

11. Let that be enough about freedom. In the book I have written on grace and free choice you may find other observations about the image and the likeness, but I do not think they contradict the things I have been saying. You have read them, and you have heard what I have just said; I leave it to your judgment which is preferable. If you find anything worth remembering in either, I am pleased, and shall always be so. However that may be, remember that I have particularly mentioned three qualities: simplicity, immortality, and freedom. And I think it must be clear to you that through its inborn likeness, which illuminates these qualities, the soul has a great affinity with the Word, the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

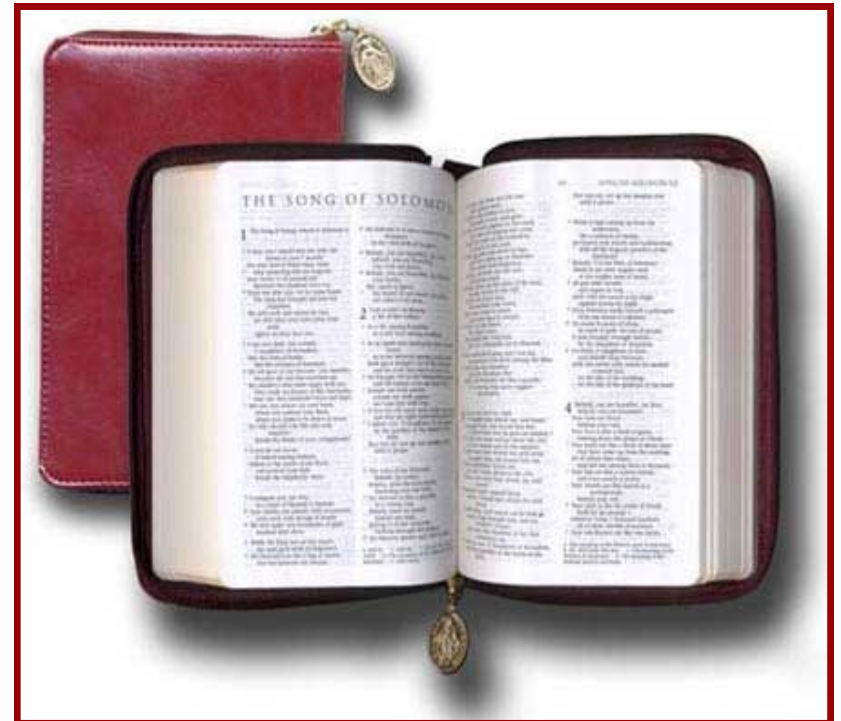
END OF SONG OF SONGS — 82



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SONG OF SONGS—82

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***SIMPLICITY,
IMMORTALITY,
AND
FREEDOM***

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.

Simplicity, Immortality, and Freedom

It was not without reason that we investigated the affinity of the soul to the Word. What can there be in common between majesty so great and poverty so extreme that such sublimity and such lowliness should be considered as though they were associated on equal terms? If we say that truly, we can indeed be confident and joyful; but if falsely, then such insolence deserves severe punishment. Therefore we had to investigate the affinity between them; and we have examined many aspects of this, but not all. No one can be so blind that he does not see the resemblance between the image and what is made in the image. Yesterday's sermon, if you remember, made a clear distinction between the two, and we not only dealt with that but also mentioned their great similarity. But we have not yet considered the nature of that similarity, or its more important aspects. Let us now proceed to consider this point, that the more fully the soul recognizes its origin, the more it will blush for the unworthiness of its life - more than this, it will be anxious to make every effort to reform what it sees in its nature to be deformed by sin, so that by God's help it may rule itself in a way worthy of its origin, and faithfully approach the Word's enfolding.

Who will set me free from my own hands? 'What I wish to do, that I do not' and it is I myself, not another, who frustrates me - 'and that which I hate, that I do.' But it is I myself, not someone else, who compels me to do it. Would that this frustration, this compulsion, were so strong that it was not voluntary, then perhaps I might be excused; if it were to be voluntary to the extent that it was less powerful, then I might be corrected. But now, alas, there is no way of escape open to me, for, as I have said, my possession of a will robs me of excuse, and the bondage I endure robs me of the possibility of correction. Who will snatch me from the hand of the sinner, from the hand of the evil-doer and the wicked man?

