulfill my promise, and apply this passage to the Word and to the soul, but to do this at all worthily I admit I need the help of the Word himself. Certainly this topic would more fitly be discussed by one with more experience and awareness of this holy and hidden love; but I cannot shirk my duty or disregard your requests. I am aware of the danger, but I will not refuse to meet it, for you force me to it. Indeed, you force me to walk in great matters and mysteries which are beyond me. Alas! how afraid I am to hear the words, ‘Why do you speak of my delights and put my mystery into words?’ Hear me then as a man who is afraid to speak but cannot remain silent. My very trepidation will perhaps justify my presumption; even more, if it increases, your edification. Perhaps too God will have regard to my tears. ‘Return,’ she says. Good. He departed, he is called back. Who will disclose to me the mystery of this change? Who will adequately explain to me the going and returning of the Word? Surely the Bridegroom will not stoop to inconstancy? Where can he come from? Where can he return to, he who fills heaven and earth? How can he who is spirit move from place to place? How can any movement of any kind be attributed to him who is God? For he is immutable.

9. Neither then is sufficient without the other. That is an understatement: neither has any value without the other. How do we know this? Scripture says, ‘If a man knows what is good, and does not do it, that for him is sin’; and again, ‘If a servant knows the will of his master and does not perform it duly, he shall be severely beaten.’ This refers to truth. What is said of grace? It is written, ‘And after the sop Satan entered into him.’ It is speaking of Judas, who received the gift of grace, but because he did not walk in truth with the Lord of truth, with truth as his teacher, he gave place in himself to the devil. Hear again, ‘He fed them with the finest wheat, and with honey from the rock he satisfied them.’ Who are they? ‘The enemies of the Lord have lied to him.’ Those whom he has fed with honey and wheat have lied to him and become his enemies, because they did not add truth to grace. In another place it says of them, ‘The strange children have lied to me, the strange children have grown weak and are limping off their paths.’ How can they help limping when they are supported on the one foot of grace, and do not stand on truth? Their fate will last forever, like that of their prince, who himself did not stand on the truth, but was a liar from the beginning, and therefore heard the words ‘You have destroyed your wisdom through your own splendor.’ I do not desire a splendor which can rob me of wisdom.

10. Do you ask what this elegance is, so harmful and so dangerous? It is your own. Do you still not understand? I will speak more plainly. It is a splendor which is inward-looking and personal. It is not the gift we condemn, but the use made of it. For, if you notice, Satan is said to have lost his wisdom not because of splendor but because of his own elegance. Surely the splendor of an angel and the splendor of a soul are one and the same. What is an angel or a soul without wisdom but a rough, shapeless mass? But with wisdom there is a splendor not only of form but of beauty. But Satan lost this when he appropriated it as his own, so that to lose wisdom through his own elegance to lose it through his own wisdom. Possessiveness brings about the loss. It was because he was wise in his own eyes, not giving God the glory, nor returning grace for grace, and not walking in grace following truth but distorting it for his own purposes, that he lost it. Indeed, to possess it is to lose it. If Abraham, as the Apostle says, was justified by his works, he possessed something in which to glory, but not before God. ‘I am not safe,’ I would say. ‘Anything I do not possess before God I have lost.’ Nothing can be as lost as that which is outside the presence of God. What is death but the loss of life? Perdition is nothing but alienation from God. ‘Woe to you who are wise in your own eyes, and prudent in your own minds.’ It is said of you, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and frustrate the prudence of the prudent.’ They have lost wisdom, because their own wisdom has caused them to be lost. How can they not lose everything, who are themselves lost; and those whom God does not recognize are indeed lost.

7. But when the Word has left me, all these spiritual powers become weak and faint and begin to grow cold, as though you had removed the fire from under a boiling pot, and this is the sign of his going. Then the needs of my soul must needs be sorrowful until he returns, and my heart again kindles within me - the sign of his returning. When I have had such experience of the Word, is it any wonder that I take to myself the words of the Bride, calling him back when he has withdrawn? For although my fervor is not as strong as hers, yet I am transported by a desire like hers. As long as I live the word 'return,' the word of recall for the recall of Word, will be on my lips.

