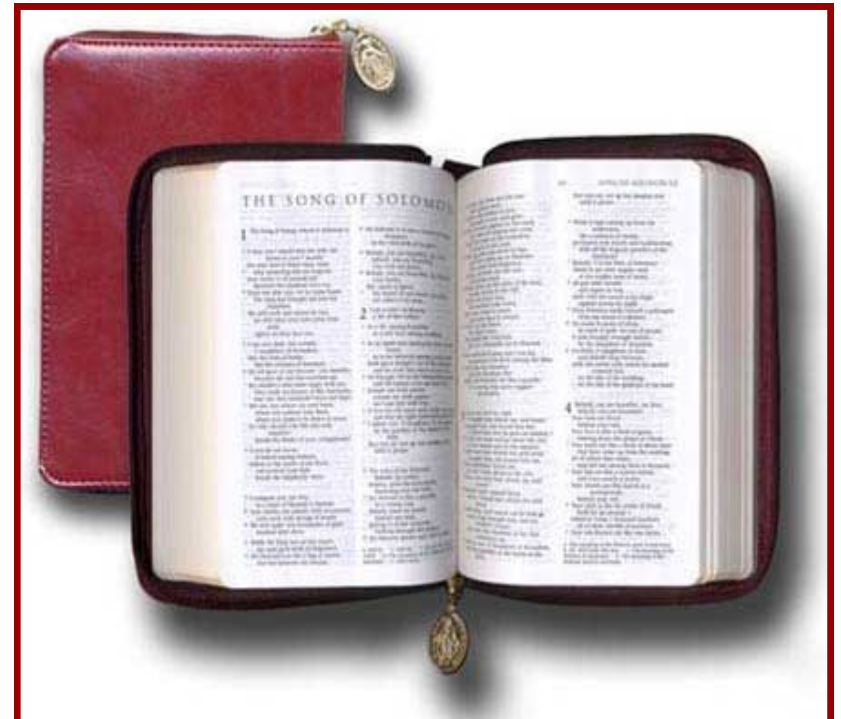




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SONG OF SONGS—59

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***WHY THE BRIDE
IS ORDERED
TO MAKE HASTE***

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.

Why the Bride is Ordered to Make Haste

'Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come.'
Who says this? Doubtless the Bridegroom. And is he not the one who, shortly before, earnestly forbade that his beloved be awakened? Why therefore does he now command her not only to arise but even to hurry? A similar incident from the Gospel comes to mind. On the very night on which the Lord was betrayed, after he had ordered the disciples who were with him to sleep and take their rest, worn out as they were by prolonged watching, he immediately said to them: 'Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.' Similarly here too, almost in the same instant he forbids that the bride be awakened, and then wakes her saying: 'Arise and come.' When can this sudden change of will or of plan mean? Are we to think that the Bridegroom is moved by caprice, first willing something and then rejecting it? Of course not. Rather you must acknowledge here those changes that I have previously and more than once explained to you concerning holy inactivity and essential action, how this life does not cater for constant contemplation or prolonged leisure, since we are impelled by the more cogent and more immediate demands of work and duty. When the Bridegroom therefore perceives, as he always does, that the bride has taken her rest for some time on his bosom, he does not hesitate to entice her out again to what seems more serviceable. It is not that she is unwilling, or that he himself is doing what he had forbidden. But if the bride is enticed by the Bridegroom this is because she receives from him the desire by which she is enticed, the desire of good works, the desire to bring forth fruit for the Bridegroom, for to her the Bridegroom is life, and death gain.

