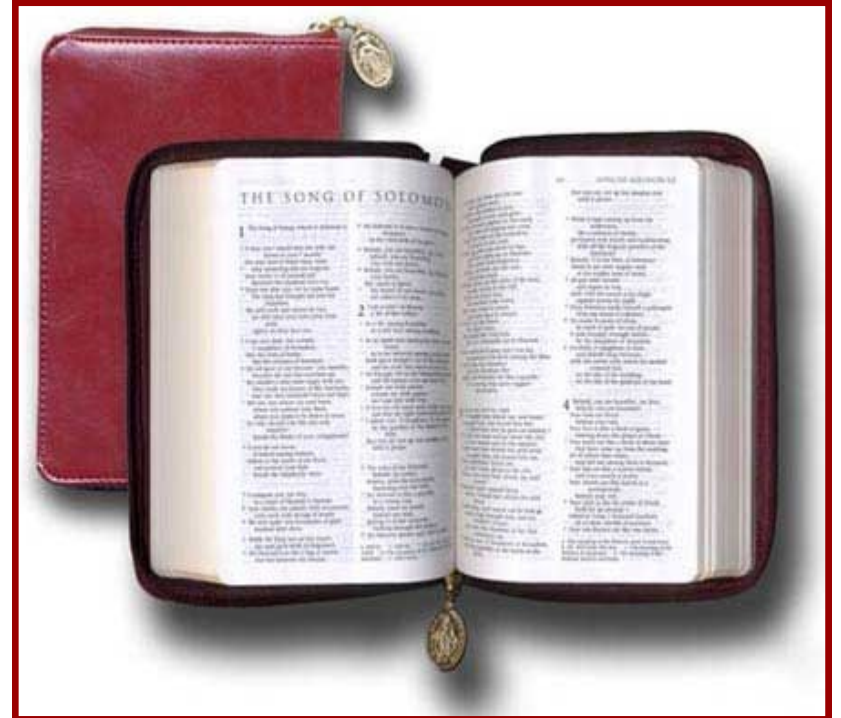




SONG OF SONGS—86

(Song of Solomon)



***Seven Reasons
Why the Soul
Seeks the Word***

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.

Seven Reasons Why the Soul Seeks the Word

“In my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves.” For what? I have already spoken of that, and it is redundant to repeat it. But for the sake of some who were not present when it was discussed, I will give a short account, and perhaps those who were present will not object to listening; for it could not be treated fully on that occasion. The soul seeks the Word, and consents to receive correction, by which to make the Jordan run backwards. What can you do then? You must seek the Word, to agree with him, by his operation. Flee to him who is your adversary, that through him you may no longer be his adversary, but that he who threatens you may caress you and may transform you by his outpoured grace more effectually than by his outraged anger.

2. This, I think, is the first and most urgent compulsion which drives the soul to seek the Word. But if you do not know what he wills with whom you have reached agreement of will, shall he not say of you that you have a zeal for God, but it is not knowledgeable? And if you think this unimportant, remember that it is written, ‘he who does not know will not be known’. Do you want to know what advice I would give in this difficulty? First of all, my advice is that you go now to the Word, and he will teach you his ways, so that you will not go astray in your journey and, desiring the good but not recognizing it, wander in a pathless place instead of along the highway. The Word is the light. ‘The unfolding of your words gives light and imparts understanding to children.’ Happy are you if you too can say, ‘Your word is a lamp for my feet and a lantern for my path’. Your soul has received great profit if your will is unswerving and your reason enlightened, willing and recognizing the good. By the first it receives life and by the second vision; for it was dead when it desired evil, and blind when it did not recognize the good.

