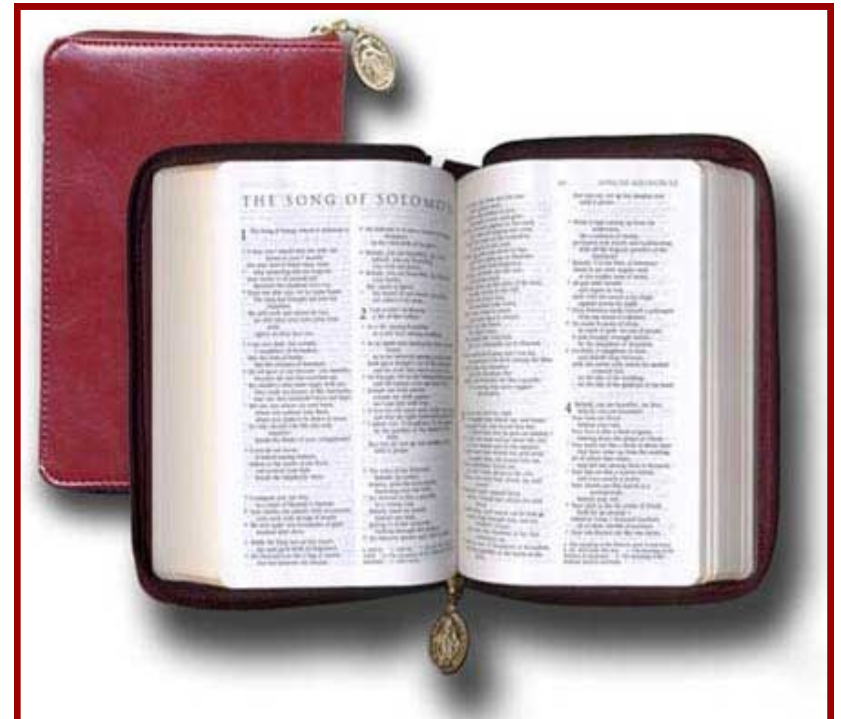


SONG OF SONGS—16

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



THE NAME OF JESUS

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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 Name of Jesus

Wisdom is a kindly spirit, and easy of access to those who call upon him. Quite often he anticipates their request and says: "Here I am." Listen now to what, because of your prayers, he has revealed to me about the subject we postponed yesterday; be ready to gather the ripe fruit of your intercession. I put before you a name that is rightly compared to oil, how rightly I shall explain. You encounter many names for the Bridegroom scattered through the pages of Scripture, but all these I sum up for you in two. I think you will find none that does not express either the gift of his love or the power of his majesty. The Holy Spirit tells us this through the mouth of one of his friends: "Two things I have heard: it is for God to be strong, for you, Lord, to be merciful." With reference to his majesty we read: "Holy and terrible is his name;" with reference to his love: "Of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved." Further examples make it clearer still. Jeremiah says: "This is the name by which he will be called: 'the Lord our righteous one' " -- a name suggesting power; but when Isaiah says: "His name will be called Emmanuel," he indicates his love. He himself said: "You call me Master and Lord." The first title implies love, the second majesty. Love's business is to educate the mind as well as to provide the body's food. Isaiah also said: "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, God, the Mighty One, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The first, third and fourth signify majesty, the others love. Which of these therefore is poured out? In some mysterious way the name of majesty and power is transfused into that of love and mercy, an amalgam that is abundantly poured out in the person of our Savior Jesus Christ. The name "God" liquefies and dissolves into the title "God with us," that is, into "Emmanuel." He who is "Wonderful" becomes "Counselor"; "God" and "the Mighty One" become the "Everlasting Father" and the "Prince of Peace." "The Lord our righteous one" becomes the "gracious and merciful Lord." This process is not new: in ancient times "Abram" became Abraham and Sarai became "Sara"; and we are reminded that in these events the mystery of the communication of salvation was pre-figured and celebrated.

But why the symbol of oil?

***"... IT GIVES LIGHT, IT NOURISHES, IT ANOINTS.
IT FEEDS THE FLAME, IT NOURISHES THE BODY,
IT RELIEVES PAIN: IT IS LIGHT, FOOD, MEDICINE....."***

2. So I ask where now is that warning cry: "I am the Lord, I am the Lord," that resounded with recurring terror in the ears of the people of old. The prayer with which I am familiar, that begins with the sweet name of Father, gives me confidence of obtaining the petitions with which it continues. Servants are called friends in this new way, and the resurrection is proclaimed not to mere disciples but to brothers.

