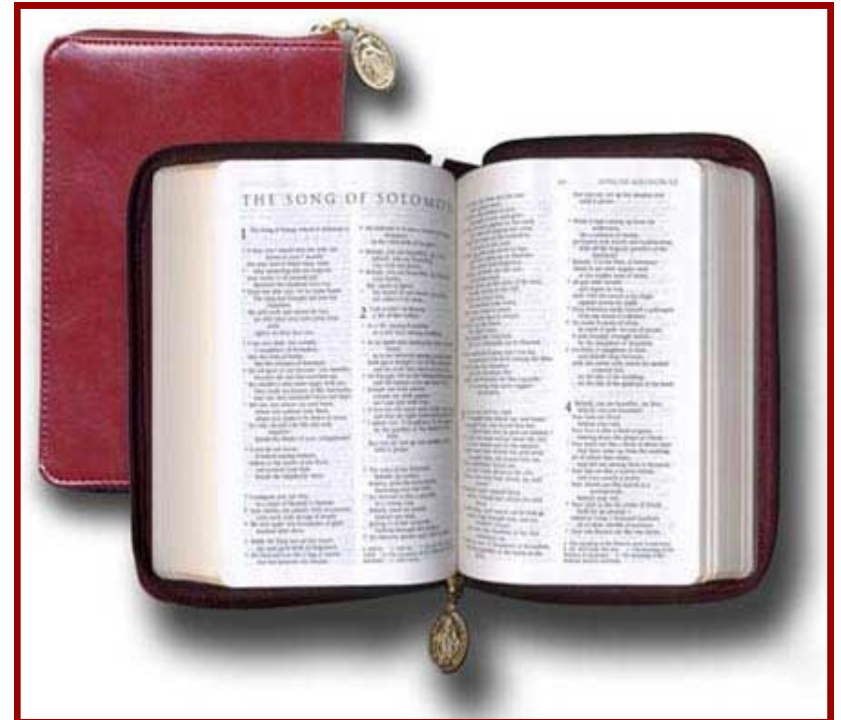




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SONG OF SONGS—20

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE LOVES
OF
THE ANGELS***

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 Loves of the Angels

The love-inspired bride will go on speaking, will chatter without end about her Bridegroom's excellence; and in order to entice more favors from him she shows that the ones already received have not been fruitless. To the words that have so long preoccupied us she adds: "That is why the maidens love you beyond measure." In effect she means: "It was not in vain, not without purpose, that you emptied out the power of your name, O Beloved, and poured it on my breasts; that is why the maidens love you so much." But why exactly? Because of the outpouring of your name, because of the breasts it has suffused. It is this that aroused their love of the Bridegroom, this that inspired their affections. No sooner had the bride received the infused gift than they, who could never stay far from their mother's side, at once perceived its fragrance. Filled with its sweetness they proclaim: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." The bride commends their devotedness: "This, O Beloved," she says, "is the fruit of the outpouring of your name, it is why the maidens love you. They perceive the outpouring of something that surpasses their capacity to absorb in its entirety; and so they give you their love." Thus, as far as the maidens are concerned, the outpouring makes your name knowable, knowledge makes it lovable. Those whose capacity is greater enjoy the name in its fullness without the need for an outpouring.

7...continued

For when he had stayed behind in Jerusalem and explained that he must be busy with his Father's affairs, yet because his parents would not concur with him he did not disdain to follow them to Nazareth; and so we have the Master obeying his disciples, God obeying men, God's Word and Wisdom obeying a carpenter and his wife. And what is the comment of Sacred Scripture? It says: "He was subject to them." How long will you be wise in your own eyes? God entrusts himself to mortals and obeys them, and will you still walk in your own ways? You received the good spirit, but you have not used it well. What I now fear is that you may receive another in its stead that, under the appearance of good, will cause you to fall, and you who began in the spirit will end in the flesh. Do you forget that Satan often transforms himself into an angel of light? God is Wisdom, and he wills to be loved not only sweetly but wisely; as St Paul says: "Let your service be one that is worthy of thinking beings." For if you neglect knowledge, the spirit of error will lead you astray effortlessly by means of your own zeal. The cunning enemy has no more effective stratagem for robbing the heart of love than to induce a man to indulge it rashly and unreasonably. Hence I intend to provide you with certain rules of conduct whose observance should benefit those who love God. But the time has come to end this sermon, so tomorrow, if God gives me life and the leisure to speak to you, I shall attempt to explain those things which we have yet to consider. For then, refreshed by the night's rest, and, most important of all, having prayed, we shall assemble with greater eagerness, as is right, for a sermon on love, by the favor of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to whom be honor and glory for evermore. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS —20

