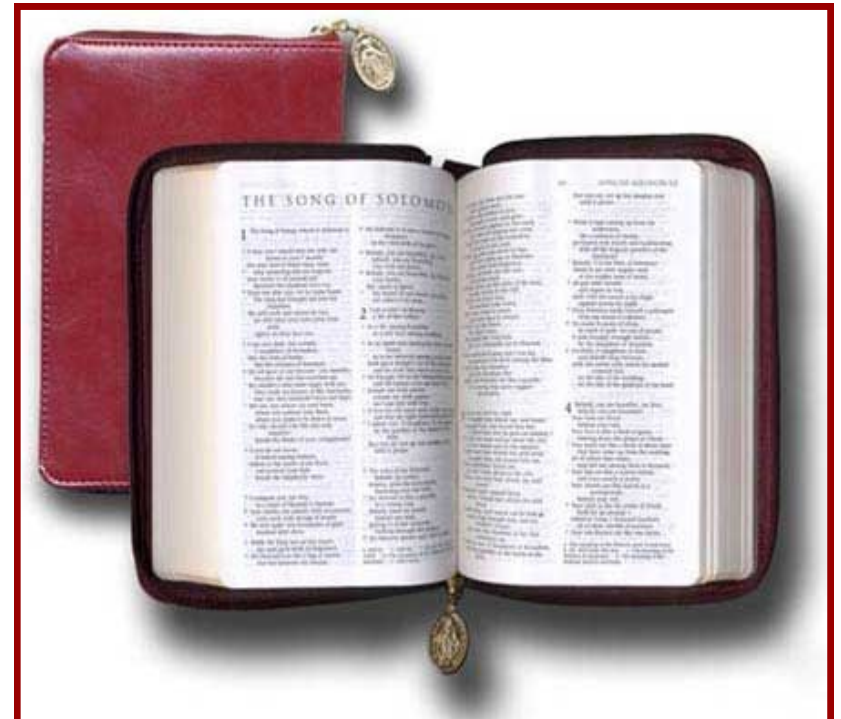




SONG OF SONGS—85

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***HOW THE SOUL IS AWAKENED
AND THE WILL INSPIRED
TO SEEK GOD***

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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.

How the Soul is Awakened and the Will Inspired to Seek God

“Nightlong in my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves.” It is a great good to seek God; in my opinion the soul knows no greater blessing. It is the first of its gifts and the final stage in its progress. It is inferior to none, and it yields place to none. What could be superior to it, when nothing has a higher place? What could claim a higher place, when it is the consummation of all things? What virtue can be attributed to anyone who does not seek God? What boundary can be set for anyone who does seek him? The psalmist says: ‘Seek his face always.’ Nor, I think, will a soul cease to seek him even when it has found him. It is not with steps of the feet that God is sought but with the heart's desire; and when the soul happily finds him its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil poured upon the flames. So it is. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of this eagerness to see God as not caused by his absence, for he is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present.

Paul says:

‘The will is in me, but I have no power to perform it.’

7. Brothers, to realize this is to be taught by the Word; to be convinced of it is to be found. But not everyone can receive this word. What shall we do for our little ones, those among us who are beginners -- not foolish, since they have the beginning of wisdom and are subject to one another in the fear of Christ? How can we make them believe that it is the Bridegroom who deals thus with them, when they themselves cannot yet perceive what is happening to them? But I send them to one whom they should not disbelieve. Let them read in the book what they do not see in the heart of another, and therefore do not believe. It is written in the prophets, 'If a man puts away his wife and she goes away and takes another husband, will he return to her? Will that woman not be dishonored and disgraced? But you have committed fornication with many lovers; yet return to me, says the Lord, and I will take you back. These are the words of the Lord; you cannot refuse to believe them. What they do not know from experience, let them believe, so that one day, by virtue of their faith, they may reap the harvest of experience.

I think enough has been explained of what is meant by being sought by the Word, and that this is necessary, not for the Word but for the soul. We must however add that the soul which knows this by experience has fuller and more blessed knowledge. It remains for me to show in my next sermon how thirsty souls seek him by whom they are sought; or rather we should learn it from the one who is mentioned in this passage as seeking him whom her soul loves, the Bridegroom of the soul, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 85

2. Now see why I have begun in this way. Surely so that every soul among you who is seeking God may know that she has been forestalled, and that she was found before she was sought. This will avoid distorting her greatest good into a great evil; for this is what we do when we receive favors from God and treat his gifts as though they were ours by right, and do not give glory to God. Thus those who appear great because of the favors they have received are accounted as little before God because they have not given him thanks. But I am understating the case. The words I have used, 'great' and 'little', are inadequate to express my meaning, and confuse the issue. I will make myself clear. I should have said 'good' and 'evil'. For if a man who is very good takes the credit for his goodness he becomes correspondingly evil. For this is a very evil thing. If anyone says 'Far be it from me! I know that it is by the grace of God I am what I am,' and then is careful to take a little of the glory for the favor he has received, is he not a thief and a robber? Such a man will hear these words: 'Out of your own mouth I judge you, wicked servant.' What is more wicked than for a servant to usurp the glory due his master?