10. 'Who are you complaining about?' someone asks. About myself. It is I who am that sinner, that outlaw, that wicked man. I am the sinner, for it is I who have sinned. I am the outlaw, because of my own will I persist in breaking the law. For my will itself is a law in my members which rebels against the divine law. And since the law of the Lord is the law of my mind it is written, 'the law of God is in his heart' - my very will is seen to be against me; and this is complete loss of integrity. For if I am untrue to myself, I am untrue to everyone. If a man injures himself, how can he benefit anyone? I admit I am not good, because there is no good in me. But I shall find comfort in the word of the saint: 'I know that in me there is no good,' he said. But he makes a distinction when he says 'in him,' explaining that he refers to the flesh, because of the perversity of the law within it. For there is a law in the mind as well, and a better one. Is the law of God not good? If wickedness is due to the law of wickedness, goodness must be due to the law of goodness. Is the law in a man's flesh evil, and does its evil spring from the evil law within it, and yet a man is not good because of the law of goodness? It is not so: the law of God is in his mind, and in his mind in such a way as to be the law of his mind. Witness who says, 'I find one law in my body, warring against the law of my mind. Can what is in his flesh be his own, and what is in his mind not be his own? It is indeed his own, even more. Why should I not echo the words of this same teacher? 'With my mind I obey the law of God, but in my flesh I obey the law of sin.' He shows clearly what he admits to be his own when he dismisses the evil in his flesh as foreign to him. He says, 'Now it is not I who act, but the sin dwelling within me.' Perhaps he said that he found another law in his members precisely because he thought this was foreign to him, coming as it were from outside him. Therefore I venture to go further, but not imprudently, and say that Paul was not evil because of the evil in his flesh so much as he was good because of the good within his mind. Is a man not good when he consents to the law of God, since that is good? Even if he acknowledges that he is enslaved to the law of sin, it is in the flesh that he is so, not in the mind. Since, however, he serves the law of God in his mind but the law of sin in his flesh, you can see for yourselves which of these should be considered more characteristic of Paul. I admit that what is of the mind is greater than what is of the flesh, and this is not only my view but that of Paul, too, as he expressed it in the words I have already quoted: 'What I wish to do, that I do not; yet it is not I who act thus, but the sin which dwells within me.'

8. 'Take care what you say,' someone will reply, 'You say it is willing, but it is obviously in bondage.' It is true that the will gave its consent, but it does not keep itself there; it is kept there against its will. You must agree that it is being held. But remember that it is the will which you state is held. Do you say that the will is unwilling? The will is not kept against its will. The will is that of a willing man, not an unwilling one. But if it is kept willingly, it is keeping itself back. What will it say, or who will answer for it, since it has itself done this thing? What has it done? It has enslaved itself. Therefore it is said: 'He who commits sin is a slave to sin.' So when it sins - and when it sins it has determined to obey sin - it enslaves itself. It would be free if it no longer committed sin; but it does so, thus keeping itself in that same servitude. The will is not held against its will, for it is the will, therefore because it is willing, it has not only enslaved itself, but continues to do so. It deserves, then, and this must be borne in mind, to ask who will be its surety, since it has itself sinned and continues to do so.