14. There may be someone who will go on to ask me, ‘What does it mean to enjoy the Word?’ I would answer that he must find someone who has experience of it, and ask him. Do you suppose, if I were granted that experience, that I could describe to you what is beyond description? Listen to one who has known it: ‘If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.’ That is to say, it is one thing for me to be with God, and of that, God alone is the judge. It is another for me to be with you. I may have been granted this experience, but I do not speak of it. I have made allowance in what I have said, so that you could understand me. Oh, whoever is curious to know what it means to enjoy the Word, make ready your mind, not your ear! The tongue does not teach this, grace does: It is hidden from the wise and prudent, and revealed to children. Humility, my brothers, is a great virtue, great and sublime. It can attain to what it cannot learn; it is counted worthy to possess what it has not the power to possess; it is worthy to conceive by the Word and from the Word what it cannot itself explain in words. Why is this? Not because it deserves to do so, but because it pleases the Father of the Word, the Bridegroom of the soul, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 86

13. But notice that in spiritual marriage there are two kinds of birth, and thus two kinds of offspring, though not opposite. For spiritual persons, like holy mothers, may bring souls to birth by preaching, or may give birth to spiritual insights by meditation. In this latter kind of birth the soul leaves even its bodily senses and is separated from them, so that in her awareness of the Word she is not aware of herself. This happens when the mind is enraptured by the unutterable sweetness of the Word, so that it withdraws, or rather is transported, and escapes from itself to enjoy the Word. The soul is affected in one way when it is made fruitful by the Word, in another when it enjoys the Word: in the one it is considering the needs of its neighbor; in the other it is allured by the sweetness of the Word. A mother is happy in her child; a bride is even happier in her bridegroom's embrace. The children are dear, they are a pledge of his love, but his kisses give her greater pleasure. It is good to save many souls, but there is far more pleasure in going aside to be with the Word. But when does this happen, and for how long? It is sweet intercourse, but lasts a short time and is experienced rarely! This is what I spoke of before, when I said that the final reason for the soul to seek the Word was to enjoy him in bliss.

3. But now it lives and sees, and stands firm in the good -- but by the operation and with the help of the Word. Raised by the hand of the Word it stands, as it were, on the two feet of devotion and knowledge. It stands, I say; but let it take to itself the saying, 'Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall'. Do you imagine he can stand in his own strength, when he could not rise in his own strength? How could he? 'The heavens were established by the word of the Lord' -- can the earth stand without the Word? If it were able to stand in its own strength, why did a man, also of the earth, pray, 'Strengthen me according to your word'? Surely he spoke from experience. It was his voice which said, 'I was attacked and thrown down and would have fallen, but the Lord sustained me'.

Who was it who attacked him? It was not only one. The devil attacked him, the world attacked him, a man attacked him. What man? Every man is his own attacker. Every man throws himself down -- indeed you need not fear any attack from outside, if you can keep your hands from yourself. 'For who can harm you', says the Apostle, 'if you follow what is good?' By your hand I mean the consent of your will. If the devil suggests you should do wrong, or the pressure of the world prompts you, and you withhold your consent and do not allow your limbs to be instruments of iniquity nor permit sin to control your mortal body, you have proved that you follow what is good, and the malice of the attack has done you no harm, but has instead benefitted you. For it is written, 'Do good, and you shall receive praise for it'.

Those who tried to attack your soul have been routed, and you can sing, 'If they have no dominion over me, then shall I be blameless'. You have shown clearly that you follow what is good, if, following the wise man's advice, you love your own soul, guard your heart with all vigilance, and keep yourself pure, as the Apostle enjoins. If you do not, even if you gain the whole world, but let your soul go to ruin we cannot consider you as following what is good; for the Savior himself will not do so.

4. There are three agents, then, who always constitute a threat: the devil, who attacks with envy and malice; the world, with the blasting wind of vanity; and man, by the burden of his own corruption. The devil attacks, but he does not overthrow you if you refuse to help him or to give your consent. You know the saying, 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.' For it was he who in envy attacked the denizens of paradise and overthrew them, but they gave their consent and put up no resistance. It was he who fell from heaven in his pride; no-one attacked him. You can see how much more danger there is that a man will precipitate his own fall, since he is weighed down by his own material being.