**One must prune often,
even, if possible, always,
for you will always find something to prune—
if you aren't dishonest with yourself.**

2. And that desire is vehement: it urges her not only to arise but to arise quickly for we read: 'Arise, make haste, and come.' It is no small consolation to her that she hears 'come' and not 'go', knowing from this that she is being invited rather than sent, and that the Bridegroom will be coming with her. For what will she reckon difficult with him as her companion? 'Set me beside you', she says, 'and let any man's hand fight against me.' Or: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me.' She is not therefore aroused against her will when what happens is already her will: for it is no other than an instilled eagerness to advance in holiness. She is animated with zeal for the task allotted her and given livelier awareness of the fittingness of the time. My bride, he says, it is time to act, for the winter is past when no one could work. The rain too that covered the earth with floods, that precluded tillage, that either hindered the sowing of crops or destroyed what was sown, that rain, I say, has quickly vanished; 'it is over and gone, the flowers have appeared in our land', showing that the warmth of spring is here, that it is seasonal to work, that harvests and fruits are not far off. Then he suggests both where and what she should do first, saying: 'the time for pruning has come.' She is led out to the cultivation of the vines. If they are to yield more abundant fruits to the farmers it is necessary that sterile boughs be got rid of, that noxious ones be cut away, that superfluous ones be pruned. So much for the literal sense.

3. Now let us see what is proposed spiritually to our understanding by this kind of historical narrative. I have told you that the vines are souls or churches, and the reason why this is so. You have heard it and have no need to hear it again. That soul who is more perfect is invited to watch over these, to correct them, to instruct them, to save them, provided he is allotted this ministry not by his own ambition but by the call of God, as Aaron was. What is this invitation but an inward impulse of charity, lovingly inciting us to zeal for our brother's salvation, to zeal for the beauty of God's house, for an increase in his rewards, an increase in the fruits of his righteousness, the praise and glory of his name? The man who is charged with the spiritual direction of others or with the duty of preaching may believe with certainty - as often as he feels himself inwardly moved by genuine love of God - that the Bridegroom is present, inviting him each time to the vineyards. To what end but that he may pluck up and destroy, that he may build and plant?

4. However, since for this work, as for everything under heaven, not every season is good or suitable, he who invites also adds that the time for pruning is come. The apostle knew it was present when he cried out: 'See, now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation. We do nothing that people might object to, so as not to bring discredit on our function as God's servants.' Knowing that the time for pruning had come, he warned that everything faulty and superfluous, everything that could give the least offense and hinder the fruit of salvation, should be pruned and cut off. Hence he said to a certain faithful cultivator of vines: 'Convince, rebuke and exhort', indicating by the first and second of these pruning and eradicating, in the last planting. This the Bridegroom said by the mouth of Paul about the time for working. But hear what he said to his new bride by his own mouth about the observance of seasons, though under other images and words: 'Do you not say, "there are yet four months, then comes the harvest"? I tell you, lift up your eyes and see how the fields are already white for harvest.' Or again: 'The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' And so, just as he showed in the first case that now is the time to reap the harvest of souls, so in the second case he declares that the time has come to prune the spiritual vines, that is souls or churches. Perhaps by using these different words he wished to distinguish between different realities, so that by the harvest we understand the people, and by vineyards the congregations of holy persons living in community.

5. Now, the winter period, which he intimates has passed, seems to me to refer to that time when the Lord Jesus did not walk openly among the Jews because they plotted against him, wishing to kill him. Hence he said to some of the disciples: 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here.' And again: 'Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going.' 'But he went up afterwards himself, not publicly but in private.' The winter lasted therefore from then until the coming of the Holy Spirit, by whom the numbed hearts of the faithful were warmed as by fire, whom the Lord sent on earth to this end. Would you deny that it was then winter when Peter sat at the charcoal fire, with a heart no less cold than his body? 'It was cold', the Gospel says. Great indeed was the cold that seized the heart of the denier. But no wonder, since the fire had been taken away from him. A short while before he was aflame with no small zeal because he was still close to this man who, for fear of losing it, drew his sword and cut off the servant's ear. But it was not the time for pruning, and therefore he heard: 'Put your sword back in its place.' That was the hour and power of darkness, and any disciple who would then wield the sword, whether of steel or of the word, must either be cut down by the sword and gain no follower nor bear any fruit, or he himself would perish, driven to denial by the sword of fear, just as the word of the Lord immediately added: 'all who take the sword will perish by the sword'. Which of the others would stand undismayed before the fearsome image of death when their leader himself, fore-armed by the bracing words of his Emperor so that being fore-warned he might strengthen the others, trembled and gave way?

