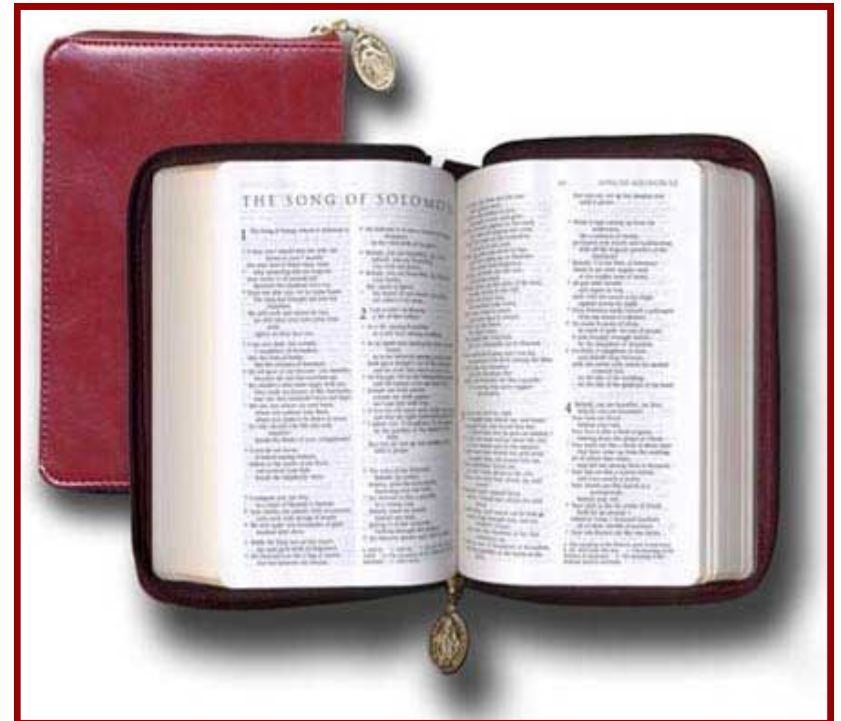




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—33***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***HOW CHRIST ADAPTS  
HIS GRACES  
TO  
PERSONAL NEEDS***

*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.*

### **How Christ Adapts his Graces to Personal Needs**

"Tell me where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon." This is where we are, from here we proceed. But before I begin to treat of these words and the vision they imply, I think we should summarize briefly the other visions that preceded it, and see how they can be applied spiritually to us according to each one's desires and merits. If we receive the grace to understand these, we shall more easily find light on the matter we are about to discuss. For we are faced with a difficult task. The words that describe these visions or images seem to refer to bodies or bodily substances, yet they are means of conveying spiritual truths to us, and hence there must be a spiritual character to our enquiry into their causes and meaning. And who is qualified to investigate and comprehend those countless affective movements of the soul caused by the presence of the Bridegroom dispensing his multiform graces? Yet if we turn our gaze to our interior, and if the Holy Spirit will be pleased to give us his light to see the fruits that by his action he constantly produces within us, I think we shall not remain entirely devoid of understanding about these mysteries. For I trust that "we have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God."

**How often has not prayer raised me from the brink  
of despair and made me feel happy  
in the hope of pardon?**

**All who have had these experiences  
know well that the Lord Jesus is a physician indeed,  
"Who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds."**

10. There you have the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden where the Bridegroom dwells, and there the pastures of life, prepared for the nourishment of men seeking holiness. "Blessed is the man who has fulfilled his desire from them." But let him be given at least this warning: not to wish to possess for himself alone goods that can suffice for the many. And perhaps for this reason after all these things the Bridegroom is described as appearing in a shepherd's guise, to provide a guideline to the man who has received the task of feeding a flock that contains so many of the ordinary people who are unable to understand those truths by their own efforts, just as sheep will not attempt to go out to the fields unless led by a shepherd. The bride thoughtfully takes note of this, and asks to be shown where he eats, where he rests in the midday heat, being ready, as may be gathered from her remark, both to be fed and to give food, as his helper and under his direction. She does not think it safe for the flock to wander far from their chief Shepherd because of wolves on the prowl, especially those who come to us in the clothing of sheep; and hence her endeavor to eat in the same pastures with him and rest in the same shady places. And she gives the reason: "Lest I begin to wander after the flocks of your companions." These are they who want to appear to be friends of the Bridegroom, but are not; and though their concern is to feed their own flocks rather than his, they cunningly spread the rumor: "Look, here is the Christ, look, he is there," and so seduce many people whom they lead away from the flocks of Christ and join to their own. So far I have been dealing with the obvious meaning of the words. But for the spiritual meaning that lies hidden beneath, you must await a new sermon. This will depend on whatever our Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Bridegroom, will be pleased to impart to me in his mercy and through your prayers. He is God, blessed for ever. Amen.

