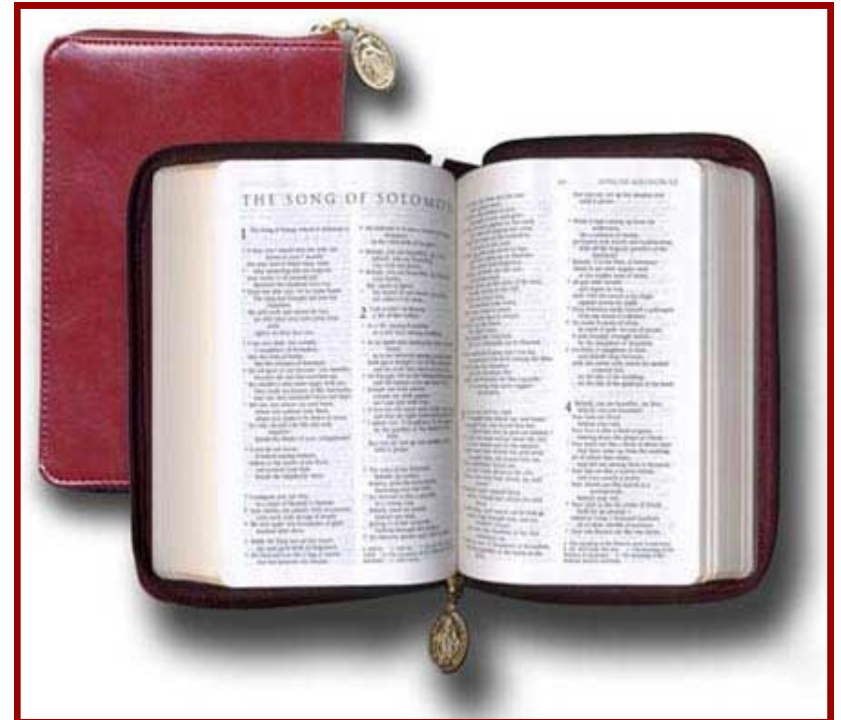




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SONG OF SONGS—30

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***ON DISCORD
IN THE CHURCH
AND IN COMMUNITIES***

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.

On Discord in the Church and in Communities

"My mother's sons turned their anger to me." Annas and Caiaphas, and Judas Iscariot, were sons of the Synagogue; and from the Church's very origin these fought with great bitterness against her, daughter of the Synagogue though she was, and hanged Jesus, her Founder, on a tree. In that moment God fulfilled through their agency what he had formerly foretold through the Prophet: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." And perhaps it is the voice of that Church we hear in the song of Hezekiah: "My life is cut off, as by a weaver; while I was yet but beginning he cut me off." It is about these and others of that same race who are known to have opposed the Christian name, that the bride complains when she says: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me." Well did she call them sons of her mother and not of her father, for they did not have God for their father but the devil; they were murderers, just as he was a murderer from the beginning. Hence she does not say: "my brother," or "the sons of my father," but: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me." If she had failed to make this distinction, even the Apostle Paul would seem to be included among those of whom she complains, for he once persecuted the Church of God. But because while living as an unbeliever he had acted in ignorance, he received the grace of mercy; and so he exemplified that he had God for father, that he was a brother of the Church both on his Father's side and on his mother's side.

**In the Gospel you are clearly informed from
our Savior's own mouth:**

***"A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THOSE
OF HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD."***

9. If worldly-minded maidens should taunt a person undergoing this trial, and say how unsightly she is and devoid of good color, does it not seem to you that she can reply very aptly: "Take no notice of my swarthyness, it is the sun that has burnt me." And if such a person bears in mind that she has arrived at this state through the exhortations and remonstrations of God's servants who "feel a divine jealousy" for her, may she not as a consequence say in truth: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me." The Church or any person inspired by true zeal will speak in this way, using this meaning, not in a mood of grief or complaint, but in joy and thanksgiving and a spirit of triumph that she has been found worthy both to become and to be called dark and unsightly for the name and love of Christ. And this she attributes not to her own merits but to the grace and mercy of the God who anticipated her needs and sent her his preachers. For how could she believe without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? Not with resentment but with gratitude does she recall that her mother's sons turned their anger on her. Hence what follows: "They made me look after the vineyards." If this statement is examined from the spiritual viewpoint I cannot see that it bears any trace of discontent or rancor, but rather of pleasure. In order to carry out this examination however, and before presuming to attempt it -- "for the place is holy" -- we must offer the usual prayers to consult and win the favor of that Spirit who "searches the depths of God," and of the only-begotten Son who is in the father's bosom, Jesus Christ our Lord, the Church's Bridegroom who is blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 30