6. God, therefore, is loved by the angels on account of the supreme rectitude of his judgments; by the archangels for the flawless ordering of his plans; by the Virtues for the overwhelming benignity revealed in his working of miracles by which he most aptly attracts unbelievers to the faith; by the Powers because of the efficacy of that righteous power by which he repels and wards off the persecutions fomented by the evil against the good; by the Principalities for that eternal power that is the source whence every creature, high and low, spiritual and corporeal, takes the principle of its being and existence. It deploys its strength from one end of the earth to the other. The Dominations love him because of the inimitable serenity of his will, for although he controls all things by the strength of his arm, a greater power is revealed in the imperturbable tranquility, the innate gentleness by which he sweetly orders all things. The Thrones are drawn to him by the good-will with which he ungrudgingly communicates the light of his wisdom and the anointing by which he freely teaches everything. The Cherubim are moved to love because the Lord is a God of knowledge; he knows what each one needs in order to be saved, and distributes with judicious providence the gifts that he sees to be advantageous to those who ask with proper dispositions: And finally the Seraphim love him because he is love, hates nothing that he has made, and desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

7. All these, as we see, love God according to their particular modes of understanding. But the maidens have less understanding and therefore less knowledge. They are not well equipped to penetrate sublime truths. Still infants in Christ, they must be fed with milk and oil. The source of their ability to love is in the breasts of the spouse. The odor of the spouse's outpoured oil rouses them to taste and experience how sweet the Lord is. And when she perceives the ardor of their love, she turns to the Bridegroom and says: "Your name is oil poured out, therefore the maidens love you beyond measure." What does she mean by "beyond measure"? Greatly, vehemently, ardently. Shall I say that this spiritual doctrine may be indirectly applied to those of you who have recently arrived, as a reproof of that indiscreet zeal or rather that incredibly obstinate intemperance which we have repeatedly attempted to restrain? You have no desire to be content with the common life. The regular fast is not enough for you, nor the solemn vigils, nor the rules of the house, nor the amount of food and clothing we have allotted to you. You want to have your own private ways rather than share what is common. In the beginning you entrusted yourselves to our care, why do you take charge of yourselves again? For now you have again for master not me but that self-will by which, on the testimony of your own consciences, you have so often offended God. It is that which urges you not to show pity for nature's needs, not to yield to reason, not to respect the advice or example of the seniors, not to obey us. Are you unaware that obedience is better than sacrifice? Have you not read in your Rule that what is done without the permission of the spiritual father shall be ascribed to presumption and vainglory and not reckoned meritorious? Have you not read in the Gospel the example of obedience given by the boy Jesus as a way to holiness for young people?

2. The angels, looking with undeviating gaze into the profound abyss of the divine judgments, are filled with inexpressible joy at the sight of their supreme righteousness; it is their glory that, through their ministry, these judgments are put into operation and made known to men. For this reason they so rightly love the Lord Christ. Scripture says: "The truth is they are all spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation. And the archangels -- whom we must regard as differing in some degree from those called angels -- experience a delight that is filled with awe as they enter more closely into the counsels of eternal wisdom, and are commissioned to execute them with supreme skill at the proper place and time. Here you have the reason why these in turn love the Lord Christ. Other blessed spirits are named Virtues because their God-given vocation is to explore and admire with a happy curiosity the hidden and eternal causes of signs and wonders, signs that they display throughout the earth whenever they please by the powerful manipulation of the elements. As a consequence, these naturally burn with love for the Lord of Hosts, for Christ, the power of God. For it is an occupation full of sweetness and grace to contemplate the obscure mysteries of wisdom in Wisdom itself, a source of the greatest honor and glory that the effects produced by causes hidden in the Word of God should be revealed for the world's admiration by their ministry.

