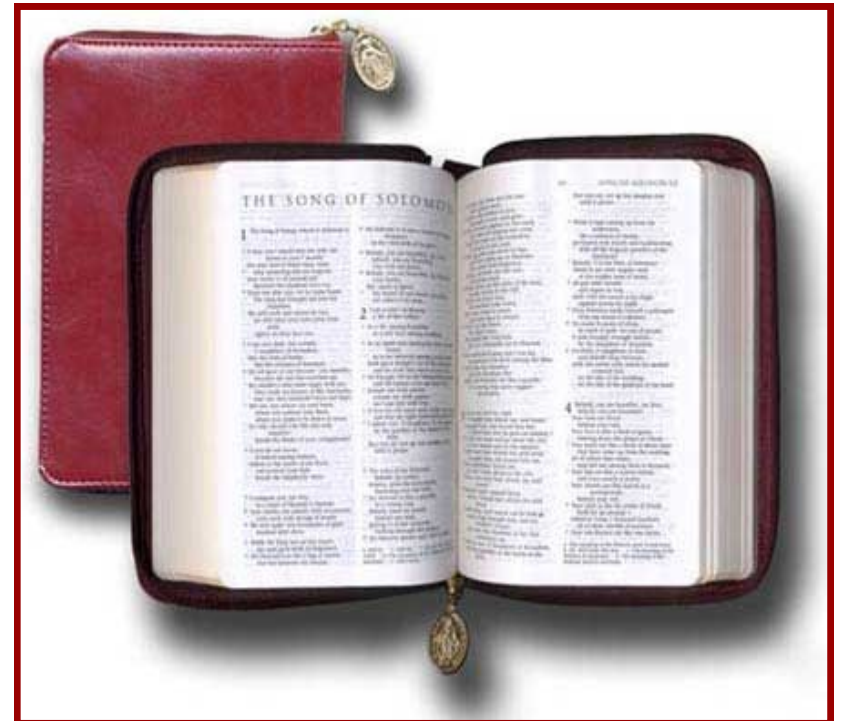




SONG OF SONGS—74

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***WHY THE BRIDE SAYS
'RETURN'***

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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.

Why the Bride Says 'Return'

“RETURN, MY BELOVED, like a roe or a fawn.” What? He has only just gone and yet you call him back? What has happened in so short a time? Have you forgotten anything? Yes, the Bride has forgotten everything but him, even her own self. Indeed, although she has not lost her reason, she seems now to be unsound in reason; no longer do we see that serenity she usually possesses. It is the violence of her love which brings this about. It is this which overcomes her and conquers all reserve, all consideration of fitness or caution, causing her to disregard all soberness and propriety. For see how she implores him to return, although he is only just leaving her! She even begs him to hasten, to run swiftly like a wild creature of the woods, such as a roe or a fawn. This is the meaning of the words, and it is the portion of the Jews.

9. So much have we said with regard to the name and likeness which the Bride in her utterance applies to the Bridegroom, without loss to his dignity. Why do I say 'without loss to his dignity,' when not even his weakness has remained without honor? He is a fawn, a little child. He is compared to a fawn, being born of a woman, yet 'on the mountains of Bethel,' yet exalted above the heavens. It does not say 'who exists' or 'who dwells' above the heavens, but 'exalted above the heavens,' so that no-one might suppose it was said about the nature in which 'he is that which he is.' And when he is ranked above the angels, it is not said that his life or existence is better than theirs but that he was made better than they. From this it would appear that not only is his being from all eternity but that even when he was made in time he is exalted above all principalities and powers, above every creature, the firstborn of every creature. So it is that 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and his weakness stronger than men.' The Apostle says this, and I do not think it would be wrong to say that this foolishness and weakness of God should be ranked before the wisdom and power of the angels. So this passage may fitly be applied to the whole Church.