2. Take note how she accuses by name only her mother's sons as if they alone were at fault. But has she not also suffered very much from strangers? For the Prophet says: "Often since I was young have men attacked me," and "they scored my back with scourges." Why then do you complain so particularly about your mother's sons, when you are so well aware that men of various races have so often assailed you? "If you take your seat at a great man's table, take careful note of what you have before you." Brothers, we are seated at the table of Solomon. Who is more wealthy than Solomon? I do not refer to earthy riches, although Solomon has plenty even of these; but I want you to contemplate the table now before you that is spread with heaven's own delicacies. Refreshments both spiritual and divine are set before us here. "Take careful note, therefore," he said, "of what you have before you, knowing that you must in turn prepare a similar table." And so, with all possible care, I study what is set before me in these words of the bride, and for my own instruction and security take note that persecution by members of the household is alone mentioned by name, whereas she passes over in silence numerous and grave trials which she is known to endure all over the world from every nation under heaven, from pagans, from heretics and schismatics. Aware as I am of the discernment of the bride, I know it was neither by chance nor through forgetfulness that she omitted these. The truth is that she expresses her grief so openly about what hurts her so acutely, and what she thinks we must use all vigilance to avoid. And what is it that hurts her? It is domestic quarreling, dissension within. In the Gospel you are clearly informed of this from our Savior's own mouth when he says: "A man's enemies will be those of his own household." The Prophet speaks in like manner: "Even my intimate friend, who shared my table, rebels against me." And again: "Were it an enemy who insulted me, I could put up with that; had a rival got the better of me, I could hide from him. But you, a man one with me, my leader and my friend, who enjoyed my meals with me," that is to say: I feel more keenly, I bear more painfully, what I have to suffer from you, my guest and companion. You know who makes this complaint, and about whom.

3. You can see that the bride complains about her mother's sons with a similar sorrow and in a similar spirit when she says: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me." She repeats the sentiment on another occasion: "My friends and my neighbors drew near and stood against me."

I ask you earnestly to keep ever far from you this abominable and detestable vice, you who have experienced and do daily experience "how good and how delightful it is for all to live together like brothers," provided that the end is union and not mutual offence. Otherwise it will be neither delightful nor good, but a great misfortune, a cause of great injury. Alas for that man who disturbs the sweet bond of unity! Whoever he may be he will certainly "bear his judgment." Rather let me die than hear any of you justly complaining: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me." Are you not all sons of this community, like sons of the same mother, all brothers to each other? What outside influence can upset you or make you sad, if you are well disposed to each other within and live in peace like brothers? "Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?" Therefore, "be ambitious for the higher gifts," that you may prove yourselves to be men of good zeal. The gift that excels all others, that is clearly incomparable, is love, a truth which the heavenly Bridegroom is so often at pains to impress on his new bride. At one time he says: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." At another time: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another;" and again: "This is my commandment that you love one another," while at the same time he prays that they may be one, as he and the Father are one. Does not Paul himself, who invites you to the better gifts, introduce love among them as being with faith and hope surpassingly greater than knowledge? And when he enumerates the many wonderful gifts of heavenly grace, does he not finally direct us to that more excellent way, which he defines as no other than love? In short, what may we consider comparable to this gift, which is preferred even to martyrdom and to the faith that moves mountains? This therefore is what I say: May peace be yours as the fruit of your zeal, and anything that may threaten from without will not intimidate you because it will not injure you. And on the other hand, though the world outside may smile on you, the solace it offers will be in vain if, God forbid, the seed of discord sprouts in your midst.

8. There is another arrow: the living and active word of God that cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword, of which our Savior said: "I have not come to send peace but the sword." "A polished arrow" too is that special love of Christ, which not only pierced Mary's soul but penetrated through and through, so that even the tiniest space in her virginal breast was permeated by love. Thenceforth she would love with her whole heart, her whole soul and her whole strength, and be full of grace. It transpierced her thus that it might come down even to us, and of that fullness we might all receive. She would become the mother of that love whose father is the God who is love; and when that love was brought to birth he would place his tent in the sun, that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "I will make you the Light of the Nations, so that you may be my salvation to the ends of the earth." This was fulfilled through Mary, who brought forth in visible flesh him whom she conceived invisibly, neither from the flesh nor by means of the flesh. In the process she experienced through her whole being a wound of love that was mighty and sweet; and I would reckon myself happy if at rare moments I felt at least the prick of the point of that sword. Even if only bearing love's slightest wound, I could still say: "I am wounded with love." How I long not only to be wounded in this manner but to be assailed again and again till the color and heat of that flesh that wars against the spirit is overcome.

