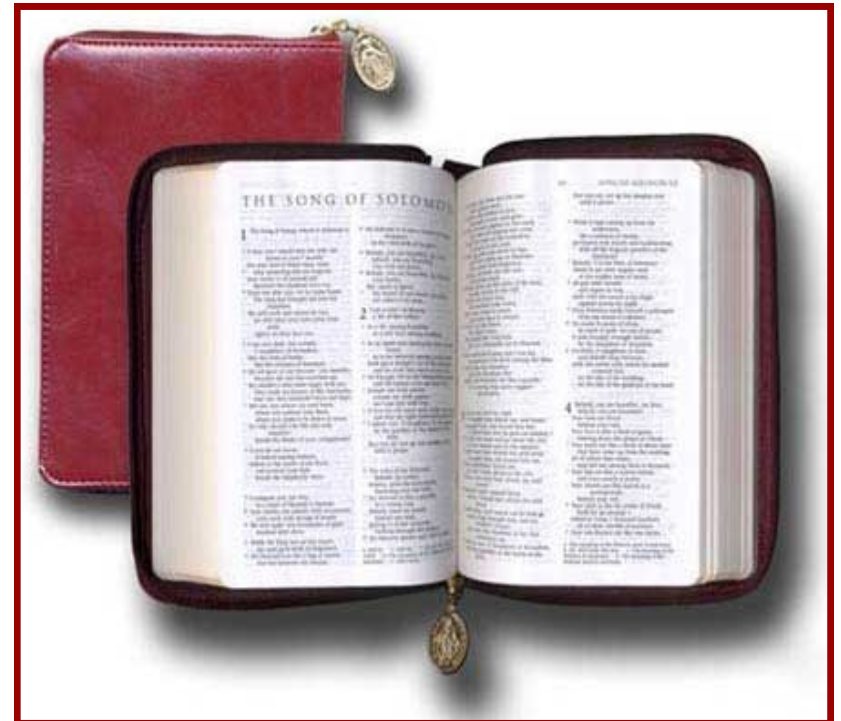




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SONG OF SONGS—29

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE BLACKNESS AND BEAUTY
OF THE
BRIDEGROOM AND BRIDE***

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 Blackness and Beauty of the Bridegroom and Bride

I presume you remember what I consider those curtains to be to which the beauty of the bride is compared, to which Solomon they belong, and how the comparison drawn from them is directed to the manifestation and praise of that beauty. But if anyone thinks that it should rather be directed to the blackness, then we must call to mind those curtains with which Solomon once covered the tabernacle. They were certainly black, being exposed daily to the sun and to the weathering of the rains. This was no futile arrangement; it ensured that the ornaments within would preserve their brilliance. By this example the bride does not deny her blackness but excuses it. She will never be ashamed of a condition that owes its origin to charity, that is not condemned by the judgment of truth. For who is weak with whom she does not share weakness? Who is made to stumble and she is not ablaze with indignation? She accepts the blemishes consequent on works of compassion, that she may relieve or heal the sickness of passion in another. Her complexion grows dark in the zeal for moral brightness, for the prize of beauty.

13. Because this is so the bride goes on: "Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me," meaning: Do not condemn me as repulsive, because you do not find me attractive under stress of persecution, nor adorned according to worldly standards of beauty. Why reproach me for blackness caused by the heat of persecution, not by the shame of evil living? Or perhaps by the sun she means zeal for what is right, by which she is aroused and armed against evil-doers, saying to God: "Zeal for your house has eaten me up;" and "My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words;" or again: "Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked who forsake your law;" or this: "Lord, do I not hate those who hate you, and have I not languished over your enemies?" She even carefully notes those words of the Wise Man: "Do you have daughters? Do not show yourself too indulgent with them;" that is when they are negligent and lax and averse to discipline, beware of greeting them with a face serenely bright; let it be severely dark. To be discolored by the sun may also mean to be on fire with fraternal love, to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to be weak with those who are weak, to burn with indignation when someone is led into sin. She can also say this: "Christ the Sun of justice had made me swarthy in color, because I am faint with love of him." This languor drains the color from the countenance, and makes the soul swoon with desire, and therefore she says: "I remembered God and was delighted, I meditated and my spirit failed me." Just like a burning sun therefore, the ardor of desire darkens her complexion while still a pilgrim in the body; rebuffs make her impatient, and delay torments her love, while she sighs for the brightness of his countenance. Which of us so burns with holy love that in his longing to see Christ he wearies of all the colorfulness of this world's prestige and gaiety and casts it from him, declaring as the Prophet did: "You know I have not desired man's day." And with David: "My soul refused to be comforted," it scorned to be tainted with the empty joy of this world's goods. Well may she say: the sun has discolored me by the contrast of its splendor; when I draw near to it I see myself in its light to be dusky, even black, and I despise my filthiness. But otherwise I am truly beautiful. Why do you term swarthy one who yields only to the sun in loveliness? The words that follow, however, seem to suggest the former meaning, for she adds: "My mother's sons turned their anger on me," to show that she had suffered persecution. But here we have come to the starting-point of another sermon. Sufficient for this occasion is all that we have received as a gift of the Church's Bridegroom concerning his glory. He is God, blessed for ever. Amen.

