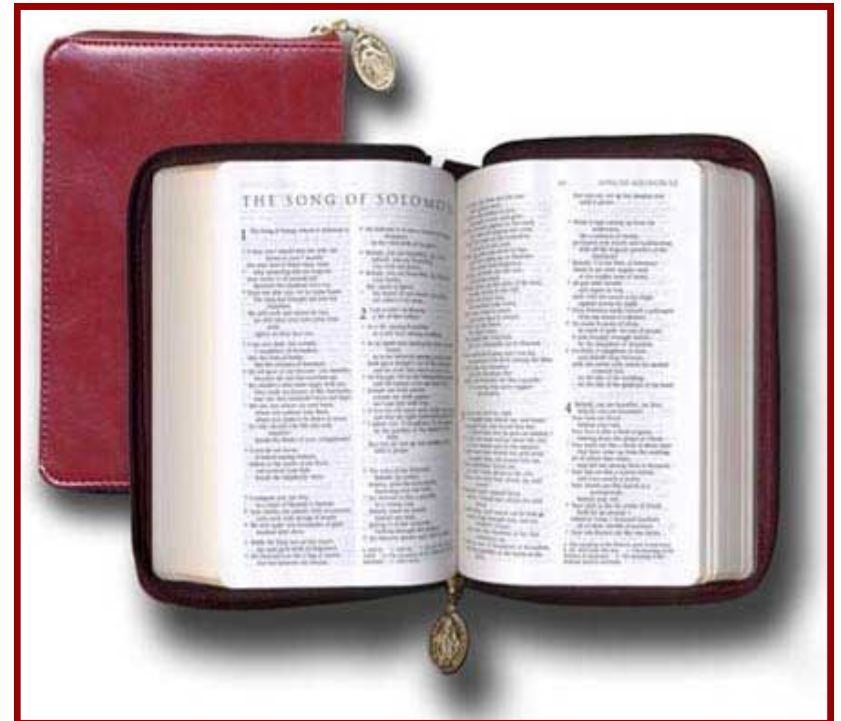




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SONG OF SONGS—10

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***ON THE BREASTS
OF THE BRIDE
AND THE BRIDEGROOM***

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.

On the Breasts of the Bride and the Bridegroom

It is time now for us to return to the book and attempt an explanation of the words of the bride and their consequence. For there they are, swinging precipitately out of nowhere, suspended before us. But we must see if there is something antecedent to them to which we may suitably connect them up. Let us suppose therefore that those whom we have called the friends of the Bridegroom now again approach the bride as they did yesterday and the day before. They find her in a state of weariness, bemoaning her condition; and wondering what the cause may be they begin to question her: "What has happened? Why this unusual sadness? Why do you murmur in this strange fashion? Is it not true that, estranged from your lawful husband, you turned aside with your lovers until, after they had abused you shamefully, you were finally compelled to return to your first husband? Did you not entreat him with tears and endless petitions to be allowed at least to touch his feet?" "I remember," she said. "What then?" said they. "After receiving that favor, and even the pardon of your offences in the kissing of the feet, you became restless again. Instead of being satisfied with a mercy so wonderful, you became eager for greater familiarity; with renewed insistence you demanded and obtained the second grace, the kiss of the hand with its endowment of virtues both many and great." "I do not deny it," she replied. But they went on: "And are you not the one who so often swore and protested that if you were ever favored with the kiss of the hand you would count that enough, you would ask for nothing further?" "Quite so," she said again. So what is it then?" they continued. "Is it that you grieve because some of those gifts you received have been taken away again?" "No," she replied, "nothing of the kind." "Do you fear then that you will be condemned anew for the sins of your past life, that you presumed were forgiven?" "No," was her answer.

Did not a man after God's own heart say:

***"The Lord has heard the desire of the poor:
your ear has heard the preparation of their heart."***

10. This comparison of carnal pleasures with wine is so very apt. For the grape, once pressed, can never again exude its liquid, it is condemned to endless dryness. So too the flesh, caught in the winepress of death, is completely drained of its co-natural pleasures, never again to revive to the stirring of sensual passions. Therefore the Prophet cried out: "All flesh is grass and its beauty like the wild flower's. The grass withers, the flower fades." St Paul too bears witness: "If a man sows in the field of self-indulgence, he will get a harvest of corruption out of it. Food is only meant for the stomach and the stomach for food; yes, and God is going to do away with both of them." But this analogy may be applied to the world as well as to the flesh; for the world with all it craves for, is coming to an end. Everything in the world indeed will come to an end, an end from which there is no return. Not so, however, the breasts we have spoken of. For when these have been drained dry they are replenished again from the maternal fount within, and offered to all who will drink. Here is a further reason why I insist that the breasts of the bride are superior to worldly or carnal love; the numbers who drink of them, however great, cannot exhaust their content; their flow is never suspended, for they draw unceasingly from the inward fountains of charity. Out of her heart shall flow rivers of water, there will be a spring inside her, welling up to eternal life. The accumulating praises of the breasts come to a climax in the perfume of the ointments, because they not only feed us with the choice food of doctrine, but shed around them like a pleasing aroma the repute of good deeds. All else that these breasts may signify, what milk fills them, what be the ambient perfumes of her ointments these I shall treat of later with the help of Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 10

2. "But please," they said, "do tell us what it is, then we can supply what you need."