10. Now as far as it applies as well to the individual soul - even one soul, if it loves God dearly, wisely, and ardently, is the Bride - each spiritual man can ponder how this corresponds to his own experience. Yet I myself am not afraid to speak aloud about what has been granted me to experience. Even though it may perhaps seem base and despicable when heard about, this does not bother me, because no one who is spiritual will despise or misunderstand me. Yet if I hold over some part of this for another sermon, perhaps there will not be lacking those who may profit by what the Lord, in answer to my prayer, will inspire me with. For he is the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

7. But if anyone thinks that this should be understood instead in the sense that the roe should leap over the wicked and fix upon the good, I do not dissent, as long as it is understood that the leaps have been made to judge between the good and the wicked. For if I remember rightly that was what I said in a previous discourse when the same subject was under discussion. But there the roe is said to leap over according to the dispensation of grace which in this life is given to some and not to others, according to the just but hidden judgment of God; but here it refers to the final and varying recompense of merits. And perhaps the end of the passage, which I had almost forgotten, may support this, for when he says, 'Be like a roe, my beloved, and a hart of the flock,' he adds, 'on the mountains of Bethel.' Now in the house of God, which is what Bethel means, there are no evil mountains. Therefore the roe leaps on them; he does not crush them, but makes them glad, so that the Scripture may be fulfilled when it says, 'The mountains and hills will sing praises before God.' Indeed there are mountains which, according to the Gospel, may be removed by a faith no bigger than a mustard seed, but these are not the mountains of Bethel. For the mountains of Bethel are not removed, but tended by faith.

8. If the principalities and powers, and other companies of blessed spirits and heavenly virtues are the mountains of Bethel, we must understand when it is said of them, 'Her foundations are in the holy hills,' that this roe is not common or to be despised, as it seemed to appear on such exalted mountains, having been made so much better than the angels and having obtained by inheritance a name which is above theirs. Now why do we read in the Psalm that he is a little lower than the angels? The fact that he is lower does not mean that he is not better, and the Apostle and the Prophet do not contradict each other, since they have received the same spirit. For if he was made lower by condescension and not by necessity, this does not lessen his goodness but rather increases it. Indeed the prophet says that he is lower than the angels, not lesser, thus extolling his grace and removing any suggestion of injustice. His nature precludes him being less, and the cause of him being lower gives the reason for it, for he was made lower because he himself wished it; he was made lower by his own wish and by our need. To be thus abased was to be merciful. What loss is there in this? Indeed, what seems to detract from his majesty increases his mercy and pity. The Apostle has not passed over in silence this great mystery of his great mercy, but says, 'We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor.'

2. Now I will examine the inner meaning, the inspiration hidden in the deep springs of the sacred writing, as I have received it from the Lord. This is my part, as I believe in Christ. How can I extract the sweet and wholesome spiritual feast from the barren and tasteless letter as I do grain from the ear, a nut from its shell, and marrow from the bone? For the word itself I will have nothing to do with; its taste brings the savor of the flesh, and to swallow it brings death, but its hidden meaning is of the Holy Spirit. 'The Spirit utters mysteries,' as the Apostle declares, but Israel takes the veil covering the mystery for the mystery itself. Why is this, except because there is a veil still over her heart? Hers therefore is the sound of the words, but the meaning is mine; to her the letter brings death, to me the spirit gives life. For it is the spirit which gives life, since he gives understanding; and is not understanding life? 'Give me understanding, and I shall live,' says the prophet to the Lord. Understanding does not remain outside, nor does it cling to the surface, nor run its finger over the exterior, like a blind man, but it explores the depths and often raises precious stores of truth, bringing them away with great eagerness; and says to God with the prophet, 'I will rejoice at your words like a man who finds great treasure.' So indeed the kingdom of truth suffers violence, and the violent take it by storm. The elder brother who returned from the field is the type of that old earthly-minded race who are taught to labor for an earthly heritage, and worn with care groan with furrowed brow under the heavy yoke of the law, bearing the burden and heat of the day. He it is, I say, who even now stands outside because he has no understanding, and refuses to enter the house of feasting, even when invited by his father; so he still defrauds himself of his share in the music and the dancing, and the fatted calf. Unhappy man, refusing to find out how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live in unity! This must be said to show the difference between the character of the Church and of the synagogue, so the blindness of the one may be distinguished from the insight of the other, and the blessedness of the one may stand in clear contrast to the unhappy foolishness of the other.