9. 'But,' you say, 'you will not make me deny the bondage which I suffer, which I experience in myself and against which I struggle continually.' 'Where do you experience this bondage?' I ask. 'Is it not in the will? Your will is not diminished because it is in bondage. Your will is strong to do what you cannot refuse to do, even if you struggle. Now where there is will there is freedom.' But I speak of natural freedom, not spiritual, by which, as the Apostle says, Christ has set us free. He also it was who said, 'Where the spirit is, there is freedom.' So the soul, in a strange and evil way, is both held as a slave in this voluntary and yet irresistible bondage, and it is free. It is enslaved and free at the same time; enslaved through bondage, free because of its will, and, which is even stranger and more unfortunate, guilty in proportion to its freedom, and enslaved in proportion to its guilt, and therefore enslaved in proportion to its freedom. Unhappy man that I am, who will deliver me from the shame of this bondage? Unhappy I may be, but I am free. I am free because I am a man, unhappy because I am a slave. I am free because I am like God, unhappy because I am in opposition to God. 'O watcher of men, why have you set me against you?' For this is what you did, when you did not stop me. But at the same time it was I who set myself against you, and 'I have become a burden to myself'. It is indeed just that your enemy should be my enemy, and that someone who opposes you opposes me. But it is I who am against you, I who have become my own enemy, and I find in myself that which is in opposition both to my mind and to your law.

2. Let it be aware, then, that because of its origin in the divine likeness it has in itself a natural simplicity of substance by which for it to exist is to live, even if it does not imply living in a state of blessedness; its likeness does not imply equality. This is a degree, of likeness, but only a degree; it is not synonymous with living in a state of blessedness, which is the prerogative of the highest virtue. If therefore this quality of life is the prerogative of the Word, by reason of the perfection of its nature, life is the prerogative of the soul because of its natural affinity to the Word. To make this clearer: it is for God alone that to be is synonymous with being in a state of blessedness, and this is the first and purest simplicity. The second is similar to it, namely, that existence is living, and this is the prerogative of the soul; and even if it is a lower degree, it can be raised not only to living well, but even to living blessedly. But even for the soul which attains to this to be is not the same thing as to be blessed, since it is glorified by its likeness to the Word, yet because of its distinction between them it will always have to say 'Lord, who is like you?' It is a degree of advancement for the soul, from which alone it may rise to the blessed life.

3. There are two kinds of living beings, those which have consciousness and those which do not. The sensate rank above the insensate, and above them both is life, by which one lives and is conscious. Life and living beings do not rank equally; much less life and lifeless things. Life is the living soul, but it does not derive its life from any other source than itself; strictly speaking, we describe this as life rather than living. Thus it follows that when this is infused into the soul it gives it life, so that the body, through the presence of life, becomes not life itself but a living thing. From this it is clear that, even for a living body, to be is not the same as to live. Much less do those things which are without life attain to this degree. Not even will everything which is described as life, or which is indeed so, be able to reach that point. There is a life of cattle and of trees, the first conscious, the second lacking consciousness. For neither of these does being involve living, since, according to many people, their existence has been in the elements before it was in their limbs. But according to this view, when they cease to quicken they cease to live, but not to be. They are dissolved and separated, as though they had been not only bound together but mingled. For they are not one simple organism but are compounded of several. Therefore it is not reduced to nothing but dissolved into its component parts, and each returns to its first principle; for example, air returns to air, fire to fire, and so forth. For such a quality of life to be is by no means the same as to live; it is even when it does not live.

4. Now none of such things, to which being is not the same thing as living, will ever make progress or rise, since it could not reach even the lower degree. The soul of man alone, which is recognized as being established in it, was created with this dignity, life from life, simple from the simple, immortal from the immortal, so that he is not far from the highest degree, where to be is synonymous with living in blessedness, in which abides the blessed and only powerful King of kings and Lord of lords. The soul by its condition has received the capability of being blessed, even if it is not yet blessed, and it is approaching that highest degree as far as it can, yet without reaching it. For as we said above, even when it attains blessedness, this will not be the same for it as being blessed. There is a similarity, I admit, but I reject any idea of equality. For example, God is life and the soul is life; it is like him, then, but it is not equal. Moreover, it is like him because it is life, because its life is within itself, because it is not only a living thing but a life-giving thing, just as God himself is all these things; but it is unlike him as a creature is unlike its creator, and unlike because if it had not been quickened by God it would not live. I say it would not live, but I refer to its spiritual life, not its natural one. It must live immortally on the natural, even if it does not on the spiritual plane. But what kind of life would it be in which it would be better not to be born than not to die? It is death rather than life, and the more grievous in that it is the death of sin, not of nature. For the death of sinners is very evil. Thus the soul which lives according to the flesh is dead though it lives, for it would have been better for it never to have lived than to live in such a way. And it will never rise from that living death except through the Word of life, or rather through the Word which is life, both living and life-giving.

