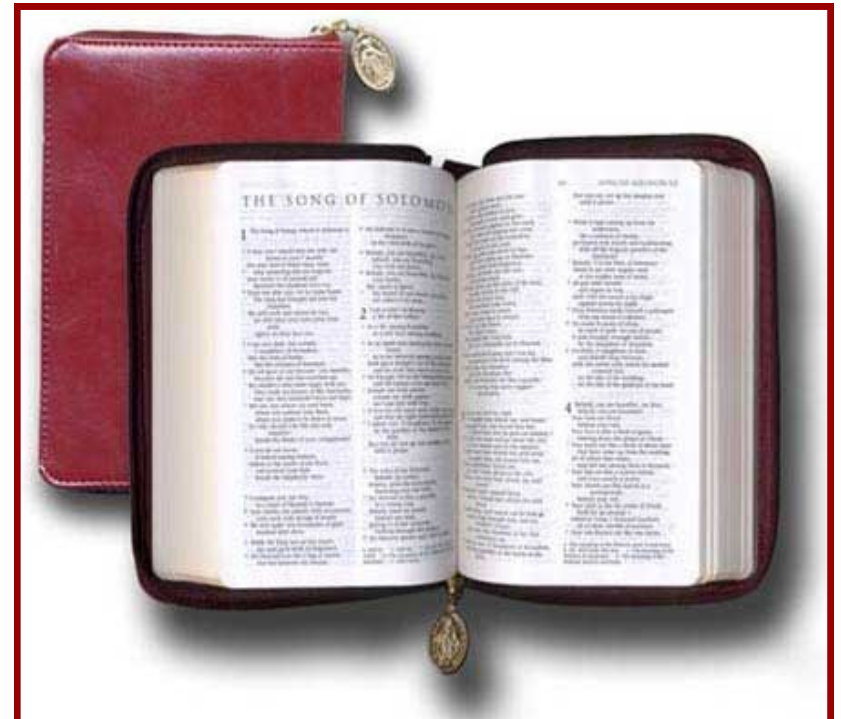




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—48***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD,  
OF THE GARDEN,  
AND  
OF THE BRIDAL SUITE***

*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 Flower of the Field, of the Garden, and of the Bridal Suite**

'I am the flower of the field and the lily of the valleys'. I feel that these words refer to the bride's commendation of the bed for its adornment with flowers. For lest she should commend herself for these flowers, with which the bed was bedecked and the room made beautiful, the Bridegroom states that he is the flower of the field, that the flowers were a product of the field, not of the room. Their splendor and perfume result from his favor and contribution. Lest anyone should reproach her and say: 'What do you have that you did not receive? If you received it, then why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' he, a concerned lover and kindly teacher, lovingly and courteously tells his beloved who it is to whom she should ascribe the splendor of which she boasted and the sweet perfume of the bed. 'I am the flower of the field,' he said: it is of me that you boast. We are well advised from this that one ought never to boast, and if one does boast he should boast of the Lord. So much for the literal meaning; let us now with the help of him of whom we speak, examine the spiritual meaning that it conceals.

2. To begin, I now take note of the three places in which a flower is found: in the field, in the garden, in the room, that we may afterwards more easily ascertain why he especially chooses to be called the flower of the field. A flower grows both in field and garden, but in a room never. It brightens and perfumes it, not by standing upright as in the garden or field, but by lying prone because it is brought from without, not sprung from within. So it is they must be frequently renewed, fresher blooms must always be added, because they soon lose their scent and beauty. And if, as I have stated in another sermon, the bed bedecked with flowers is the conscience laden with good works, you must certainly see that it is by no means enough to do a good deed once or twice if the likeness is to be preserved; you must unceasingly add new ones to the former, so that sowing bountifully you may reap bountifully. Otherwise the flower of good works withers where it lies, and all its brilliance and freshness are swiftly destroyed if it is not renewed continually by more and more acts of love. So it is in the room.

**He who is the flower in perpetual bloom  
could not therefore proclaim himself  
a flower of the room,  
nor yet of the garden,  
lest he seem begotten by human means.**

8. At this point it would be good to hear what he will say of his dearly beloved; but the time does not permit. By our Rule we must put nothing before the work of God. This is the title by which our Father Benedict chose to name the solemn praises that are daily offered to God in the oratory, that so he might more clearly reveal how attentive he wanted us to be at that work. So, dearest brothers, I exhort you to participate always in the divine praises correctly and vigorously: vigorously, that you may stand before God with as much zest as reverence, not sluggish, not drowsy, not yawning, not sparing your voices, not leaving words half-said or skipping them, not wheezing through the nose with an effeminate stammering, in a weak and broken tone, but pronouncing the words of the Holy Spirit with becoming manliness and resonance and affection; and correctly, that while you chant you ponder on nothing but what you chant. Nor do I mean that only vain and useless thoughts are to be avoided; but, for at least that time and in that place, those also must be avoided with which officeholders must be inevitably and frequently preoccupied for the community's needs. Nor would I even recommend that you dwell on those you have just freshly acquired as you sat in the cloisters reading books, or such as you are now gathering from the Holy Spirit during my discussions in this lecture hall. They are wholesome, but it is not wholesome for you to ponder them in the midst of the psalms. For if at that time you neglect what you owe, the Holy Spirit is not pleased to accept any thing offered that is not what you owe. May we always be able to do his will in accord with his will, as he inspires, by the grace and mercy of the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 48***

