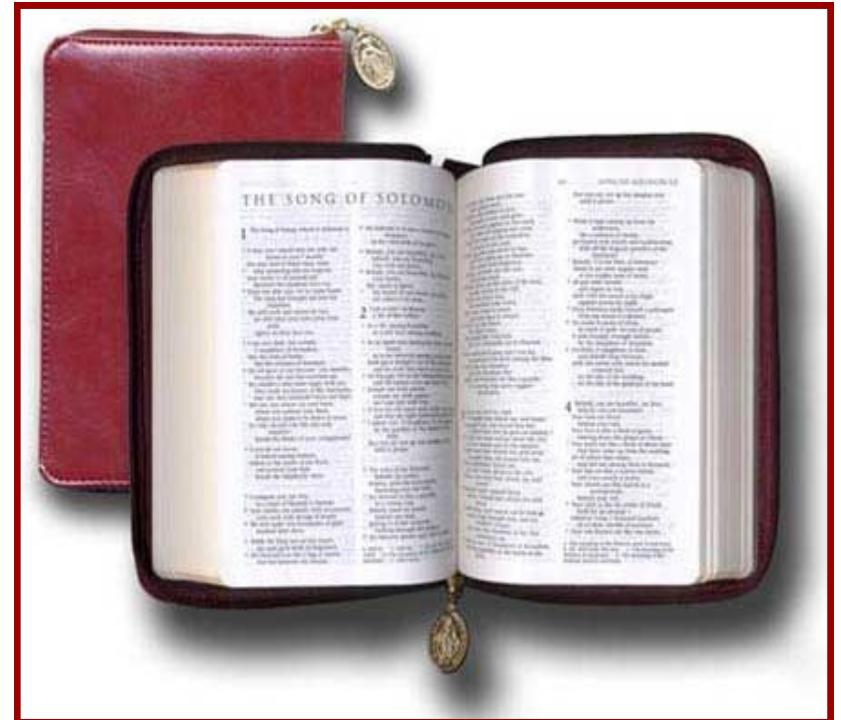




SONG OF SONGS—57

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***HIS PRESENCE
AND
HIS ABSENCE***

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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.

His Presence and His Absence

Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattices. As the words stand, they seem to say that he who was seen coming by leaps and bounds has arrived at the Bride's dwelling and, standing behind the wall, peeps inquisitively through the windows and chinks, because he is too modest to presume to enter. According to the spiritual meaning, however, he is understood to have drawn near, but in a different way, as it befits the heavenly Bridegroom to behave and the Holy Spirit to describe it. A true spiritual understanding will not condone what ill becomes either the one who acts or the one who describes the action. He drew near the wall, therefore, when he joined himself to our flesh. Our flesh is the wall, and the Bridegroom's approach is the incarnation of the Word. The windows and lattices through which he is said to gaze can be understood, I think, as the bodily senses and human feelings by which he began to experience all our human needs. For 'he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows'. On being made man, therefore, he has used our bodily feelings and senses as openings or windows, so that he would know by experience the miseries of men and might become merciful. These were things he already knew but in a different way. As Lord of the virtues he knew the virtue of obedience, and yet the apostle bears witness that 'he learned obedience through what he suffered'. By this means he also learned mercy, although the mercy of the Lord is from eternity. This same teacher of the Gentiles teaches this again when he states that He was tempted in all things as we are without sin, in order to become merciful. Do you see him becoming what he [already] was, and learning what he [already] knew, seeking in our midst openings and windows by which to search more attentively into our misfortunes? He found as many openings in our tumbling down and fissured wall as he experienced proofs of our weakness and corruption in his own body.

'He learned obedience through what He suffered'.

Scripture says:

'It is our sins that raise a barrier between us and God.'

7. But there is one thing you must attend to with total vigilance: that you always open the windows and lattices of your confessions. Through them his kindly gaze may penetrate to your inward life, because his discerning is your learning. They say that lattices are narrow windows, similar to what writers of books provide for themselves to direct light on to the page. I think this is why those whose work is the drawing up of official documents are called chancellors. Since therefore there are two kinds of compunction—the one in sorrow for our deviations, the other in rejoicing for God's gifts—as often as I make that confession of my sins which is always accompanied by anguish of heart, I seem to open for myself a lattice or narrow window. Nor do I doubt that the devoted examiner who stands behind the wall looks through it with pleasure, because God will not despise a humble and contrite heart. One is even exhorted to do this: confess your iniquities that you may be made righteous. But if at times, when the heart expands in love at the thought of God's graciousness and mercy, it is all right to surrender our mind, to let it go in songs of praise and gratitude, I feel that I have opened up to the Bridegroom who stands behind the wall not a narrow lattice but a wide-open window. Through it, unless I am mistaken, he will look in with greater pleasure the more he is honored by the sacrifice of praise. I can easily show from Scripture that he approves of both these confessions; but I am speaking to those who are aware of this, and I must not burden with superfluities men whose time scarce suffices to pursue the essentials: the great mysteries of this love-song and the praises it proclaims to the Church and her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 57