12. But there is another blackness, that of the endurance of penance, as when a man decides to express sorrow for his sins. Solomon will not recoil if I bear such a blackness in me, if I willingly assume it because of my sins, for "you will not scorn this crushed and broken heart, O God." There is also the blackness of compassion, when you condole with a brother in his suffering and his trouble fills you with gloom. This, too, our Peaceful One must not think of rejecting. Did he not himself graciously undergo it on our behalf, when he "bore our sins in his body on the tree." And there is the blackness of persecution, to be regarded as a most noble adornment when endured in the cause of right and truth. For that reason "the apostles went out from the Council rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer indignity for the name of Jesus." And "happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right." I think that the Church glories especially in her free choice of this dark covering from the curtains of her Bridegroom. In any case she has been promised: "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

2. The blackening of one makes many bright, not the blackness caused by sin, but that which results from genuine concern. "It is better," said Caiaphas, "for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed." It is better that one be blackened for the sake of all "in the likeness of sinful flesh," than for the whole of mankind to be lost by the blackness of sin; that the splendor and image of the substance of God should be shrouded in the form of a slave, in order that a slave might live; that the brightness of eternal light should become dimmed in the flesh for the purging of the flesh; that he who surpasses all mankind in beauty should be eclipsed by the darkness of the Passion for the enlightening of mankind; that he himself should suffer the ignominy of the cross, grow pale in death, be totally deprived of beauty and comeliness that he might gain the Church as a beautiful and comely bride, without stain and fellows. How then this shaggy-haired likeness to Esau? Solomon; I even embrace Solomon himself under his black covering. For though Solomon presents this black exterior, it is only in the curtain. Outwardly, in the skin, he is black, but not within. In any case, "all the glory of the king's daughter is from within." Within is the brightness of divine life, the graciousness of the virtues, the splendor of grace, the purity of innocence. But covering it all is the abject hue that indicates infirmity, with his face as it were hidden and despised, "One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." I recognize here the image of our sin-darkened nature; I recognize the garments of skins that clothed our sinning first parents. He even brought this blackness on himself by assuming the condition of slave, and becoming as men are, he was seen as a man. I recognize under the kid-skin, a symbol of sin, both the hand that committed no sin and the neck through which thought of evil never passed; no word of treachery was found in his mouth. I know that you are gentle by nature, meek and humble of heart, pleasing in appearance and loveable in your ways, anointed "with the oil of gladness above your fellows." How then this shaggy-haired likeness to Esau? Who owns this ravaged and wrinkled face? Whose are these hairs? They are mine. These hairy hands are the sign of my likeness to sinful men. These hairs are my very own: and in my hairy skin I shall see God my Savior.

3. But it was not Rebekah who clothed him in this fashion, it was Mary; he received so much richer a blessing as he was born of a holier mother. And how rightly he is clothed in my likeness, because the blessing is being claimed, the inheritance requested, for me. For he had heard the words: "Ask of me and I will give you the nations, your heritage, and the ends of the earth, your possession." It is from your own heritage, the speaker said, your own possession, that I will give you. How will you give it to him if it is his already? And why urge him to ask for what is his own? Or how is it his own if he has to ask for it? It must be for me, that he asks; he clothed himself in my nature for this purpose, that he might take up my cause. For "on him lies a punishment that brings us peace," as the Prophet said; "and the Lord burdened him with the sins of us all." "He had to be made like his brothers in every respect," as the Apostle says, "that he might become merciful."