Then there is the attack from the world, which is rooted in wickedness. The world attacks everyone, but it only overthrows those who are its friends and acquiesce with it. I have no wish to be a friend to the world and court the danger of falling. 'He who desires to be a friend of this world makes himself the enemy of God', and there can be no worse fall than that. So it is quite clear that man is his own greatest threat, for he can fall by his own momentum without any impulse from anyone else, but not without an impulse of his own. Which of these needs to be resisted most? The last, for it is nearest to us, and therefore more troublesome, being enough in itself to cast us down, whereas without it no-one else can harm us. It is not without reason that the Wise Man accounted the man who has command of his spirit greater than he who storms a city. This is very important for you: you have need of strength, and not simply strength, but strength drawn from above. For this strength, if it is perfect, will easily give the mind control of itself, and so it will be unconquered before all its adversaries. It is a strength of mind which, in protecting reason, does not know how to retreat. Or, if you like, it is the strength of a mind standing steadfast with reason and for reason. Or again, it is a strength of mind which gathers up and directs everything towards reason.

5. 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?' If anyone aspires to climb to the summit of that mountain, that is to the perfection of virtue, he will know how hard the climb is, and how the attempt is doomed to failure without the help of the Word. Happy the soul which causes the angels to look at her with joy and wonder and hears them saying, 'Who is this coming up from the wilderness, rich in grace and beauty, leaning upon her beloved?' Otherwise, unless it leans on him, its struggle is in vain. But it will gain force by struggling with itself and, becoming stronger, will impel all things towards reason: anger, fear, covetousness, and joy; like a good charioteer, it will control the chariot of the mind, bringing every carnal affect into captivity, and every sense under the control of reason in accordance with virtue. Surely all things are possible to someone who leans upon him who can do all things? What confidence there is in the cry, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me!' Nothing shows more clearly the almighty power of the Word than that he makes all-powerful all those who put their hope in him. For 'all things are possible to one who believes'. If all things are possible to him he must be all-powerful. Thus if the mind does not rely upon itself, but is strengthened by the Word, it can gain such command over itself that no unrighteousness will have power over it. So, I say, neither power, nor treachery, nor lure, can overthrow or hold in subjection the mind which rests upon the Word and is clothed with strength from above.

11. But when this beauty and brightness has filled the inmost part of the heart, it must become outwardly visible, and not be like a lamp hidden under a bushel, but be a light shining in darkness, which cannot be hidden. It shines out, and by the brightness of its rays it makes the body a mirror of the mind, spreading through the limbs and senses so that every action, every word, look, movement and even laugh (if there should be laughter) radiates gravity and honor. So when the movements of the limbs and senses, its gestures and habits, are seen to be resolute, pure, restrained, free from all presumption and licence, with no sign of triviality and idleness, but given to just dealing, zealous in piety, then the beauty of the soul will be seen openly -- that is, if there is no guilt in the spirit, for these qualities can be counterfeited, and not spring from the heart's abundance. Now let us elucidate what we mean by honor, and wherein it may be found; so that the soul's beauty may shine forth even more. It is integrity of mind, which is concerned to keep the innocent reputation with a good conscience, and not only, as the Apostle says, to provide things good in the sight of God, but in the sight of men also. Happy the mind which has clothed itself in the beauty of holiness and the brightness of innocence, by which it manifests its glorious likeness, not to the world but to the Word, of whom we read that he is the brightness of eternal life, the splendor and image of the being of God.