2. This then is how the Bridegroom stands behind the wall and looks through the windows and lattices. 'Stands' is the right word, because he alone who never experienced the sin of the flesh, truly stood in the flesh. This we can duly discern, because he who sank down through the weakness of the flesh stood erect by the power of divinity, as he said himself: 'The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak.' I think too that this interpretation is supported by what David said of Christ with regard to this mystery; for he prophesied as the Lord's prophet, and though speaking of Moses was contemplating Christ. For [Christ] is the true Moses who came indeed by water, though 'not by water only but by water and blood'. Hence the aforementioned prophet says, referring to God the Father: 'He said he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen one stood in the breach before his gaze, to turn away his wrath lest He destroy them.' How, I ask, did Moses stand in the breach? How, I repeat, could he stand if he were broken down or, if he stood, how could he have been broken down?' But I'll let you see, if you wish, who really stood in the breach. I know of no one else who could achieve this except my Lord Jesus, who certainly lived in death, who while broken in body on the cross stood erect with the Father in his divinity: petitioning with us in the one, appeasing the Father in the other. His standing behind the wall then means that his prostrate weakness was revealed in the flesh, while that which stood erect in him was hidden by the flesh: the man revealed and the hidden God are one and the same.

3. And for each one of us who desire his coming he also stands behind the wall as long as this body of ours, which is certainly sinful, hides his face from us and shuts out his presence. For 'so long as we are in this body we are exiles from the Lord'. Not because we are embodied, but because we are in this body which has a sinful lineage, and is never without sin. So you may know that it is not our bodies but our sins that stand in the way, listen to what Scripture says: 'it is our sins that raise a barrier between us and God.' How I wish that the body's wall were the only obstacle, that I should suffer only that single barrier of fleshly sin and not the many fences of vice that intervene! I am afraid that through my own weakness I have added a host of sins to that which my nature inherits, and by them I set the Bridegroom at too great a distance from me, so that if I am to speak the truth I must confess that to me he stands not behind a wall but behind walls.

4. Let me say it more plainly. Through the immediacy of his divine majesty and the greatness of his power the Bridegroom is present, equally and without distinction, in every place. But with regard to rational creatures, angels and men, he is said to be near to some and far from others by holding out or withholding grace. For 'salvation is far from the wicked'. And yet the holy man says: 'why do you stand so far off, Lord?' Indeed he sometimes, by a loving arrangement, withdraws far from his saints for a time, not entirely but in part. From sinners, however, he is always very far removed, and that in anger, not in mercy. Of them it is said: 'Their pride rises up continually'; and again: 'his ways are filthy at all times.' Hence the holy man prays to the Lord and says: 'Turn not away in anger from your servant,' knowing that he can also turn away in mercy. And so the Lord is close to his saints and chosen ones even when he seems far away, though not at an equal distance from all, but farther from some, less far from others according to their varying merits. Although the Lord is near to all who call upon him in truth, and though he is near to the brokenhearted, he is not perhaps so close to all that they can say he stands behind the wall. Yet how close he is to the bride who is separated by one wall only! On this account she longs that the dividing wall be broken down, that she may die and be with him who, she trusts, is behind the wall.

5. But I, because I am a sinful man, I have no wish to be dissolved. Instead I am afraid, knowing that the death of the wicked is very evil. How can death not be very evil where Life brings no help? I am afraid to go forth. I tremble at the very entrance of the haven, because I have no assurance that he is standing by to receive me at my exit. And why? Do I go forth securely if the Lord does not guard my going forth? Alas! Unless he who redeems and saves is standing by I shall be the laughing-stock of the devils who intercept me. Nothing like this troubled the soul of Paul, whom one wall only separated from the vision and embrace of his beloved, that is, the law of sin that he discovered in his members. This is that sensuality of the body that he could not possibly avoid while living on earth. But despite the obtrusion of this wall he did not wander far from the Lord. Therefore he cried out longingly: 'who will deliver me from this body of death?' He knew that by the short passage of death he would at once attain life. So Paul averred that he was in bonds to this one law, sensual desire, which he unwillingly endured because it was rooted in his flesh. As for the rest he could say: 'I am not aware of anything against myself.'

6. But is there anyone like Paul, anyone who does not consent at times to this sensual desire and so submits to sin? Let him who yields to sin take note that he has raised another wall against himself by that wicked and unlawful consent. A man of this kind cannot boast that for him the Bridegroom stands behind the wall, because not one wall but walls now intervene. Much less still if the consent has passed into action, for then a third wall, the sinful act itself, wards off and bars the Bridegroom's approach. But what if the repetition of sins becomes a habit, or the habit induces contempt, as Scripture says: 'When wickedness comes, contempt comes also'? If you die like this, will you not be devoured a thousand times by those that roar as they await their food, before you can reach the Bridegroom now shut off from you not merely by one, but by a succession of walls? The first is sensual desire; the second, consent; the third, the action; the fourth, habit; the fifth, contempt. Take care then to resist with all your strength the first movements of sensual desire lest they lure you to consent, and then the whole fabric of wickedness will vanish. Then there will be but the wall of the body to hinder the Bridegroom's approach to you, so that you may proclaim with gladness: 'behold, there he stands behind our wall.'