**END OF SONG OF SONGS — 33**

2. If then, any of us, like the holy Prophet, finds that it is good to cling close to God, and -- that I may make my meaning more clear -- if any of us is so filled with desires that he wants to depart and to be with Christ, with a desire that is intense, a thirst ever burning, an application that never flags, he will certainly meet the Word in the guise of a Bridegroom on whatever day he comes. At such an hour he will find himself locked in the arms of Wisdom; he will experience how sweet divine love is as it flows into his heart. His heart's desire will be given to him, even while still a pilgrim on earth, though not in its fullness and only for a time, a short time. For when after vigils and prayers and a great shower of tears he who was sought presents himself, suddenly he is gone again, just when we think we hold him fast. But he will present himself anew to the soul that pursues him with tears, he will allow himself to be taken hold of but not detained, for suddenly a second time he flees from between our hands. And if the fervent soul persists with prayers and tears, he will return each time and not defraud him of his express desire, but only to disappear soon again and not to return unless he is sought for with all one's heart. And so, even in this body we can often enjoy the happiness of the Bridegroom's presence, but it is a happiness that is never complete because the joy of the visit is followed by the pain at his departure. The beloved has no choice but to endure this state until the hour when she lays down the body's weary weight, and raised aloft on the wings of desire, freely traverses the meadows of contemplation, and in spirit follows the One she loves without restraint wherever he goes.

3. Nevertheless, he will not reveal himself in this way to every person, even momentarily, but only to the one who is proved to be a worthy bride by intense devotion, vehement desire and the sweetest affection. And the Word who comes to visit will be clothed in beauty, in every aspect a Bridegroom.

But the person who has not yet been raised to this state, who smarts at the remembrance of past deeds and says to God in bitterness of soul: "Do not condemn me," or who may still be caught up in the snare of his own evil propensities, still perilously tempted, this person needs a physician, not a bridegroom; hence kisses and embraces are not for him, but only oil and ointments, remedies for his wounds. Is not this how we too often feel? Is not this our experience at prayer, we who are tempted daily by our passions and filled with remorse for our past sins? O good Jesus, from what great bitterness have you not freed me by your coming, time after time? When distress has made me weep, when untold sobs and groans have shaken me, have you not anointed my wounded conscience with the ointment of your mercy and poured in the oil of gladness? How often has not prayer raised me from the brink of despair and made me feel happy in the hope of pardon? All who have had these experiences know well that the Lord Jesus is a physician indeed, "who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds." And those who cannot lay claim to experience must for that very reason put their trust in him when he says: "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the humble, to bind up the broken-hearted." And if they should still be in doubt, let them draw near and put it to the test and so learn by inward experience what this means: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." But let us pursue the subject.

9. God spoke to Moses face to face; not by riddles and images was he privileged to see the Lord, but openly; whereas the Lord points out that he appears to other prophets only in vision, and speaks to them in dreams. Philip too received his heart's desire when shown the Father in the Son, in that immediate reply of Christ: "Philip, he who has seen me, has seen the Father," and, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." Thomas, according to his heart's desire and the protestation he had made, was permitted to touch him. And what of David? Does he not show that he has not been entirely deprived of his wish when he says that he will not give sleep to his eyes nor slumber to his eyelids until he finds a place for the Lord? To great men like these the Bridegroom will come in his greatness; he will perform mighty deeds with them, sending out his light and his truth leading them on and directing them to his holy mountain and the tent where he dwells. Any one of these men can say: "He who is mighty has done great things for me." His eyes will see the king in his beauty going before him into the beautiful places of the desert, to the flowering roses and the lilies of the valley, to gardens where delights abound and streams run from the fountains, where storerooms are filled with delightful things and the odors of perfume, till last of all he makes his way to the privacy of the bedchamber.

8. It seems to me that he appears in the guise of a mighty Father of a family or sovereign ruler to those whose hearts are high as they approach him, who, filled with magnanimous courage because of greater liberty of spirit and purity of conscience, love to dare what is above the common measure. These are restless men, eager to penetrate the deeper mysteries, to grasp sublimer truths, to strive for what is more perfect, not so much in the physical as in the spiritual order. Because of the grandeur of their faith these are considered worthy of experiencing all fullness; in all the treasure-houses of wisdom there is nothing from which the Lord, the God who knows all things, would think of turning these men away; avid for truth as they are, and their motives free of vanity. Moses was such a man, and he dared to say to God: "If I have found favor in your sight show me yourself." Such was Philip, who begged that the Father be shown to him and his fellow disciples." Thomas, too, was such a man, for he refused to believe unless he touched with his hand the spear-wound in Christ's side. This meant indeed a lack of faith, but it was a superb consequence of his greatness of soul. Again there was David, who said to God: "My heart has said to you: 'I have been searching for you;' Lord, I do seek your face." Men of this kind undertake great deeds because they are themselves great; and what they undertake they achieve, in accord with the promise which runs: "Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours." Great faith deserves great rewards; and if you step out with trust where the good things of the Lord are to be found, you will possess them.