3. 'In my little bed nightlong I sought him whom my soul loves'. The soul seeks the Word, but has been first sought by the Word. Otherwise when she had gone away from the Word, or been cast out, she would not turn back to look upon the good she had left unless she were sought by the Word. For if a soul is left to herself she is like a wandering spirit which does not return. Listen to someone who was a fugitive and a wanderer: 'I have gone astray as a sheep that was lost. O seek your servant.' O man, do you want to return? But if it is a matter of will, why do you ask for help? Why do you beg elsewhere for what you have within yourself in abundance? Clearly because one wills it, but cannot do it, and this is a spirit which wanders and does not return. He who has not the will is yet further away; if a soul desires to return and asks to be sought, I would not say that it was entirely dishonored and abandoned. Whence does it obtain this desire? If I am not mistaken, it is the result of the soul being already sought and visited, and that seeking has not been fruitless, because it has activated the will, without which there could be no return. But the soul is so feeble, and the return so difficult, that it is not enough to be sought only once. The soul may have the will, but the will cannot act unless it has some supporting power. Paul says, 'The will is in me, but I have no power to perform it.' We quoted the psalmist; what does he go on to ask? Simply to be sought. He would not ask this if he had not already been sought. He also prays, 'O seek your servant'; that is asking that the God who had given him the will might also give him the power to perform it, at his good will.

4. I do not think, however, that this passage can refer to such a soul, which has not yet received the next grace; it desires to approach him 'whom her soul loves', but is powerless to do so. How can you apply to it the words which follow? -- that is, that she rises and goes about the city, and seeks her beloved through the streets and squares -- if she herself needs to be sought? Let her seek him as she can, provided she remembers that she was first sought, as she was first loved; and it is because of this that she herself both seeks and loves. Let us also pray, beloved, that his mercies may speedily go before us, for our need is great. I do not say this of all, for I know that many of you walk in the love with which Christ has loved us, and seek him in simplicity of heart. But there are some, I am sad to say, who have not yet shown any sign of this saving and prevenient grace, and therefore no sign of salvation, men who love themselves, not the Lord, and are concerned with their own interests, not his.

5. 'I sought him whom my soul loves' this is what you are urged to do by the goodness of him who anticipates you, who sought you, and loved you before you loved him. You would not seek him or love him unless you had first been sought and loved. Not only in one blessing have you been forestalled but in two, being loved as well as being sought. For the love is the reason for the search, and the search is the fruit of the love, you may not suppose you are sought to be punished. You are sought so that you may not complain you are loved in vain. Both these loving and manifest favors give you courage, and drive away your diffidence, persuading you to return, and stirring your affections. From this comes the zeal and ardor to seek him whom your soul loves, because you cannot seek unless you are sought, and when you are sought you cannot but seek.

6. Do not forget whence you came. Now, that I may take the words to myself -- which is the safest course -- is it not you, my soul, who left your first husband, with whom it went well with you, and cast aside your loyalty by going after lovers? And now that you have chosen to commit fornication with them and have been cast aside by them, do you have the effrontery, the insolence, to return to him whom you spurned in your arrogance? Do you seek the light when you are only fit to be hidden, and run to the Bridegroom when you are more deserving of blows than of embraces? It will be a wonder if you do not meet the judge rather than the bridegroom. Happy the person who hears his soul replying to these reproaches, 'I do not fear, because I love; and I could not love at all if I were not loved; therefore this is love.' One who is loved has nothing to fear. Let those fear who do not love; they must always live in fear of retribution. Since I love, I cannot doubt that I am loved, any more than I can doubt that I love. Nor can I fear to look on his face, since I have sensed his tenderness. In what have I known it? In this -- not only has he sought me as I am, but he has shown me tenderness, and caused me to seek him with confidence. How can I not respond to him when he seeks me, since I respond to him in tenderness? How can he be angry with me for seeking him, when he overlooked the contempt I showed for him? He will not drive away someone who seeks him, when he sought someone who spurned him. The spirit of the Word is gentle, and brings me gentle greetings, speaking to me persuasively of the zeal and desire of the Word, which cannot be hidden from him. He searches the deep things of God, and knows his thoughts -- thoughts of peace and not of vengeance. How can I fail to be inspired to seek him, when I have experienced his mercy and been assured of his peace?