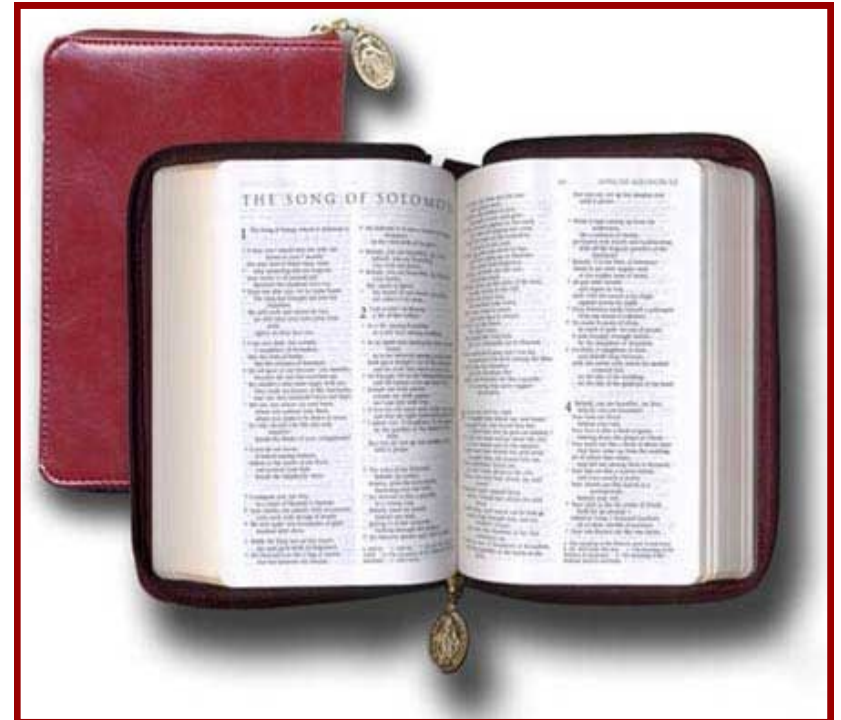




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SONG OF SONGS—63

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE TWO KINDS
OF
HEAVENLY
CONTEMPLATION***

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 Two Kinds of Heavenly Contemplation

'My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the wall.' The dove finds safe refuge not only in the clefts of the rock, she also finds it in the crannies of the wall. Now if we interpret 'wall' not as a conglomeration of stones but as the communion of saints, let us see if perhaps the crannies of the wall are the places of those angels who fell through pride, leaving behind those empty spaces which are to be filled by men, like ruins repaired by living stones. Hence the apostle Peter says: 'Come to him, to that living stone, and like living stones be yourselves built into spiritual houses'. Nor do I think it irrelevant if we understand the guardianship of angels to represent a wall in the Lord's vineyard, in the Church of the predestined, since Paul says: 'Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who receive the inheritance of salvation?' And the prophet: 'The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him.' If that is accepted the meaning will be that two things console the Church in the time and place of its pilgrimage: from the past the memory of Christ's passion, and for the future the thought and confidence of being welcomed among the saints. In these glimpses of the past and future she contemplates both events with insatiable longing; each aspect is entirely pleasing to her, each a refuge from the distress of troubles and from sorrow. Her consolation is complete, since she knows not only what to hope for but also the ground of her confidence. Her expectation, founded on the death of Christ, is joyful and undoubting. Why be overawed at the greatness of the reward when she ponders the worthiness of the ransom? How gladly she visits in her mind those clefts through which the ransom of his sacred blood flowed upon her! How gladly she explores the crannies, the refreshing retreats and rooms, which are so many and so diverse in the Father's house, in which he sets up his sons according to the diversity of their merits! But for the moment she does the one thing meanwhile possible, she reposes there in memory, entering now in spirit into the heavenly dwelling that is above. But in time she will fill up those ruins and dwell in those crannies both in body and mind. Then she will brighten with the presence of her countless members those empty domiciles abandoned by the former inhabitants. No longer will crannies be visible in the wall of heaven, happily restored again to its perfection and completeness.

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2. If you prefer, however, let us say that these crannies are not found but rather made by studious and devout minds. How so, you ask? By thought and eager desire. That devout wall, of comparatively soft material, yields to the soul's desire, yields to pure contemplation, yields to frequent prayer. For 'the just man's prayer pierces the clouds'. Not that it cleaves the spacious heights of this material atmosphere, of course, as a bird in flight does by the beating of its wings, nor pierces like a sharp sword the dense and lofty dome of the sky; but there are holy heavens, living and rational, which proclaim the glory of God, which gladly listen to our prayers with gracious acquiescence and, on sensing our devotion, take us affectionately to their hearts as often as we appeal to them with a worthy intention. For 'to him who knocks it will be opened'. It is therefore within the power of each of us, even during the time of our mortal life, to hollow out a place anywhere we will in the heavenly wall: at our pleasure to visit the patriarchs now, to salute the prophets now, to mingle with the assembly of apostles now, to slip into the choirs of martyrs now, even to run with all the swiftness of mind that devotion can inspire through the orders and dwellings of the blessed spirits, from the smallest angel to the Cherubim and Seraphim. And if we stand and knock there where our attraction has drawn us, inwardly moved as the Spirit wills, [the door] will at once be opened to us, a cranny will be made amid the holy mountains—or rather the holy minds—who will spontaneously and lovingly enfold us that we may rest with them for a while. The face and voice of every soul who acts like this are pleasing to God: the face for its candor, the voice for its praise. For praise and beauty are in his sight. And he says to one thus endowed: 'Show me your face, let your voice sound in my ears.' This voice is the wonder in the mind of the contemplative, this voice is the giving of thanks. God finds his delight in these crannies; from them resounds the voice of gratitude, the voice of wonder and adoration.