12. The soul which has attained this degree now ventures to think of marriage. Why should she not, when she sees that she is like him and therefore ready for marriage? His loftiness has no terrors for her, because her likeness to him associates her with him, and her declaration of love is a betrothal. This is the form of that declaration: 'I have sworn and I purpose to keep your righteous judgements.' The apostles followed this when they said, 'See, we have left everything to follow you'. There is a similar saying which pointing to the spiritual marriage between Christ and the Church, refers to physical marriage: 'For this shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh'; and the prophet says of the Bride's glory: 'It is good to me to cling to good, and to put my hope in the Lord.' When you see a soul leaving everything and clinging to the Word with all her will and desire, living for the Word, ruling her life by the Word, conceiving by the Word what it will bring forth by him, so that she can say, 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain', you know that the soul is the spouse and bride of the Word. The heart of the Bridegroom has faith in her, knowing her to be faithful, for she has rejected all things as dross to gain him. He knows her to be like him of whom it was said, 'He is a chosen vessel for me.' Paul's soul indeed was like a tender mother and a faithful wife when he said, 'My little children, with whom I travail in birth again, until Christ shall be formed in you.'

10. Now the soul has recovered its life by changing its will, its health by instruction, its stability by virtue, and its maturity by wisdom. It remains for us to find how to obtain the beauty without which it cannot please him who is lovelier than all the sons of men. For it hears that 'the king shall desire your beauty'. What great spiritual goods we have mentioned: gifts from the Word, goodwill, knowledge, virtue, wisdom! Yet we read that none of them is desired by the king, who is the Word, but it only says, 'the king shall desire your beauty'. The prophet says, 'The Lord is king, he is clothed in beauty'. How can he but desire a like garment for his Bride, who is also his likeness? And the closer the likeness, the dearer she will be to him. What is this spiritual beauty? Does it consist of what we call honor? Let us take it as such for the moment, until we find something better. But honor concerns outward behavior -- not that honor issues from it, but is perceived through it. Its root and its dwelling are in the conscience; and the evidence of a good conscience is its clarity. There is nothing clearer than this transparent goodness, which is the light of truth shining in the mind; there is nothing more glorious than the mind which sees itself in the truth. But what is this mind like? It is modest, reverent, filled with holy fear, watchful, guarding against anything which might dim the glory of its conscience, aware of nothing which might make it ashamed in the presence of the truth or cause it to avert its gaze from the light of God in confusion and terror. This is the glory which delights the eyes of God above all qualities of the soul, and this is what we mean by honor.

6. Do you wish to be free from fear of attack? Let the foot of pride not come near you, then the hand of an attacker shall not move you. 'There lie those who work wickedness.' There fell the devil and his angels, who were not attacked from without, yet could not stand and were driven out. So he who did not rest on the Word but relied on his own strength did not stand in the truth. Perhaps that is why he wished to sit, because he had not the strength to stand; for he said, 'I will sit on the mountain of assembly'. But the judgment of God was otherwise: he neither stood nor sat, but fell, as the Lord said, 'I beheld Satan fallen like lightning from heaven'. Therefore anyone who stands and does not wish to fall, should not place his trust in himself, but lean on the Word. The Word says, 'without me you can do nothing'. And so it is. We can neither rise to the good nor stand in the good without the Word. Therefore, you who stand, give glory to the Word and say, 'He set my feet upon a rock, and directed my path aright.' You must be held by the strength of him by whose hand you were raised. This is to explain what I meant when I said that we had need of the Word on whom to lean in our pursuit of virtue.