"I cannot rest," she said, "unless he kisses me with the kiss of his mouth. I thank him for the kiss of the feet, I thank him too for the kiss of the hand; but if he has genuine regard for me, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. There is no question of ingratitude on my part, it is simply that I am in love. The favors I have received are far above what I deserve, but they are less than what I long for. It is desire that drives me on, not reason. Please do not accuse me of presumption if I yield to this impulse of love. My shame indeed rebukes me, but love is stronger than all. I am well aware that he is a king who loves justice; but headlong love does not wait for judgment, is not chastened by advice, not shackled by shame nor subdued by reason. I ask, I crave, I implore; let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. Don't you see that by his grace I have been for many years now careful to lead a chaste and sober life, I concentrate on spiritual studies, resist vices, pray often; I am watchful against temptations, I recount all my years in the bitterness of my soul. As far as I can judge I have lived among the brethren without quarrels. I have been submissive to authority, responding to the beck and call of my superior. I do not covet foods not mine; rather do I put both myself and my goods at the service of others. With sweat on my brow I eat my bread. Yet in all these practices there is evidence only of my fidelity, nothing of enjoyment. What can I be but, in the words of the Prophet, another Ephraim, a well-trained heifer that loves to tread the threshing floor? On top of that the Gospel says that he who does no more than his duty is looked on as a useless servant. I obey the commandments, to the best of my ability I hope, but in doing so my soul thirsts like a parched land. If therefore he is to find my holocaust acceptable, let him kiss me, I entreat, with the kiss of his mouth."

3. Many of you too, as I recall, are accustomed to complain to me in our private conversations about a similar languor and dryness of soul, an ineptitude and dullness of mind devoid of the power to penetrate the profound and subtle truths of God; devoid too, entirely or for the most part, of the sweetness of the spirit. What of these, except that they yearn to be kissed? That they yearn is indeed evident, their very mouths are open to inhale the spirit of wisdom and insight: insight that they may attain to what they long for, wisdom in order to savor what the mind apprehends. I think that a motive such as this must have inspired the holy Prophet's prayer when he said: "My soul will feast most richly, on my lips a song of joy and in my mouth, praise." The kiss was surely what he sought for, that kiss at whose touch the lips are so bedewed with the richness of spiritual grace, that only the Prophet's words again, spoken in another context, can fathom the effect: "My mouth is full of your praises, that I might sing of your glory, of your splendor all day long." No sooner had he tasted than he burst forth: "Lord how great your goodness, reserved for those who fear you!" This kiss has sufficiently detained us now. And yet, if I am to speak the truth, I cannot feel assured that my exposition measures up to the dignity of the subject. But let us pass on to other themes, experience of the kiss tells more than any words.

9. There is still another meaning that I did not really intend to place before you, but I must not exclude it. Why should we not allow that these words may be fittingly applied to those that are cared for by a mother or a nurse, as children are? For these souls, immature, lacking in hardihood, cannot tolerate patiently the contemplative repose of her to whom they look for fuller instruction in the faith, for the guidance of her religious observances. And is it not the restlessness of such as these that is frowned upon in a subsequent verse, where they are forbidden with a grave warning to awake the loved one till she pleases? When these perceive that the bride longs for kisses, that she seeks to be alone, that she shuns the streets, turns aside from the crowds and prefers her own peace to solicitude for them, they protest: "No!" they say. "No! Far greater the profit in the breasts you extend to others than in the embraces you enjoy in private. For by the former you deliver us from the selfish passions that attack the soul; you snatch us from the world and gain us for God." What they are really saying is: "Your breasts are better than wine." "These spiritual delights," they say, "that your breasts distill can conquer in us the pleasures of the flesh, that enslaved us just as drunkards are enslaved by wine."

7. While the bride is conversing about the Bridegroom, he, as I have said, suddenly appears, yields to her desire by giving her a kiss, and so brings to fulfillment those words of the psalm: "You have granted him his heart's desire, not denied him what his lips entreated." The filling up of her breasts is a proof of this. For so great is the potency of that holy kiss, that no sooner has the bride received it than she conceives and her breasts grow rounded with the fruitfulness of conception; bearing witness, as it were, with this milky abundance. Men with an urge to frequent prayer will have experience of what I say. Often enough when we approach the altar to pray our hearts are dry and lukewarm. But if we persevere, there comes an unexpected infusion of grace, our breast expands as it were, and our interior is filled with an overflowing love; and if somebody should press upon it then, this milk of sweet fecundity would gush forth in streaming richness. Let us hear the Bridegroom "You have received, my love, what you asked for, and here is a sign to show you, your breasts are better than wine; henceforth you will know that you have received the kiss because you will be conscious of having conceived. That explains the expansion of your breasts, filled with a milky richness far surpassing the wine of the worldly knowledge that can intoxicate indeed but with curiosity, not charity; it fills but does not nourish; puffs up but does not build up; pampers but does not strengthen."