Nor am I surprised if, when the time has fully come, there is an outpouring of Jesus' name as God fulfills what he had promised through Joel, an outpouring of his Spirit on all mankind, since I read that a similar event took place among the Hebrews in former times. But I feel that your thoughts fly ahead of my words, that you already guess what I intend to say. How is it, I ask, that God's first answer to Moses' question was: "I Am Who I Am," and "I Am has sent me to you"? I doubt if even Moses himself would have grasped its import if it had not been poured out. But it was poured and he understood it; and not only poured but poured out, for an inward pouring had already occurred: the citizens of heaven already possessed it, the angels knew it. Now it is sent abroad, and what was infused into the angels as an intimate secret was poured out upon men, so that henceforth they could justly proclaim from the earth: "Your name is oil poured out," if the obstinacy of a thankless people did not prevent it. For he had said: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

3. Run then, O pagans, salvation is at hand, that name is poured out which saves all who invoke it. The God of the angels calls himself the God of men. He poured out oil on Jacob and it fell on Israel. Say to your brothers: "Give us some of your oil. If they refuse, ask the Lord of the oil to give it to you. Say to him: "Take away our reproach."

See that no envious tongue insults your beloved, whom it has pleased you to call from the ends of the earth with a compassion all the greater for her unworthiness. Is it fitting, I ask, that a wicked servant should shut out the invited guests of the master of the house? You have said: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Of no more than these? Pour out, continue to pour; open your hand still wider and satisfy the desire of everything that lives.

Let them come from the east and the west and take their places with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. Let them come, let the tribes come up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise his name according to his command to Israel. Let them come and take their place, let them feast and be filled with gladness, let the banqueters sing as one man the resounding song of exultation and praise: "Your name is oil poured out." One thing I know: if we find that the porters are Andrew and Philip, we shall not be repulsed when we ask for oil, when we desire to see Jesus. Philip will at once tell Andrew, and Andrew and Philip will tell Jesus. And what will Jesus say? Precisely because he is Jesus he will tell them: "Unless a wheat-grain falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." Let the grain die therefore, and let the harvest of the pagans spring to fruition. It is necessary for Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and that penance and forgiveness of sin should be preached in his name, not alone in Judea but even among all nations, because from the sole name of Christ thousands upon thousands of believers are called Christians, whose hearts all re-echo: "Your name is oil poured out."

8. Judea too has had her Jesus -- Messiahs in whose empty names she glories: For they give neither light nor food nor medicine. Hence the Synagogue is in the darkness still, enduring the pangs of hunger and disease, and she will neither be healed nor have her fill until she discovers that my Jesus rules over Jacob to the ends of the earth, until she comes back in the evening, hungering like a dog and prowling about the city. True, they were sent on in advance, like the staff preceding the Prophet to where the child lay dead, but they could not see a meaning in their own names because no meaning was there. The staff was laid upon the corpse but produced neither voice nor movement since it was a mere staff. Then he who sent the staff came down and quickly saved his people from their sins, proving that men spoke truly of him when they said: "Who is this man that he even forgives sins?" He is no other than the one who says: "I am the salvation of my people." Now the Word is heard, now it is experienced, and it is clear that, unlike the others, he bears no empty name. As men feel the infusion of spiritual health they refuse to conceal their good fortune. The inward experience finds outward expression. Stricken with remorse I speak out his praise, and praise is a sign of life: "For from the dead, as from one who does not exist, praise has ceased." But see! I am conscious, I am alive! I am perfectly restored, my resurrection is complete. What else is the death of the body than to be deprived of life and feeling? Sin; which is the death of the soul, took from me the feeling of compunction, hushed my prayers of praise; I was dead. Then he who forgives sin came down, restored my senses again and said: "I am your deliverer." Why wonder that death should yield when he who is life comes down? "For a man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved." The child who was dead is now yawning, he yawns seven times as if to say: "Seven times daily I praise you, Lord." Take note of this number seven. It is not a meaningless number, it bears a sacred significance. But because you are by now sated, we should do well to hold this theme over for another sermon, and come with whetted appetites to a table newly laden, to which we are invited by the Church's Spouse, our Lord, Jesus Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

7. Hidden as in a vase, in this name of Jesus, you, my soul, possess a salutary remedy against which no spiritual illness will be proof. Carry it always close to your heart, always in your hand, and so ensure that all your affections, all your actions, are directed to Jesus. You are even invited to do this: "Set me as a seal," he says, "upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm." Here is a theme we shall treat of again. For the moment you have this ready medicine for heart and hand. The name of Jesus furnishes the power to correct your evil actions; to supply what is wanting to imperfect ones; in this name your affections find a guard against corruption, or if corrupted, a power that will make them whole again.