7. Now we must consider my other words, that we are conformed to wisdom by the Word. The Word is strength and he is wisdom. Let the soul therefore draw strength from his strength and wisdom from his wisdom; let it ascribe both gifts to the Word alone. For if she ascribes either to another source, or claims the credit for herself, she might as well say that the river does not come from the spring, nor the wine from the grape, nor light from light. 'If anyone has need of wisdom, let him ask it from God, who gives to all freely and utters no reproach, and he will give it to him. A faithful saying. I think the same applies to virtue, for virtue is the sister of wisdom. Virtue is God's gift and must be counted among his best gifts, coming down from the Father of the Word. If anyone thinks that wisdom is the same in all respects, I do not dissent, but this holds good in the Word, not in the soul. For the attributes which are in the Word, because of the singular simplicity of the divine nature, do not have a single action on the soul, but are applied to its various different needs as though they were different and could be divided. It follows this reasoning that to be moved by virtue is one thing and to be ruled by wisdom another; it is one thing to be controlled in virtue, and another to be delighted by sweetness. For although wisdom is powerful and virtue sweet, if we are to give words their proper significance, virtue is characterized by strength of mind, and wisdom by peace of mind and spiritual sweetness. This I think was what the Apostle meant when, after a long exhortation to virtue, he mentions what wisdom there is in sweetness, in the Holy Spirit. It is an honor, therefore, to stand firm, to resist, to meet force with force -- these are considered works of virtue -- but it is hard work. For defending your honor with toil is not the same as possessing it in peace. Nor is being moved by virtue the same as enjoying virtue. What virtue wins by toil, wisdom enjoys; and what is ordained, counseled, and guided by wisdom is accomplished by virtue.

8. 'The wisdom of a scribe comes by leisure', says Solomon. Therefore the leisure of wisdom is exertion, and the more leisure wisdom has, the harder it works in its own fashion. But the more virtue is exercised in its own sphere, the more illustrious it is, and the more ready it is to serve, the more approval it wins, If anyone defines wisdom as the love of virtue, I think you are not far from the truth. For where there is love, there is no toil, but a taste. Perhaps "sapientia," that is wisdom, is derived from "sapor," that is taste, because, when it is added to virtue, like some seasoning, it adds taste to something which by itself is tasteless and bitter. I think it would be permissible to define wisdom as a taste for goodness. We lost this taste almost from the creation of our human race. When the old serpent's poison infected the palate of our heart, because the fleshly sense prevailed, the soul began to lose its taste for goodness, and a depraved taste crept in. 'A man's imagination and thoughts are evil from his youth', that is, as a result of the folly of the first woman. So it was folly which drove the taste for good from the woman, because the serpent's malice outwitted the woman's folly. But the reason which caused the malice to appear for a time victorious, is the same reason why it suffers eternal defeat. For see! It is again the heart and body of a woman which wisdom fills and makes fruitful so that, as by a woman we were deformed into folly, so by a woman we may be reformed to wisdom. Now wisdom always prevails over malice in the mind which it has entered, and drives out the taste for evil which the other has brought to it, by introducing something better. When wisdom enters, it makes the carnal sense taste flat, it purifies the understanding, cleanses and heals the palate of the heart. Thus, when the palate is clean, it tastes the good, it tastes wisdom itself, and there is nothing better.

9. How many good actions are performed without the doers having any taste for them, because they are compelled to do them by their way of life or by some circumstance or necessity? And on the contrary many who do evil with no taste for it are led by fear or desire for something, rather than because they relish evil. But those who act in accordance with the affection of their hearts are either wise, and delight in goodness because they have a taste for it, or else they are wicked, and take pleasure in wrong-doing, even if they are not moved by any hope of gain. For what is malice but a taste for evil? Happy is the mind which is protected by a taste for good and a hatred of evil, for this is what it means to be reformed to wisdom, and to know by experience and to rejoice in the victory of wisdom. For in nothing is the victory of wisdom over malice more evident than when the taste for evil -- which is what malice is -- is purged away, and the mind's inmost task senses that it is deeply filled with sweetness. It looks to virtue to sustain tribulations with fortitude, and to wisdom to rejoice in those tribulations. To strengthen your heart and to wait upon the Lord -- that is virtue; to taste and see that the Lord is good -- that is wisdom. Now both goods are best seen as arising from their appropriate nature. Thus modesty of mind marks the man who is wise, and constancy the man of virtue. It is right to put wisdom after virtue, for virtue is, as it were, the sure foundation above which wisdom builds her home. But the knowledge of good should come before these, because there is no fellowship between the light of wisdom and the shadows of ignorance. Goodwill, too, should come before them, because wisdom will not enter a soul disposed to ill.