3. But now let us examine the words of the Bride, and so try to express the pure affection of her holy love that no cause of dispute may be left in the sacred writing, nor may there appear to be anything at all unworthy or unseemly. If we consider the hour when the Lord, the Bridegroom, passed from this world to his Father, and how this must have touched the heart of his household the Church, his newly-wedded Bride, when she saw herself deserted, like a widow bereft of her only hope - I mean the Apostle who had left everything to follow him and had remained with him in his trials - if, I say, we consider these things, I think we shall not find it amazing or odd that she is so inconsolable at his departure and so anxious for his return, when she is thus afflicted and forsaken. In her love and her need, then, she had a twofold reason for entreating the beloved, since he could not be persuaded from leaving her and ascending where he was before, at least to hasten to return as he had promised. When she begs and beseeches him to be like those wild beasts who have considerable speed in running, she shows how great is her soul's longing; for her no haste is sufficient. Is not this what she asks for every day, when she says in her prayer 'Thy kingdom come'?

4. But I think that she is pointing to the meaning of weakness no less than of speed, and of the sex of the roe and the age of the fawn. So it seems to me that she desires that even when he comes with power to judge, he should not appear to us in the form of God but in that form wherein he was born as a little child, and born of a woman, one of the weaker sex. Why is this? It is that on two grounds he should be implored to be merciful to the weak in the day of wrath and should remember on the day of judgment to put mercy before judgment. For if he marks what is done amiss, even by the elect, who can abide it? In his sight the stars are not clean, and even in the angels he finds corruption. Hear then what the elect and holy one says to God: 'You forgave the wickedness of my sin; therefore everyone who is holy shall pray to you in due time.' Therefore even the saints have need to ask pardon for their sins, that they may be saved by mercy, not trusting in their own righteousness. For all have sinned, and all need mercy. It is therefore so that he may remember mercy when he is angry that he is begged to appear in the likeness of mercy; for the Apostle says of him: 'Being found in the likeness of a man.'

5. And indeed it must be so. For if even with this tempering his equity in judgment is so great, his severity as judge so terrible, so lofty his majesty, so changed the appearance of all things, that according to the prophet the day of his coming cannot be imagined, what would happen if he - and it is Almighty God I speak of - if he came as a consuming fire, in the power of his Godhead, in his might and purity, like the wind teasing a leaf, to blow away the dry stubble? He is also man. And the prophet says, 'Who shall look upon him? Who shall stand at his appearing?' How much less could any man bear the sight of God if he manifested himself without his humanity, unapproachable in the brightness of his glory, inaccessible in the loftiness of his majesty, incomprehensible in his mighty power? But now, when his wrath is kindled but a little, how graceful is the sight of his gentle human face to the sons of grace, strengthening their faith, fortifying their hope, and giving vigor to their confidence, because his grace and mercy is with his saints, and he has regard for his chosen ones. Indeed God the Father has given the power of judgement to his Son, not because he is his Son, but because he is the son of man. O truly father of mercies! He is willing that men should be judged by a man, so that in spite of all their terror and apprehension of evil, his chosen should find confidence in his humanity. Holy David foretold this in his prayer and prophecy, saying, 'Give the king your judgments, O God, and your righteousness to the king's son.' So also was the promise given by the angels when they spoke to the apostles after the Ascension: 'This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come in the same manner as you have seen him going into heaven' - that is, in the very form and substance of his body.

6. From all this it is clear that the Bride has divine counsel within her, and has insight into the mystery of the divine will, for she proclaims in the spirit of prophecy and the disposition of prayer that he who has chosen a weaker nature, or rather a lower (for it will not now be weak), shall be set on high to judge, and shall shake heaven and earth in his might, being girded with power against the foolish, but he will show himself tender and compassionate and altogether gentle to his elect. This too may be added: that to discern one from the other he will need the agility of the roe and the sharp sight of the hart, and to discern in so great a confusion and so large a crowd whom he should fix upon and whom leap over, so that he may not crush the righteous instead of the wicked, when in his wrath he treads the heathen underfoot.

As to the wicked, there must be fulfilled the prophecy of David, or rather the word of God speaking by his mouth: for 'I will beat them like dust before the face of the wind, like mud in the streets I will destroy them.' Similarly another saying which he spoke by another prophet should be recognized as fulfilled, when he returns and says to the angels, 'I have trampled them in my wrath, and trodden them underfoot in my displeasure.'