4. When men grow weary of studying spiritual doctrine and become lukewarm -- when their spiritual energies are drained away, then they walk in sadness along the ways of the Lord. They fulfill the tasks enjoined on them with hearts that are tired and arid, they grumble without ceasing, they complain of the long days and the long nights in words like those of Job: "When I lie down I say: 'When shall I arise?' And then I shall be waiting for evening." If when we are subject to these moods, the compassionate Lord draws near to us on the way we are traveling, and being from heaven begins to talk to us about heavenly truths, sings our favorite air from among the songs of Zion, discourses on the city of God, on the peace of that city, on the eternity of that peace and on the life that is eternal, I assure you that this happy discourse will bear along as in a carriage the man who has grown tired and listless; it drives all trace of aversion from the hearer's mind and weariness from his body. Does it not seem that this is what was felt, this is what was asked for by the man who said: "My soul has slumbered through weariness, strengthen me according to your word"? And when he obtains his request will he not cry out: "O how I love your law! It is my study all day long"? For our meditations on the Word who is the Bridegroom, on his glory, his elegance, power and majesty, become in a sense his way of speaking to us. And not only that, but when with eager minds we examine his rulings, the decrees from his own mouth; when we meditate on his law day and night, let us be assured that the Bridegroom is present, and that he speaks his message of happiness to us lest our trials should prove more than we can bear.

5. When you find yourself caught up in this kind of thinking, beware of seeing the thoughts as your own; you must rather acknowledge that he is present who said to the prophet: "It is I, announcing righteousness."

Our own thoughts bear a very close resemblance to the words Truth speaks within us; no one can easily differentiate between what springs from the heart and what he hears from without unless he attends carefully to what the Lord says in the Gospel: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts;" or that question: "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" And again: "When he (the devil) lies, he speaks according to his own nature." The Apostle says: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as coming from us," meaning here anything good, "but our sufficiency is from God." So when we yield our hearts to wicked thoughts, the thoughts are our own; if we think on good things, it is God's word. Our hearts produce the evil thoughts, they listen for those that are good. "Let me hear," the heart says, "what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people." God accordingly utters words of peace, of goodness, of righteousness within us; we do not think these things of ourselves, we hear them in our interior. On the other hand, murders, adulteries, robberies, blasphemies and similar evils come forth from the heart; we do not hear them, we produce them. For "the fool says in his heart: `there is no God.'" And hence, "The wicked has provoked God, for he has said in his heart: `He will not call to account.'" But there is still another kind of thought that is perceived indeed in the heart but not uttered by it. It does not come forth from the heart as our thought does, nor is it that word which we have said is directed to the heart, namely, the word of the Word, because it is evil. It is produced within us by hostile powers, like the images that come to us from bad angels, such as we read the devil put into the heart of Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to betray the Lord.

6. For who can keep watch over his inward thoughts so closely and so assiduously, whether they merely occur to him or whether he is their author, as to be able to decide clearly which of the heart's illicit desires are the fruit of his own frailty, which an insinuation of the devil? I believe this is more than mortals can achieve, unless by the light of the Holy Spirit they receive that special gift which the Apostle lists with the other charisma under the name of discernment of spirits. According to Solomon, no matter how vigilantly a man may guard his heart and watch with the closest scrutiny every movement of his inward being, he will not be able to diagnose or judge exactly between the evil that is inborn and the evil implanted from without, even after prolonged study and frequent experience of these matters. For "who can understand sins?" It is of little consequence to us to know the source of the evil within us, provided we know it is there; no matter what its source we must watch and pray that we may not consent to it. The Prophet prays against both these evils: "Cleanse me from my secret sins, O Lord, and spare your servant from those others." As for me, I cannot hand on to you what I have not received. And I certainly have not received the power to distinguish with certitude between what springs from the heart and what is sown there by the enemy. Both are evil, both have an evil source; both are in the heart, though both do not originate there. I am fully certain that I bear them within, but by no means certain which to attribute to the heart, which to the enemy. But this problem, as I have said, entails no danger.

7. But where the error is dangerous, even fatal, there we are provided with a rule that is certain: not to attribute to ourselves what comes from God within us, thinking that the visit of the Word is no more than a thought of our own. The distance of good from evil is the distance between these two things: for just as evil cannot proceed from the Word, neither can good proceed from the heart unless it has been previously inspired by the Word, because "a sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit." But I think enough has been said to clarify which movements of the heart are from God and which from ourselves. And this, I feel, had to be done in order that the enemies of grace may know that without grace man's heart is incapable of thinking good thoughts, that its capacity to do so comes from God: the good thought is God's inspiration, not the heart's offspring. You therefore, if you hear his voice, will no longer be ignorant of whence it comes or whither it goes because you will know it proceeds from God and goes to the heart. But make sure that the word which goes forth from the mouth of God does not return to him empty, see that it prospers and accomplishes all those things for which he sent it, so that you too will be able to say: "The grace of God in me has not been fruitless." Happy the man who has the Word for an inseparable companion who is always accessible, whose delightful conversation is an unceasing pleasure that frees him at all times from the flesh's bothersome vices, and enables him to use his time profitably in a wicked age. He shall be neither wearied nor troubled, since, according to Scripture, no matter what happens to the righteous man, it will not make him sad.