3. Yet other spirits are named Powers. While these find their happiness in contemplating and praising the divine omnipotence of our crucified Lord that extends so effectively into every place, they are also gifted with the power to overthrow and subdue the hostile power of demons and men in defense of those who will be the heirs of salvation. And surely these have a perfect reason for loving the Lord Jesus? Above them are the Principalities, who, contemplating him from their higher vantage point, clearly perceive that he is the source whence all things spring, the first-born of all creation. So great is the princely dignity with which they are endowed that nothing on earth is outside their dominion; and from their exalted seat of power they change and regulate at will the fall of kingdoms and governments and officials of any rank. According to individual merits they place those who are first in the last place and the last first; they pull down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the lowly. This is the source of their incentive to love. Then come the Dominations, who also love the Lord. And the reason? With a presumption meriting only praise they probe more piercingly and sublimely into the limitless and insuperable lordship of Christ, whose presence and power reach everywhere throughout the universe. With a planned excellence, he bends all things from the highest to the lowest to the sway of his supremely upright will: the succession of the seasons, the movement of bodies, the propensities of the mind. He exercises this control with so provident a care that not one of these phenomena suffers the minutest failure in its functioning, not even by an iota; and he does it with an effort so facile that he feels not the least disquietude or misgiving. Fascinated by the flawless tranquility with which the Lord of hosts governs the universe, they are caught up in a wondrous ecstasy of contemplation that is utterly delightful, utterly intense; and, consciously transported into the mighty ocean of God's splendor, they find themselves in a secret haven so serenely calm, so completely and securely peaceful, that while they recline there at ease the other angelic hosts, out of reverence for their prerogative of unimpeachable dominance, perform official services on their behalf.

4. Next come the Thrones, who are the seat of God. These spirits have a more just cause and more abundant reasons for loving than all the others we have mentioned. For when you enter the king's palace do you not see that though there are footstools, chairs and armchairs in every room, the king's throne is on a higher level? You do not have to ask where the king usually sits; you notice at once the seat that is more ornate and more elevated than the rest. And so you must understand that the adorned beauty of these spirits surpasses that of all the others, for upon them by a special and stupendous act of graciousness, the God of majesty has chosen to take his seat. If a seated posture symbolizes the teaching office, one may presume that Christ, the Wisdom of God, our unique teacher in heaven and on earth, although reaching everywhere because of his spiritual power, yet imparts a special light to these in particular on whom he is enthroned, and from this august rostrum teaches knowledge to angels and to men. The angels receive knowledge of God's judgments, the archangels of his counsels. The Virtues discover the time, place and nature of the signs they are to perform; and all, whether Powers or Principalities or Dominations, learn the extent of their official duties, the privileges of their exalted rank and a caution to which all must pay heed, not to abuse the power they have received for the sake of their own glory or convenience.

5. Then there are those multitudes of spirits called Cherubim. If we understand them in terms of their title, it seems to me that they possess nothing received from or by means of the others; for they are free to drink their fill from the very fountainhead, under the benign patronage of the Lord Jesus himself, who leads them on to the very fullness of truth and eagerly unfolds before their gaze the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hoarded in the depths of his being. Neither do the spirits we call Seraphim depend on them for anything, for God, who is love, has so drawn and assimilated them to himself, so filled them with the ardor of affection that burns in himself, that they seem to be one spirit with God, just as fire that flames into the air imparts its own heat and color to it and the enkindled air becomes part of the very fire. The Cherubim's bent is to contemplate God's infinite knowledge, the Seraphim adhere to the love that never ends. Hence they derive their names from that occupation in which each is preeminent: the name Cherub denotes one filled with knowledge, the name Seraph one inflamed with or inciting to love.