As often as he slips away from me, so often shall I call him back. From the burning desire of my heart I will not cease to call him, begging him to return, as if after someone who is departing, and I will implore him to give back to me the joy of his salvation, and restore himself to me.

I assure you, my sons, I find joy in nothing else if he is not here, who alone gives me joy. And I implore him not to come empty-handed but full of grace and truth, as is his nature - as he did yesterday and the day before. Herein is shown his likeness to a roe or a fawn, for his truth has the sharp eyes of a roe, and his grace the gladness of a fawn.

8. I need both of these: I need truth that I may not be able to hide from him, and grace that I may not wish to hide. Indeed, without both of these his visitation would not be complete, for the stark reality of truth would be intolerable without grace, and the gladness of grace might appear intolerable without truth. Truth is bitter unless seasoned with grace, and devotion without the restraining power of truth can be capricious and uncontrolled and even arrogant. How many have received grace without profit because they have not also accepted a tempering measure of truth? In consequence they have luxuriated in it too much, without reverence or regard for truth; they have not considered the ripe maturity of the roe, but have given themselves over to the caprices and gladness of the fawn. Thus it has come about that they have been deprived of the grace which they wished to enjoy by itself. To them it could be said, though too late, 'Go then, and learn what it means to serve the Lord in fear, and rejoice in him with awe.' The holy soul which had said in her abundance 'I shall never be moved,' and then feels that the Word has turned his face away finds herself not only moved but much troubled; thus she learns in sorrow that with the gift of devotion she needed also the steadying power of truth. The fullness of grace, then, does not consist of grace alone. What use is it to know what you ought to do, if you are not given the will to do it? But what is the use of having the will if you have not the power? How many have I known who are the sadder for knowing the truth because they could not plead ignorance as an excuse when they knew the demands of truth but did not fulfill them?

2. Yet let him receive this who can. But let us, as we proceed with caution and singleness of purpose in our exposition of this sacred and mystical utterance, follow the example of Scripture, which speaks of the wisdom hidden in the mystery, but does so in words familiar to us, and which, even as it enlightens our human minds, roots our affections on God, and imparts to us the incomprehensible and invisible things of God by means of figures drawn from the likeness of things familiar to us, like precious draughts in vessels of cheap earthenware.

Let us then follow this discourse of pure love, and say that the Word of God, God himself, the Bridegroom of the soul, comes to the soul and leaves it again as he wishes, but we must realize that this happens as a result of soul's sensitivity, and is not due to any movement of the Word. Indeed, when the soul is aware of the influence of grace she acknowledges the presence of the Word; but when she is not, she mourns his absence, and again seeks his presence, saying with the prophet, 'My face has sought you; your face, Lord, I will seek.' How could she do otherwise? For when so sweet a bridegroom withdraws from her she cannot desire any other, nor even think of another. It must be that when he is absent she seeks him ardently, and when he goes away she calls him back. Thus the Word is recalled - recalled by the longing of the soul who has once enjoyed his sweetness. Is longing not a voice? It is indeed, and a very powerful one. Then the Psalmist says, 'The Lord has heard the longing of the poor.' When the Word departs therefore, the one unceasing cry of the soul, its one unceasing desire, is 'return' - until he comes.

3. Now show me a soul which the bridegroom, the Word, is accustomed to visit often, whom friendship has made bold, who hungers for what it has once tasted, whom contempt of all things has given leisure, and without hesitation I will assign it the voice and name of the Bride, and will consider the passage we are studying applicable to it. So indeed is the speaker portrayed. For when she calls him back she proves that she deserves his presence, even if not in its fulness. Otherwise she would have called to him to come, not to return. But the word `return' signifies a recalling. Perhaps it was for this very reason that he withdrew, that the more eagerly she recalls him, the more closely she will cleave to him. For he once pretended that he was going further, not because that was his intention, but because he wanted to hear the words, `Stay with us, for evening is coming on.' And another time, when the apostles were in a boat pulling on the oars, he walked on the sea, making as though he would pass them by, not because he intended to, but to try their faith and draw out their prayers. Then, so the Evangelist says, they were troubled and cried out, thinking that he was a ghost. This kind of pious pretense, this saving gift, dispensed by the Word when in the body does not lose its effect when the Word in spirit employs it in his own spiritual manner in dealing with a soul devoted to him. He makes to go past, desiring to be held back, and seems to go away, wishing to be recalled; for he, the Word, is not irrevocable; he comes and goes according to his own good pleasure, visiting the soul at daybreak and then suddenly putting it to the test. His going is part of his own purpose, and his return is always part of his own will; both are within his infinite wisdom. His reasons he alone knows.