5. Now the soul is immortal, and in this it is also similar, but not equal to, the Word. For the immortality of the Godhead is so far above it that the Apostle says of God, 'He who alone possesses immortality.' This was said of him, I think, because only God is by nature unchangeable - he said 'I am God, and I do not change.' For true and integral immortality does not admit change any more than it does ending, because all change is in some way an imitation of death. Everything which changed, in passing from one state to another, necessarily dies to what it is, so that it may begin to be what it is not. But if every change necessarily involves death, where is immortality? 'For the creature was made subject to vanity, not of its own will, but of that of him whom made it; yet it has hope.' But the soul is immortal, and since it has life in itself, and there is no way in which it can fall away from itself, so there is no way in which it can fall away from life. But it is plain that it changes in its affections and it so recognizes that its likeness to God in its immortality is incomplete that it realizes it lacks no small part of immortality. It acknowledges that absolute and complete immortality is seen in God alone, in whom is no change nor shadow of alteration. But it has been established in the present discussion that the soul has no little dignity, since it seems to resemble the Word in two respects: simplicity of essence and perpetuity of life.

6. But one point has occurred to me which I cannot neglect, and which in no way detracts from the soul's greatness and its similarity to the Word, but enhances them. This is free choice, something clearly divine which shines forth in the soul like a jewel set in gold. From it the soul derives its power of judgment, and its option of choosing between good and evil, between life and death, in fact between light and darkness, and any other concepts which are perceived by the soul as opposites. It is the eye of the soul which as censor and arbiter exercises discrimination and discernment between these things, and arbiter in discerning and free in choosing. It is called free choice because it is exercised in these matters in accordance with the freedom of the will. By it a man can acquire merit; everything you do, whether good or ill, which you had the choice of doing or not doing, is duly imputed to you for merit or censure. And as a man is rightly praised for refraining from doing wrong when he might have done wrong, so also someone who could have refrained from doing wrong but did wrong, like someone who could have done right but did not do so, is not free from censure. But when there is no freedom, there is no merit or blame. Therefore animals devoid of reason gain no merit, for they lack deliberation just as they lack freedom. They are prompted by the senses, led by impulse, dominated by appetite. They have no judgment to rule their actions, nor any faculty for exercising judgment, which is reason. It follows that they can incur no judgment since they exercise none. How can they reasonably be expected to exercise a faculty of reason which they have not received?

7. It is only man who has not thus been dominated by nature, therefore he alone among living creatures is free. Yet when sin intervenes, even man is dominated, but by his will, not by nature, and he is not thereby deprived of the liberty which is his birthright. What is done willingly is done freely. It is by sin that the corruptible body oppresses the soul, but it is the result of love, not of force. For although the soul fell of itself, it cannot rise of itself, because the will lies weak and powerless through the vitiated and depraved love of a corrupt body, yet is at the same time capable of a love of justice. So, in some strange and twisted way the will deteriorates and brings about a state of compulsion where bondage cannot excuse the will, because the action was voluntary, nor can the will, being fettered, free itself from bondage. For this bondage is in some sense voluntary. It is an agreeable bondage which flatters while it overcomes, and overcomes by flattery, so that when the will has betrayed itself by consenting to sin, it cannot of itself throw off the yoke, nor reasonably excuse itself. Then, like the voice of one groaning under the yoke of bondage, comes this cry, 'Lord, I am oppressed; answer for me.' But now listen to what he says next, knowing that he has no just complaint against the Lord, since it was his own will which was to blame: 'What am I to say? Who will speak for me? For I myself have done this evil.' He was oppressed by the yoke, but the yoke of a voluntary servitude; because it was servitude, he is miserable, yet because it was voluntary, inexcusable. For it is the will which, although free, by consenting to sin became slave to sin; and it is the will which puts itself in subjection to sin by its willing servitude.