11. For us, brothers, it is always time to prune, just as there is always a need. I am confident that for us the winter has now past. You know the winter I mean, that fear which is devoid of love, which, although it can lead everyone to wisdom perfects no one, because superabounding love drives it away as summer does the winter. Summer means charity, which, if it has come, or rather because it has come - I am right in thinking you enjoy it - of necessity dries up every wintry rain, every anxious tear wrung from you by the bitter recollection of sin and fear of the judgment. Accordingly - and I say this without hesitation about many of you, if not all - this rain is now over and gone, for now the flowers appear as witnesses to a gentler rain. For summer too has its pleasant and enriching showers. What is sweeter than charity's tears? Charity weeps, but from love, not from sorrow; it weeps from desire, it weeps with those who weep. I am convinced that a rain like this moistens your acts of obedience which I see so gladly. No murmuring taints them, no sadness overshadows them, but a certain spiritual joy makes them delightful and radiant. They are like flowers that you always carry in your hands.

12. Therefore if the winter is past, the rain over and gone, if flowers have appeared again in our land and the spring-like warmth of spiritual grace indicates the time for pruning, what is left for us but to bend our energies totally to this work, so holy and so necessary. Let us examine our ways and our endeavors, as the prophet counsels, and let each one judge that he has progressed, not by finding nothing to correct, but by correcting what he does find. You will not have examined yourself in vain when you discover the need for a new examination: your investigation never deceives you as often as you decide that it needs repeating. But if you always do it at the spur of need, you will do it always. Be mindful therefore that you always have need of heaven's help and of the mercy of the Church's Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

10. This sermon could even had ended here if I had first given each of you my customary warning about his vineyard. For who has so completely cut away from himself all superfluous things that he thinks he has nothing worth pruning? Take my word for it, what is pruned will sprout again, what is banished will return, what is quenched will blaze again, things lulled to sleep will reawaken. To prune once therefore is of little worth. One must prune often, even, if possible, always, for you will always find something to prune-if you aren't dishonest with yourself. No matter what progress you make in this life, you are wrong if you think vices are dead when they are only suppressed. Whether you like it or not, the Jebusite dwells within your borders. He can be subdued but not exterminated. 'I know', said the apostle, 'that nothing good dwells within me.' But this is not enough unless he also admits that evil is within him. So he says: 'For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.' If you dare then, either prefer yourself to Paul - for it is he who speaks - or admit with him that you too are not lacking in vices. Virtue stands in the midst of vices, and therefore needs not only careful pruning but a trimming of the ground about it. Otherwise one must fear that as the vices steal upon it from all sides and nibble at it, it will gradually wither, unbeknownst to you, and suffocate when overgrown. In so great a hazard the only plan is to keep a sharp watch, and as soon as the buds appear to lop them off ruthlessly. Virtue and vices cannot prosper together: if the one is to flourish, the others must be checked. Remove the superfluous and the wholesome will thrive. Control cupidity and promote what is good. Let us apply ourselves to pruning. Let cupidity be pruned that virtue may grow strong.

6. But neither he nor they were as yet clothed with power from on high; and so it was not safe for them to go out into the vineyards, to use the tongue as a hoe and with the sword of the Spirit to prune the vines, to trim the branches to let them bear more fruit. Even the Lord himself kept silent during his passion, and did not when interrogated answer questions on many things; He became, as the prophet said, 'like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.' He did say: 'If I tell you, you will not believe me. But if I were to do the asking, you would not answer me.' He knew the time of pruning had not yet come, that the vine would not respond to the labors expended on it, that it would bear no fruit either of faith or good works. Why? Because it was winter in the hearts of the faithless, because the wintry rains of malice still flooded the earth, more calculated to drown than to nourish the scattered seeds of the word, and to frustrate any effort to cultivate the vines.