3. Happy the mind which frequently works at hollowing a place for itself in this wall, but happier still the one which does so in the rock! For it is all right to hollow even in the rock; but for this the mind must have a keener edge, a more eager purpose, and merits of a higher order. 'Who is equal to such a calling?' Evidently he was who said: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.' Does it not seem to you that he had immersed himself in the very inward being of the Word, and from the hidden recesses of his breast had drawn forth the holiest essence of divine wisdom? What about him who imparted wisdom to the perfect, a wisdom wrapt in mystery, which none of the rulers of this age understood? Passing through the first and second heavens by his keen but holy curiosity, did the devout scrutinizer not gain at last this wisdom from the third? But he has not hidden it from us, he has faithfully delivered it to the capable in well-chosen words. But he also heard unutterable words that he was not permitted to speak, at least not to men, for he spoke them to himself and to God. Imagine therefore that God, trying to console the tender love of Paul, says to him: 'Why do you worry because the human hearing cannot grasp your thought? "Let your voice sound in my ears." That is: if what you perceive may not be revealed to mortals, be nevertheless consoled, because your voice can delight the ears of God.' You see this holy soul now sober through love for us, then transported in pure attachment to God! Look too at holy David, whether he himself is not the man about whom he says to God as if about another: 'For the thought of a man will offer you praise, and the residue of his thought will be a feast day for you.' As much of prophetic thought as could come through the prophet's word and example, therefore, he at once disclosed in publicly praising the Lord and declaring it among the people; the residue he reserved for himself and for God, holding festival together in gladness and rejoicing. This then is what he wished to convey to us in the verse quoted. Whatever was appropriate in all that he was able to learn from the mystery of wisdom by an eager and inquiring mind, he imparted for the salvation of men by zealous preaching; the residue which the people could not grasp he employed in praising God with festive joy. As you see, there is no less to holy contemplation when all that cannot be used for the instruction of the people becomes a sweet and gracious praise of God.

8. He shows how greatly the preaching of the truth with a pure mind pleases him when immediately he says: 'for your voice is sweet.' That the voice does not please if the face displeases he shows when he adds at once: And your face comely.' What is the comeliness of the inner face if not purity? The one was found attractive in many without the preaching of the word; the other without it in no one. Truth does not show itself nor Wisdom entrust itself to the impure. How can they speak of that which they have not seen? 'We speak of what we know', [John] said, 'and we bear witness to what we have seen.' Go then and dare to bear witness to what you have not seen, to preach what you do not know. Do you ask whom I call impure? Anyone who looks for human praise, who does not deliver the Gospel without charge, who preaches for a livelihood, who considers godliness a means of gain, who does not work for the [spiritual] fruit but for contribution. Such are the impure; and though lacking the power to perceive the truth because of their impurity, they presume to preach it. Why do you act so hastily? Why not wait for the light? Why presume to do the work of the light before [you see] the light? It is useless for you to rise before light. Light is purity, light is the love which does not insist on its own way. Let this take the lead and your tongue will not move like an unsteady foot. The truth is not visible to the haughty eye, it is manifest to the sincere. Truth does not withhold its vision from the pure of heart, and so fail to be proclaimed. 'To the sinner God says: "what right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?" ' Many, slighting this purity, endeavor to speak before they see. They have seriously erred, ignorant of what they are saying or of what they claim, incurred shameful derision as those who teach others while failing to teach themselves. Through your prayers may we be always preserved from these two evils by the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 63

7. And if we understand that the hollow in the ground is referred to [in the words]: 'they have dug my hands and my feet', we cannot doubt that the wounded soul who abides there will quickly regain health. What greater cure for the wounds of conscience and for purifying the mind's acuity than to persevere in meditation on the wounds of Christ? Indeed until he has been perfectly purified and healed I do not see how anyone can suitably listen to the words: 'Let me see your face, let me hear your voice.' How can anyone dare show his face or raise his voice if he is ordered to hide? He was told to 'hide in the hollowed ground'. Why? Because without facial beauty he is not fit to be seen. He will not be fit to be seen as long as he is not equipped for seeing. But when by dwelling in the hollow in the ground he will so have succeeded in healing his inward vision that he can gaze on the glory of God with unveiled face, then at last, pleasing both in voice and face, he will confidently proclaim what he sees. The face that can focus on the brightness of God must of necessity be pleasing. Nor could it accomplish this unless it were itself bright and pure, transformed into the very image of the brightness it beholds. Otherwise it would recoil through sheer unlikeness, driven back by the unaccustomed splendor. When a pure [soul] can therefore gaze on the pure truth, the Bridegroom himself will want to look on his face, and then to hear his voice.