Accordingly, "the voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." What we hear from him is his, what we see in him is ours. The words he speaks are "spirit and life;" the form we see is mortal, subject to death. We see one thing and we believe another. Our senses tell us he is black, our faith declares him fair and beautiful. If he is black it is "in the eyes of the foolish," for to the minds of the faithful he is wholly beautiful. He is black, then, but beautiful: black in the opinion of Herod, beautiful in the testimony of the penitent thief, in the faith of the centurion.

4. The man who cried out: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" certainly perceived how great his beauty was. But where he perceived that beauty to lie is for us to ascertain. For supposing he considered only what his eyes beheld, in what way was this man beautiful, how was he the Son of God? What did the eyes of the beholders see but a man deformed and black, his hands splayed out on the cross as he hung between two criminals, an object of laughter for the wicked, of weeping for the faithful. He alone was the laughingstock, he alone who could have stricken them with terror, who alone had a right to be honored. How then did the centurion see the beauty of the Crucified, how did he see as Son of God him "who was numbered with the transgressors"? It is neither right nor necessary for me to provide an answer, for the Evangelist's observation has not allowed this to escape him. He writes: "And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus cried out and breathed his last, he said: 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'" It was the sound of his voice that inspired his belief, it was by the voice that he recognized the Son of God, and not by the face. Perhaps he was one of those sheep of whom Christ said: "My sheep hear my voice."

11. Here, then, we must pay tribute to the prudence of the bride, and the profound wisdom of her words. She sought her God under the image of the curtains of Solomon, that is, in the flesh. She sought life in death, the summit of glory and honor in the midst of shame, the whiteness of innocence and the splendor of the virtues under the dark vesture of the Crucified. Those curtains, black and despicable as they were, contained beneath them jewels more precious and more brilliant than a king's riches. How right not to have been put off by the blackness in the curtains, when she glimpsed the beauty beneath them. But many were put off by it, because they failed to glimpse the beauty. "For if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Herod did not know, and therefore he despised him. The Synagogue did not know, hence it taunted him with the dark weakness of his Passion: "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." But the thief, though on the cross, recognized him from the cross, and proclaimed his total innocence: "What evil has this man done?" he asked. In the same moment he bore witness to his kingly majesty, saying: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." The centurion knew him, and called him the Son of God. The Church recognizes him, and strives to imitate his blackness that she may participate in his beauty. She is not ashamed to be seen as black, to be called black, for she can then say to her beloved: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." But make sure the blackness is that of Solomon's curtains, on the outside and not within, for my Solomon bears no blackness within. Nor does she say: "I am black like Solomon," but "as the curtains of Solomon," for the blackness of the true Peaceful One is merely external. The blackness of sin is within; sin defiles the interior before it becomes visible to the eyes. "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, theft, murder, adultery, fornication, blasphemy, and these are what defile a man;" but this cannot apply to Solomon. You will never find these kinds of defilement in the true Peaceful One. For he who takes away the sins of the world has to be without sin; if he is to be found fit to reconcile sinners he must duly vindicate for himself the name of Solomon.