7. What rains do you think I am now speaking of? Those which we see the rushing clouds pour upon the earth in a violent tempest? Not those. But those which men of a violent spirit cause to rise from earth to the heavens, whose 'slanders reach up to heaven while their tongues ply to and fro on earth' like pestilential showers, making the earth itself a barren marsh, unfit for both plants and seeds. I do not mean those that we can see and touch, that are meant for the welfare of our bodies - about which God is no more concerned than he is about cattle. Which then? Surely those which God's hand, not man's, has sown and planted, that germinate and take root in, faith and love, that bear the fruits of salvation if watered by good and timely rains. The souls for which Christ died. Woe to the clouds that pour down bad rains; they make only mud, they do not produce fruit.

Now just as there are good and bad trees, each bearing fruits that differ because of their differences - the good have good fruits, the bad have bad - so too, I think, are the clouds: The rains the good pour are good, the bad pour bad. Consider then if the Lord was not intimating this difference in clouds and rains to us when he said: 'I will command my clouds that they rain no rain upon it'—upon the vineyard, of course. Why do you think he so pointedly says 'my clouds', except that there are bad clouds which are not his? 'Away with him, away with him', they said. 'Crucify him.' O violent and stormy clouds! O tempestuous rains! O torrent of wickedness, fit rather to destroy than to fertilize! Not less evil or bitter, though less violent in its downpour, was that rain which followed close behind: 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross and we will believe in him.' The windy chatter of philosophers was not good rain; it produced barrenness, not fertility. Much worse still were those rains, the perverse dogmas of the heretics that brought forth thorns and thistles instead of fruit. The traditions of the Pharisees, themselves bad clouds, were also a bad rain that the Savior condemned. And though you may consider me unjust to Moses, for he is a good cloud, I do not call everything good which even he poured down, or else I shall contradict him who said: 'I gave them', that is the Jews, 'statutes that were not good' - which certainly came through Moses—'and ordinances by which they could not have life.' For example, that literal observance of the sabbath which enjoined but gave no rest; the imposed rite of sacrifices; the prohibition of eating pork and many similar things condemned by Moses as unclean - this was a rain coming down entirely from that Mosaic cloud. I should hate it to fall in any field or garden of mine. It may have been good in its proper season, but if it comes out of season I consider it no longer good. Even a soft rain, a rain that falls gently, is harmful if it is untimely.

8. As long as these pestilent waters flooded and submerged the earth, then, the vineyards did not come into season, nor could the bride be invited to prune the vines. But when they ebbed away the dry land appeared and the flowers bloomed, showing that the time for pruning was at hand. You ask when this was? When do you think, if not when Christ's flesh flowered again at the resurrection? This was the first and greatest flower to appear in our land, for Christ is the first fruit. He, Jesus, is 'the flower of the fields and the lily of the valleys', being the son, as was supposed, of Joseph of Nazareth, which means a flower. He appeared therefore the first flower but not the only one. For many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep also arose, and appeared in our land all brilliant like flowers. They even 'entered the holy city where they appeared to many'. The people who were fruits of the saints. Their miracles were flowers that, like flowers, produced the fruit flowers that like flowers, produced the fruit of faith. For when that rain of unbelief was over and gone, at least partially, there soon followed that 'free rain' which the Lord had set aside for his inheritance, and the flowers began to appear. The Lord bestowed prosperity and our earth yielded its flowers, so that on one day three thousand, on another five thousand people believed—in a short time the number of flowers grew like this which means, the multitude of believers. Nor could the front of malice overwhelm the flowers that appeared, nor destroy in advance, as it often does, the fruit of which they gave promise.

9. For when all who had believed were clothed with power from on high, men arose from their midst firm in the faith, who despised the threats of men. They suffered indeed from a great many adversaries, but they did not cease from or abandon the performance and proclamation of the works of God. In a spiritual way they fulfilled the words of the psalm: 'They sowed fields and planted vineyards and got a fruitful yield.' In the course of time the storm was stilled, peace was restored to the earth, the vines grew and they were propagated and spread abroad and multiplied beyond counting. Then at last the bride was invited to the vineyards, not to plant but to prune what had been planted. At the proper time too, for this task needed a period of peace. For how could it be possible when she was being persecuted? But also, to prune the vines is to grasp the two-edged swords, to wreak vengeance on the nations and chastisement on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the prescribed judgment! Even in a time of peace all these things can scarcely be performed peacefully! Enough on this point.