4. This being so, it is obvious that there are two kinds of contemplation: one concerns the state and happiness and glory of the heavenly city, in which either by activity or by repose a great crowd of its citizens are engaged; the other concerns the majesty, the eternity and the divinity of the king himself. The former exists in the wall, the latter in the rock. The more difficult the hollowing in the former the sweeter the yield; nor need one fear the scriptural threat about the scrutinizer of majesty. Just bring to it an eye that is pure and simple, and you will not be overwhelmed by glory but led into it—unless you seek your own glory, not God's. For each person is weighed down not by God's glory but by his own, when by his bent for his own he cannot raise to God's a head burdened by cupidity. But let us rid ourselves of this and excavate confidently in the rock where the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge are stored. If you still hesitate, listen to the rock itself: 'They who do things in me shall not sin.' 'Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly away and be at rest.' The meek and the simple find rest there where the deceitful, the proud, the seekers of vainglory are trodden down. The Church is a dove and therefore is at rest. A dove because innocent, because mourning. A dove, I say, because she receives the implanted word meekly. And she reposes in the Word, that is, in the rock, for the rock is the word. The Church dwells therefore in the clefts of the rock. Through them she gazes at and beholds the glory of her bridegroom. Nor is she overwhelmed by glory because she does not arrogate it to herself. She is not overwhelmed because she is a scrutinizer not of God's majesty but of his will. What touches upon his majesty, she does indeed sometimes dare to contemplate it, but in admiration, not in scrutiny. But if at times she is even rapt toward it in ecstasy, this is the finger of God deigning to raise man up, not the brashness of a man insolently intruding on the lofty things of God. For when the apostle recalls being rapt he apologizes for its daring; what other mortal then would presume to involve himself by his own attempts at an awesome scrutiny of the divine majesty, what insolent contemplative would force his way into those dread secrets? The scrutinizers of majesty described as invaders are not, I think then, those who are rapt into it, but those who force their way in. They are understandably overwhelmed by glory.

5. Scrutinizing God's majesty is then a thing to fear; but scrutinizing his will is as safe as it is dutiful. Why should I not tirelessly concentrate on searching into the mystery of his glorious will, which I know I must obey in all things? Sweet is the glory which has no source but the contemplation of sweetness itself, than the vision of the riches of his goodness and the multitude of his mercies. The glory we have seen is the glory of the Father's Only-begotten. For whatever glory has been manifested in this way is totally kind, truly paternal. This glory will not oppress me, though I lean toward it with all my strength; it will rather impress itself upon me. 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' We are transformed when we are conformed, God forbid that a man presume to be conformed to God in the glory of his majesty rather than in the modesty of his will. My glory is this, to hear it one day said of me: 'I have found a man according to my own heart.' The heart of the Bridegroom is the Father's heart. And how describe this? Christ said: 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.' This is the form he desires to see when he says to the Church: 'Let me see your face', the form of love and gentleness. Let her raise this [face] with complete trust to the Rock, whose likeness she bears. 'Look to him', [the psalmist] says, 'and be enlightened, so your faces shall never be ashamed.' How can the humble [face] be put to shame by the humble [person], the holy by one who is dutiful, the modest by one who is meek? The bride's pure face will recoil from the purity of the Rock no more than virtue will from virtue, or light from light.

6. But since in the meantime the Church as a whole cannot draw near to make clefts in the rock—for it is not within the power of everybody in the Church to examine the mysteries of the divine will or of themselves to pierce the depths of God—therefore she is shown to dwell not only in the clefts of the rock but also in the crannies of the wall. Accordingly she dwells in the clefts of the rock through her perfect [members] who by their purity of conscience dare to explore and penetrate into the secrets of wisdom, and can achieve this by their keenness of mind. As for the crannies of the wall, those who of themselves are unable or will not presume to dig in the rock, let them dig in the wall, content to gaze mentally upon the glory of the saints. If even this is not possible to someone, let him place before him Jesus and him crucified, that without effort on his part he may dwell in those clefts of the rock at whose hollowing he has not labored. The Jews labored at them, and He will enter the labors of an unbeliever to make a believer of him. Nor must he who has been invited to enter dread a rebuff. 'Enter into the rock', says [Isaiah], 'and hide in the hollowed ground from the face of the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty.' To the soul who is still weak and sluggish, the one who confesses with the gospel that he is unable to dig and ashamed to beg, there is shown a hollow in the ground where he may hide until he grows strong and vigorous enough to hollow out for himself clefts in the rock through which he may enter into the inward being of the Word by the energy and purity of his mind.