4. Now it is clear that his comings and goings are the fluctuations in the soul of which he speaks when he says, `I go away, and come again to you,' and, `a little while and you shall not see me, and again a little while and you shall see me.' Oh little while, little while! How long a little while! Dear Lord, you say it is for a little while that we do not see you. The word of my Lord may not be doubted, but it is a long while, far too long. Yet both are true: it is a little while compared to what we deserve, but a long while to what we desire. You have each meaning expressed by the prophet Habakkuk: `If he delays, wait for him, for he will come, and will not delay.' How is it that he will not delay if he does delay, unless it is that he comes sooner than we deserve but not as soon as we desire? For the loving soul is carried away by her prayers and drawn on by her longing; she forgets her deserts, closes her eyes to the majesty of the Bridegroom but opens them to the pleasure he brings, looking only at his saving grace, and in that putting her at confidence. Then without fear or dread she calls back the Word, and confidently asks again for his delights, calling him, with accustomed familiarity, not `Lord' but `beloved': `Return, my beloved.' And she adds `Be like a fawn or a doe on the mountains of Bethel.' But more of this later.

5. Now bear with my foolishness for a little. I want to tell you of my own experience, as I promised. Not that it is of any importance. But I make this disclosure only to help you, and if you derive any profit from it I shall be consoled for my foolishness; if not, my foolishness will be revealed. I admit that the Word has also come to me - I speak as a fool - and has come many times. But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going. And where he comes from when he visits my soul, and where he goes, and by what means he enters and goes out, I admit that I do not know even now; as John says: `You do not know where he comes from or where he goes.' There is nothing strange in this, for of him was it said, `Your footsteps will not be known.' The coming of the Word was not perceptible to my eyes, for he has no color; nor to my ears, for there was no sound; nor yet to my nostrils, for he mingles with the mind, not the air; he has not acted upon the air, but created it. His coming was not tasted by the mouth, for there was no eating or drinking, nor could he be known by the sense of touch, for he is not tangible. How then did he enter? Perhaps he did not enter because he does not come from outside? He is not one of the things which exist outside us. Yet he does not come from within me, for he is good, and I know that there is no good in me. I have ascended to the highest in me, and look! the word is towering above that. In my curiosity I have descended to explore my lowest depths, yet I found him even deeper. If I looked outside myself, I saw him stretching beyond the furthest I could see; and if I looked within, he was yet further within. Then I knew the truth of what I had read, `In him we live and move and have our being.' And blessed is the man in whom he has his being, who lives for him and is moved by him.

6. You ask then how I knew he was present, when his ways can in no way be traced? He is life and power, and as soon as he enters in, he awakens my slumbering soul; he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart, for before it was hard as stone, and diseased. So he has begun to pluck out and destroy, to build up and to plant, to water dry places and illuminate dark ones; to open what was closed and to warm what was cold; to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth, so that my soul may bless the Lord, and all that is within me may praise his holy name. So when the Bridegroom, the Word, came to me, he never made known his coming by any signs, not by sight, not by sound, not by touch. It was not by any movement of his that I recognized his coming; it was not by any of my senses that I perceived he had penetrated to the depths of my being. Only by the movement of my heart, as I have told you, did I perceive his presence; and I knew the power of his might because my faults were put to flight and my human yearnings brought into subjection. I have marvelled at the depth of his wisdom when my secret faults have been revealed and made visible; at the very slightest amendment of my way of life I have experienced his goodness and mercy; in the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind, that is of my inmost being, I have perceived the excellence of his glorious beauty, and when I contemplate all these things I am filled with awe and wonder at his manifold greatness.