4. I recognize now the name hinted at by Isaiah: "My servants are to be given a new name. Whoever is blessed on earth in that name will be blessed by the Lord, Amen." O blessed name, oil poured out without limit! From heaven it pours down on Judea and from there over all the earth, so that round the whole world the Church proclaims: "Your name is oil poured out." And what an outpouring! It not only bathes the heavens and the earth, it even bedews the underworld, so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee in the name of Jesus, and that every tongue should acclaim: "Your name is oil poured out." Take the name Christ, take the name Jesus; both were infused into the angels, both were poured out upon men, even upon men who rotted like animals in their own dung. Thus you became a savior both of men and beasts, so countless are your mercies, O God. How precious your name, and yet how cheap! Cheap, but the instrument of salvation. If it were not cheap it would not have been poured out for me; if it lacked saving power it would not have won me. Made a sharer in the name, I share too in its inheritance. For I am a Christian, Christ's own brother. If I am what I say, I am the heir of God, co-heir with Christ. And what wonder if the name of the Bridegroom is poured out, since he himself is poured out? For he emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave.

Did he not even say: "I am poured out like water"? The fullness of the divine life was poured out and lived on earth in bodily form, that all of us who live in this body doomed to death may receive from that fullness, and being filled with its life-giving odor say: "Your name is oil poured out." Such is what is meant by the outpouring of the name, such its manner, such its extent.

5. But why the symbol of oil? I have yet to explain this. In the previous sermon I had begun to do so when another matter that seemed to demand mention suddenly presented itself, though I may have dallied with it longer than I intended. In this I resembled the valiant woman, Wisdom, who put her hand to the distaff, her fingers to the spindle. Skillfully she produced from her scanty stock of wool or flax a long spool of thread, out of which she wove the material that made warm clothes for the members of her household. The likeness between oil and the name of the Bridegroom is beyond doubt, the Holy Spirit's comparison of the two is no arbitrary gesture. Unless you can persuade me otherwise, I hold that the likeness is to be found in the threefold property of oil: it gives light, it nourishes, it anoints. It feeds the flame, it nourishes the body, it relieves pain: it is light, food, medicine. And is not this true too of the Bridegroom's name? When preached it gives light, when meditated it nourishes, when invoked it relieves and soothes. Let us consider each point.

6. How shall we explain the world-wide light of faith, swift and flaming in its progress, except by the preaching of Jesus' name? Is it not by the light of this name that God has called us into his wonderful light, that irradiates our darkness and empowers us to see the light? To such as we Paul says: "You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord." This is the name that Paul was commanded to present before kings and pagans and the people of Israel; a name that illumined his native land as he carried it with him like a torch, preaching on all his journeys that the night is almost over, it will be daylight soon -- let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light. Let us live decently as people do in the day-time. To every eye he was a lamp on its lamp-stand; to every place he brought the good news of Jesus, and him crucified. What a splendor radiated from that light, dazzling the eyes of the crowd, when Peter uttered the name that strengthened the feet and ankles of the cripple, and gave light to many eyes that were spiritually blind! Did not the words shoot like a flame when he said: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk"? But the name of Jesus is more than light, it is also food. Do you not feel increase of strength as often as you remember it? What other name can so enrich the man who meditates? What can equal its power to refresh the harassed senses, to buttress the virtues, to add vigor to good and upright habits, to foster chaste affections? Every food of the mind is dry if it is not dipped in that oil; it is tasteless if not seasoned by that salt. Write what you will, I shall not relish it unless it tells of Jesus. Talk or argue about what you will, I shall not relish it if you exclude the name of Jesus. Jesus to me is honey in the mouth, music in the ear, a song in the heart.

6....continued

Again, it is a medicine. Does one of us feel sad? Let the name of Jesus come into his heart, from there let it spring to his mouth, so that shining like the dawn it may dispel all darkness and make a cloudless sky. Does someone fall into sin? Does his despair even urge him to suicide? Let him but invoke this life-giving name and his will to live will be at once renewed. The hardness of heart that is our common experience, the apathy bred of indolence, bitterness of mind, repugnance for the things of the spirit -- have they ever failed to yield in presence of that saving name? The tears damned up by the barrier of our pride -- how have they not burst forth again with sweeter abundance at the thought of Jesus' name? And where is the man, who, terrified and trembling before impending peril, has not been suddenly filled with courage and rid of fear by calling on the strength of that name? Where is the man who, tossed on the rolling seas of doubt, did not quickly find certitude by recourse to the clarity of Jesus' name? Was ever a man so discouraged, so beaten down by afflictions, to whom the sound of this name did not bring new resolve? In short, for all the ills and disorders to which flesh is heir, this name is medicine. For proof we have no less than his own promise: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." Nothing so curbs the onset of anger, so allays the upsurge of pride. It cures the wound of envy, controls unbridled extravagance and quenches the flame of lust; it cools the thirst of covetousness and banishes the itch of unclean desire. For when I name Jesus I set before me a man who is meek and humble of heart, kind, prudent, chaste, merciful, flawlessly upright and holy in the eyes of all; and this same man is the all-powerful God whose way of life heals me, whose support is my strength. All these re-echo for me at the hearing of Jesus' name. Because he is man I strive to imitate him; because of his divine power I lean upon him. The examples of his human life I gather like medicinal herbs; with the aid of his power I blend them, and the result is a compound like no pharmacist can produce.