10. "She therefore will touch me worthily who will accept me as seated with the Father, no longer in lowly guise, but in my own flesh transformed with heaven's beauty. Why wish to touch what is ugly? Have patience that you may touch the beautiful. Things will be beautiful then that are now ugly: ugly to the touch, ugly to the eye, ugly even to you in your ugliness, you who are so bound to the senses, so indifferent to faith. Become beautiful and then touch me; live by faith and you are beautiful. In your beauty you will touch my beauty all the more worthily, with greater felicity. You will touch me with the hand of faith, the finger of desire, the embrace of love; you will touch me with the mind's eye. But shall I still be black? God forbid! Your beloved will be fair and ruddy, strikingly beautiful, surrounded by a bloom of roses and lilies of the valley, by the choirs of martyrs and virgins; and sitting in their midst, I, a virgin and martyr, am alien to neither choir. Why should I not be at ease in the white-robed choirs of virgins, virgin that I am and the Son of a Virgin, the Bridegroom of a Virgin? Or amid the red-robed choirs of the martyrs, I who am the motive, the strength, the reward and the model of martyrs? Here let kind touch its kind after the manner of its kind, and say: "My beloved is fair and ruddy, chosen out of thousands." Thousands of thousands are with the Beloved, and ten hundred thousand surround him but none compare with him. Do you not fear that in seeking your beloved, you may by mistake take one of this multitude for him? But no, you will not hesitate in making your choice. He who is a paragon among thousands, peerless in their midst, will be easy to discover. These words will spring to your mind: "He is glorious in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength." No longer therefore will he appear in the swarthy skin that up to now he had presented to the eyes of his persecutors, who would despise him to the point of killing him or even to the eyes of his friends after his resurrection, that they might recognize him. No longer will he be encountered clothed in a dark skin, but in a white robe, surpassing in beauty not only all mankind, but even the angels. Why then should you wish to touch me in this lowly condition, rigged out like a slave, contemptible to look at? But touch me in the beauty with which heaven endows me, crowned with glory and honor, awe-inspiring in the majesty of my divine life, yet loving and calm with an inborn serenity."

5. The hearing succeeded where the sight failed. Appearances deceived the eye, but truth poured itself into the ear. The eye saw him to be weak, detestable, wretched, a man condemned to a most shameful death; but to the ear the Son of God revealed himself, to the ear he made known his beauty, but not to that of the Jews whose ears were uncircumcised. There was a certain propriety in Peter's cutting off the servant's ear, to open up a way for the truth, that the truth might set him free, that is, make him a freedman. The centurion was uncircumcised, but not where his ear was concerned, because at that one cry of a dying man he recognized the Lord of majesty beneath all those signs of helplessness. Therefore he did not despise what he saw, because he believed in what he did not see. He did not believe, however, because of what he saw, but, without any doubt, because of what he heard, because "faith comes from hearing." It would indeed have been a worthy thing if the truth had penetrated to the soul through the windows of the eyes which are a nobler power; but this, O my soul, is reserved for us till the life to come, when we shall see face to face. Meantime let the remedy find entrance where the ancient malady stole a march on us; let life follow the same pathway as death, light in the wake of darkness, the antidote of truth after the poison of the serpent. And let it heal the troubled eye that it may serenely contemplate him whom the sickly eye could not see. The ear was death's first gateway, let it be the first to open up to life; let the hearing restore the vision it took from us. For unless we believe we shall not understand. Therefore hearing is connected with merit, sight with the reward. Hence the Prophet says: "You will give to my hearing joy and gladness," for the beatific vision is the reward of faithful hearing. We merit the beatific vision by our constancy in listening. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The eye that would see God must be cleansed by faith, as it is written: "He cleansed their hearts by faith."

6. In the meantime then since the sense of sight is not yet ready, let us rouse up our hearing, let us exercise it and take in the truth. Happy the man of whom Truth testifies: "At the hearing of the ear he obeyed me." I shall be worthy to see if before seeing I shall have been found obedient; I shall look on him with confidence if he has already received the service of my obedience. Blessed indeed was the man who said: "The Lord God opened my ears and I did not disobey or turn back in defiance." Here we find both a model of voluntary obedience and an example of perseverance. Spontaneity is found where there is no contradiction, and perseverance where there is no turning back. Both are necessary, for "God loves a cheerful giver," and "the man who perseveres to the end will be saved." How I wish the Lord would open my ear, that the word of his truth would enter into my heart, cleanse my eye and make it ready for that joyful vision, so that even I could say to God: "Your ear has heard the preparation of my heart." That even I, along with his other obedient followers, should hear from God: "You are clean by the word which I have spoken to you." Not all who hear are cleansed, but those only who obey, the blessed ones are those who both hear and keep the word. This is the hearing he asks for with the command: "Hear, O Israel;" this is the hearing he offers who says: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening;" and this is the response that such a man makes: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak within me."