3. In the garden however it is not so; nor is it in the field, for of themselves they constantly nourish the blooms they produce, which, in consequence, retain their native beauty. Yet there is this difference, that the garden flourishes because it is cultivated by the hand and skill of men, but the field produces flowers naturally of itself, without the aid of human labor. Do you think you now perceive who that field is: it is not furrowed by the plow, nor broken with the hoe, nor fertilized with dung, nor sown by the hand of man, but nevertheless made honorable by that noble flower on which the Spirit of the Lord has clearly rested? 'See, my son's scent is as the scent of a field which the Lord has blessed'. That flower of the field had not as yet put on its beauty and already it produced its fragrance, when the holy and aged patriarch, with enfeebled body and failing sight but a keen sense of smell, pre-sensed it in spirit and uttered those joyful words. He who is the flower in perpetual bloom could not therefore proclaim himself a flower of the room, nor yet of the garden, lest he seem begotten by human means. But he who was born without human effort said in a way both beautiful and becoming: 'I am the flower of the field.' And once born he was never thereafter subjected to corruption, that the word might be fulfilled which says: 'You will not allow your holy one to see corruption.'

4. But listen, if you please, to another explanation of this problem, in my opinion not to be slighted. It is not without reason that the spirit is called manifold by the Wise Man, if only because it usually contains different meanings under the text's one shell. Therefore, in accord with the aforesaid distinction concerning the flower's situation, the flower is virginity, it is martyrdom, it is good work: in the garden, virginity; in the field, martyrdom; in the room, good work. And how suitable the garden is for virginity that has modesty for companion, that shuns publicity, is happy in retirement, patient under discipline. The flower is enclosed in the garden, exposed in the field, strewn about in the room. You have 'a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed'. In the virgin it seals up the doorway of chastity, the safeguard of untainted holiness, provided however that she is one who is holy both in body and spirit. Suitable the field too for martyrdom, for the martyrs are exposed to the ridicule of all, made a spectacle to angels and to men. Is not theirs the pitiful voice of the psalm: 'We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those round about us?' Suitable, too, is the room for good works that foster a safe and quiet conscience. After a good work one rests more securely in contemplation, and the more a man is conscious that he has not failed in works of charity through love of his own ease, the more faithfully will he contemplate things sublime and make bold to study them.

5. And all these, in each way, mean the Lord Jesus. He is the flower of the garden, a virgin shoot sprung from a virgin. He is the flower of the field, martyr and crown of martyrs, the exemplar of martyrdom. For he was led outside the city, he suffered 'outside the camp', he was raised on the cross to be stared by all, to be mocked by all. He is also the flower of the room, the mirror and the model of all helpfulness, as he himself testified to the Jews: 'I have done many good works among you', and Scripture says of him: 'he went about doing good and healing all'. If the Lord then is all three of these, what was the reason that of the three he preferred to be called 'flower of the field'? Surely so that he might inspire in her the endurance to suffer the persecution that he knew was imminent if she wished to live a godly life in Christ. Hence he eagerly proclaims himself to be that for which he especially wishes to have a following; and that is what I have said elsewhere: she always longs for quietness and he arouses her to labor, impressing on her that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of heaven. When he had arranged to return to the Father, then, he said to the young Church on earth which he had recently betrothed to himself: 'The hour comes when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God;' and again: 'If they persecuted me they will persecute you'. You too can gather many texts in the Gospels similar to this proclamation of evils to be endured.

6. 'I am the flower of the field and the lily of the valley.' While she therefore draws attention to the bed, he summons her to the field, he challenges to exertion. Nor does he consider any motivation for undertaking the contest more compelling for her than to propose himself as the exemplar or reward of the contender. 'I am the flower of the field.' In fact, the words may be understood in either of these two senses: the form of combat or the glory of the victor. To me, Lord Jesus, you are both, both the mirror of endurance and the reward of the sufferer. Both are a strong challenge, a vehement incitement. By the example of your virtue you train my hands for war; by your regal presence you crown my head in victory. Whether I see you doing battle, or whether I look to you not only as the crowner but the crown as well, in both you attract me wonderfully to yourself. Each is a powerful cord to draw me on. 'Draw me after you', willingly do I follow, and still more willingly enjoy it. If you are so good, O Lord, to those who follow you, what will you be to those who overtake you? 'I am the flower of the field': let him who loves me come into the field, let him not refuse to undertake the struggle, with me and for me, that he may be enabled to say: 'I have fought the good fight.'

7. And since it is not the proud nor the arrogant, but rather the humble, who know nothing of self-reliance, that are fit for martyrdom, he adds that he is 'the lily of the valley', that is, the reward of the humble, designating by the excellence of this flower the special glory of their future exaltation. For a time shall come when every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill be made low, and then he, the brightness of eternal life, will appear as the lily, not of the hills but of the valleys. 'The just man shall blossom as the lily,' says the prophet. Who is just if not the humble man? In short, when the Lord bowed down under the hands of his servant the Baptist, who recoiled in fear of his majesty, he said: 'Let it be; it is fitting that we should in this way do all that righteousness demands', thereby assigning the fulness of righteousness to perfect humility. The just man therefore is humble, the just man is a valley. And if we shall have been found to be humble, we too shall blossom as the lily, and bloom for ever before the Lord. Will he not truly and in a special way reveal himself as a lily of the valley when 'he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body'? He does not say 'our body' but 'our wretched bodies', to indicate that the humble alone would be enlightened by the marvelous and eternal brightness of this lily. These things have been said because of the Bridegroom's declaration that he is the flower of the field and the lily of the valley.