8. Finally, let us imagine those words as coming from the Bridegroom's companions: "You are unjust," they say, "to murmur against the Bridegroom, because what he has already given you is of far more value than that which you look for. The favor you demand is rather for your own delight, but the breasts with which you may feed the offspring of your womb are preferable to, that is, they are more essential than, the wine of contemplation. What gladdens the heart of one man cannot be placed on equal terms with that which benefits many. Rachel may be more beautiful, but Lia is more fruitful. So beware of lingering amid the kisses of contemplation, better the breasts that flow in the preaching of God's word."

4. The text continues: "For your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments." The author does not say who spoke these words, so we are free to assign them to the person whom we think they best suit. For my part, I can see reasons for attributing them either to the bride, or to the Bridegroom or to the latter's companions. And for a start I shall point out how fittingly the bride might have spoken them. Let us say that while she and those companions are conversing together, the Bridegroom on whom the conversation centers, suddenly appears, for he loves to draw near to those who speak about him. It is his way. For example he proved himself a pleasant and affable companion to the two men who conversed together as they went to Emmaus. This is no more than what he has promised in the Gospel: "Where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them;" and through the Prophet: "Long before they call I shall answer; before they stop speaking I shall say: 'I am here.' " And so in the present instance he approaches though not actually invited; their words so please him that he anticipates their invitation: I am sure that sometimes he does not wait for words, our thoughts alone are enough to summon him. Did not a man after God's own heart say: "The Lord has heard the desire of the poor: your ear has heard the preparation of their heart." In every place you must be attentive to your inward state, you must realize that the God who is the assessor of mind and heart knows everything about you; he it is who moulds every heart and takes thought of all men do. The bride therefore, becoming conscious of the Bridegroom's presence, grew suddenly silent. She is ashamed to think that he is aware of her presumption, for a certain modesty had prompted her to use intermediaries in achieving her purpose. So in her endeavor to excuse her temerity, she turns to him and says: "For your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments." What she meant was: "If I seem to be high-minded, O my Bridegroom, you are responsible; you have honored me so greatly with the nurturing sweetness of your breasts, that by your love and not by my own temerity I have put aside all fear, and may seem to have been more daring than is proper. I do indeed make bold, but it is because I am convinced of your goodness, forgetful of your majesty." These explanations have been given merely to supply a context for the words of the bride.

5. Now let us try to see the meaning of this commendation of the Bridegroom's breasts.

These two breasts are two proofs of his native kindness: his patience in awaiting the sinner and his welcoming mercy for the penitent. This twofold sweetness of inward joy overflows from the heart of the Lord Jesus in the form of tireless expectancy and prompt forgiveness. And be assured that this is no figment of mine. You yourselves have read of his patience: "Are you abusing his abundant goodness, patience and toleration, not realizing that this goodness of God is meant to lead you to repentance?" To this very end he postpones his punishment of the contumacious, awaiting a favorable moment to bestow on them the grace of repentance and forgiveness. He does not wish the death of a wicked man, but that he turn back and live. And now let us see an example of the second breast, which I have called promptness to forgive. Of this you have read: "At whatever hour the sinner will repent, his sin will be forgiven him." Or again: "Let the wicked man abandon his way, the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn back to the Lord who will take pity on him, to our God who is rich in forgiving." David beautifully described both breasts in the few words: "Slow to anger, most loving." It is through her experience of this twofold goodness therefore, that the bride justifies the increase of confidence that emboldened her to ask for the kiss. She would seem to say to the Bridegroom: "What wonder if I presume to ask you for this favor, since your breasts have given me such overwhelming joy. It is your breasts' very sweetness, not trust in my own merits, that provokes me to this daring."

6. When she said, then, "your breasts are better than wine," she meant: "The richness of the grace that flows from your breasts contributes far more to my spiritual progress than the biting reprimands of superiors. Not only are they better than wine, but smelling sweet of the best ointments too, for not merely do you refresh those present with the milk of inward sweetness, you also spray the pleasing perfume of good repute over the absent ones, and so are well thought of, both by outsiders and by those within. You have, as I say, milk within and ointments without, for none would come to be refreshed with the milk, if you had not the perfume to attract them." We shall see later on what these ointments contain that make them worth considering, when we discuss the text: "We will run after you to the odor of your ointments."

Now, however, we must fulfill our promise and show if those words which we have attributed to the bride may not also be suitably assigned to the Bridegroom.