7. To assure you that the Holy Spirit follows this order in promoting the soul's spiritual welfare, enabling it to hear before gladdening it with vision, Scripture says: "Hear, O daughter, and see." So why strain with your eyes? Prepare rather to hear. Do you wish to see Christ? The first thing for you to do is to hear him, to hear about him, so that when you do see you may say: "As we have heard, so have we seen." His glory is immense, the scope of the eye is meager and cannot attain to it. But where the eye fails, the ear succeeds. So when God cried out: "Adam, where are you?" I could no longer see him because I was a sinner, but I heard him. The hearing, if it be loving, alert and faithful, will restore the sight. Faith will cleanse the eye exacerbated by godlessness; obedience will open what disobedience closed. "From your precepts," says the Psalmist, "I get understanding:" the keeping of the commandments restores the intellectual light clouded over by sin. See how the faithful Isaac retained in old age a power of hearing whose vigor surpassed that of the other senses. The Patriarch's eyes grow dim, his palate is deceived, his hand lets him down, but his ear does not let him down. What wonder if the ear catches the truth, since faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the word of God, and the word of God is truth? "The voice," he said, "is the voice of Jacob." True! "But the hands are the hands of Esau." False! You are deceived. The resemblance of the hand has led you astray. Nor is truth found in the taste, though it be pleasant. What truth has he if he thinks he is eating venison when he is dining off the flesh of domestic kids? Less still is it found in the eye that sees nothing. The eye is not dependable either for truth or wisdom, for Isaiah says: "Woe to you who are wise in your own eyes." Can wisdom which is accursed be good? It is of the world, and for that reason is folly in God's sight.

8. The wisdom that is good and true, as holy Job experienced it, "is drawn out of secret places." Why then seek it from without, in your bodily senses? Taste resides in the palate, but wisdom in the heart. Do not look for wisdom with your eyes of flesh, because flesh and blood will not reveal it to you, but the Spirit. Do not look for it in what the mouth tastes, for it is not found in the land of those who live for pleasure. Do not look for it in the hand's touch, for a saintly man says: "If my mouth has kissed my hand, that is a great iniquity and a denial of God." This happens, in my opinion, when the gift of God, wisdom, is ascribed not to God but to the merits of our actions. Though Isaac was wise, his senses led him astray. Only the hearing that catches the word possesses the truth. The woman whose wisdom was still carnal was rightly forbidden to touch the risen flesh of the Word, because she depended more on what she saw than on what she heard, that is, on her bodily senses rather than on God's word. She did not believe that he whom she saw dead would rise again, though he himself had made this promise. Hence her eye did not rest till her sight was satisfied, because for her there was no consolation from the faith, even God's promise was not sure. Must not heaven and earth and all those things that the human eye may reach, pass away and perish, before one iota or one dot shall pass away from the words that God has spoken? And yet she, who refused to be consoled by the word of the Lord, ceased her crying when she saw him, because she valued experience above faith. But experience is deceptive.

9. She is impelled, therefore, to seek the surer knowledge of faith, which discerns truths unknown to the senses, beyond the range of experience. When he said: "Do not touch me," he meant: depend no longer on this fallible sense; put your trust in the word, get used to faith.

Faith cannot be deceived. With the power to understand invisible truths, faith does not know the poverty of the senses; it transcends even the limits of human reason, the capacity of nature, the bounds of experience. Why do you ask the eye to do what it is not equipped to do? And why does the hand endeavor to examine things beyond its reach? What you may learn from these senses is of limited value. But faith will tell you of me without detracting from my greatness. Learn to receive with greater confidence, to follow with greater security, whatever faith commends to you. "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father." As if after he had ascended he wished to be or could be touched by her! And yet he could be touched, but by the heart, not by the hand; by desire, not by the eye; by faith, not by the senses. "Why do you want to touch me now," he says, "would you measure the glory of the resurrection by a physical touch? Do you not remember that, while I was still mortal, the eyes of the disciples could not endure for a short space the glory of my transfigured body that was destined to die? I still accommodate myself to your senses by bearing this form of a servant which you are accustomed to seeing. But this glory of mine is too wonderful for you, so high that you cannot reach it. Defer your judgment therefore, refrain from expressing an opinion, do not entrust the defining of so great a matter to the senses, it is for faith to pronounce on it. With its fuller comprehension, faith will define it more worthily and more surely. In its deep and mystical breast it can grasp what is the length and breadth and height and depth. 'What eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived,' is borne within itself by faith, as if wrapped in a covering and kept under seal.