7. It is in this sense that the Church, or the soul who loves God, can say that the sun has changed her color by commissioning and equipping some of her mother's sons to make salutary warfare against her, and lead her captive to his faith and love, pierced with those arrows of which Scripture says: "The warrior's arrows are sharp," and again: "Your arrows have pierced deep into me." Hence she goes on to say: "There is no soundness in my flesh;" but because, as a consequence, she has grown more sound and courageous in spirit, she is able to affirm: "The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak." Her sentiments are those of Paul: "It is when I am weak that I am strong." Do you see how physical infirmity can be an occasion for increasing spiritual strength, a source of new spiritual powers. On the other hand you know that physical strength can beget weakness of the spirit. What wonder if the enemy's weakness makes you stronger, unless in your madness you make friends with a nature that ever lusts against the spirit? See then, if the Saint who, for his own good, demands to be attacked and pierced with arrows, is not acting prudently when he says: "Pierce my flesh with your fear." How excellent that arrow of fear that pierces and kills the desires of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved. Is it not obvious to you that he who chastises his body and subdues it, is aiding the hand that fights against his lower nature?

4. Therefore my very dear brothers, preserve peace among you, and beware of offending each other, whether by deed or word or any gesture whatever, lest someone, provoked and surprised by passion in a moment of weakness, should be constrained to invoke God against those who injured or saddened him, and impetuously cry out this grave accusation: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me." For those who sin against a brother sin against Christ who said: "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." Nor is it enough to avoid only the more serious offences, for example, public insult and abuse or the venomous slander in secret. It is not enough, I say, to guard one's tongue from these and similar kinds of nastiness; even slight offences must be avoided, if anything may be termed slight that is directed against a brother for the purpose of hurting him, since merely to be angry with one's brother makes one liable to the judgment of God. And justly so. Because what you regard as slight, and therefore commit with all the more ease, will be seen in a different light by another, just as a man looking at the outward appearance and judging according to the outward appearance, is prepared to think a splinter to be a plank, and a spark a blazing fire. The love which believes all things is not the gift of all men. A man's heart and thoughts are more prone to suspect evil than to believe good, especially when the obligation of silence does not permit you, whose conduct is in question, to defend yourself, nor him who suspects you to lay bare the wound from which he suffers, that it might be healed. And so he endures the agony, grieving in his heart, till he succumbs from the secret and deadly wound, totally immersed in anger and bitterness, his mind a whirl of unvoiced thoughts on the injury he has received. He cannot pray, he cannot read, nor meditate on anything holy or spiritual. And while this soul for whom Christ died is cut off from the vital influence of the Spirit, and goes to its death through lack of the nourishment it needs, what, I ask, are the thoughts of your own mind in the meantime? What can you find in prayer, or in any work you do, when Christ is sorrowfully crying out against you from the heart of your brother whom you have embittered, saying: "My mother's son is fighting against me, he who enjoyed my meals with me has filled me with bitterness."

5. And if you say that he should not be so gravely perturbed for so slight a cause, I answer: the more slight it is, the more easy for you not to have done it. Furthermore, as I have said already, I do not understand how you call slight something that is more than the feeling of anger, since you have heard from the judge's own mouth that even this is liable to be judged. Just think! And then will you call slight a gesture that offends Christ, that will bring you before the judgment seat of God, since "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"? So when an offence is committed against you, a thing hard to avoid at times in communities like ours, do not immediately rush, as a worldly person may do, to retaliate dishonorably against your brother; nor, under the guise of administering correction, should you dare to pierce with sharp and searing words one for whom Christ was pleased to be crucified; nor make grunting, resentful noises at him, nor mutter and murmur complaints, nor adopt a sneering air, nor indulge the loud laugh of contempt, nor knit the brow in menacing anger. Let your passion die within, where it was born; a carrier of death, it must be allowed no exit or it will cause destruction, and then you can say with the Prophet: "I was troubled and I spoke not. "

6. I understand that there are some who give a more mysterious meaning to the words of our text by applying them to the devil and his angels, who were once sons of that Jerusalem above which is our mother and who, since their fall, do not cease to fight against their sister, the Church. Nor will I argue with anyone who finds it more acceptable to see here a reference to those spiritual men in the Church who make war with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, against their impious brothers, wounding them for their salvation and leading them on to spiritual things by this kind of assault. "Let a good man strike or rebuke me in kindness," wounding and healing, killing and bringing to life, so that even I may dare to say: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me." "Come to terms with your opponent," says Christ, "while you are still on the way to court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the torturer." I shall have found a good opponent if after I have come to terms with him, there will be neither judge to speak against me nor torturer. And indeed if some of you have been saddened by me in the past for this reason, I do not regret it; the sadness was for their salvation. I certainly cannot recall ever having done it without experiencing great sadness myself, such as Christ referred to when he said: "A woman in childbirth suffers." But let me no longer remember my anguish, now that I enjoy the fruit of my pain, seeing Christ formed in my offspring." And these, who have convalesced from their weakness after and by means of many corrections, are, I know not how, bound to me by a more tender love than those who have remained strong from the beginning, without need of this kind of remedy.