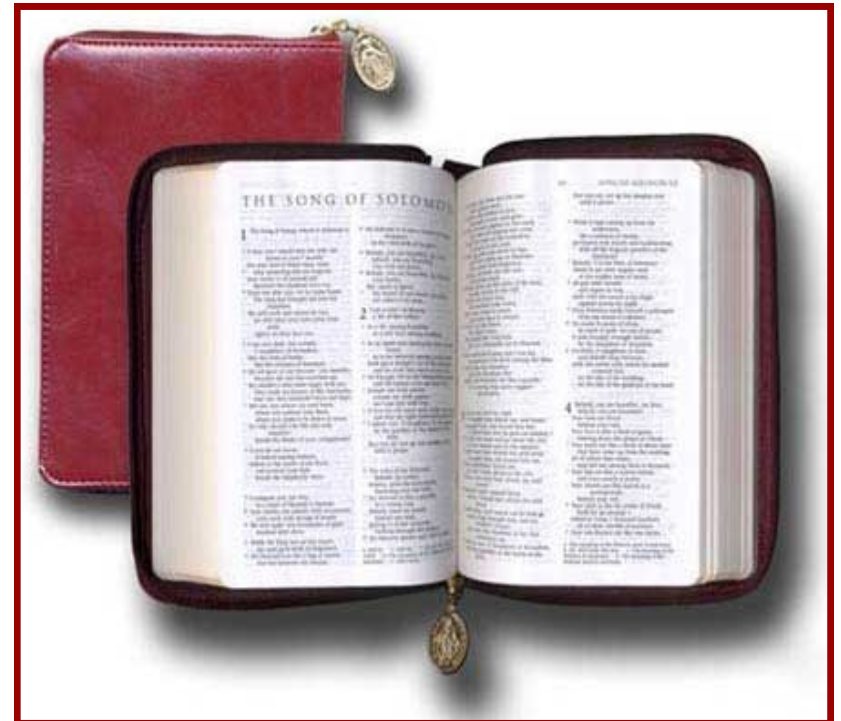




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SONG OF SONGS—55

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***IF
WE ARE
TO AVOID PRIDE***

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.

If We Are to Avoid Pride

Today I am going to propose another interpretation of the same verse that was dealt with in yesterday's sermon. Think them over and choose the better. There is no need to repeat yesterday's points, they could not have been forgotten so soon. But in case they have been, they were written down as they were delivered, taken down by pen like the other sermons, so that what may slip the memory may easily be recovered. So here is the new matter. 'See how he comes', she says, 'leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.' She speaks of the bridegroom, who was certainly leaping upon the mountains when, sent by the Father to preach the good news to the poor, he did not disdain to perform the task of the angels: he who was the Lord became the angel of great counsel. He whose custom was to delegate others, himself descended to the earth. The Lord himself made known his salvation; he himself revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. Since therefore, according to Paul's statement, 'they are all ministering spirits, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation', he who was superior to them became as one of them among them, disregarding their offence and bestowing abundant grace. But listen to him. 'I came', he said, 'not to be served but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many.' This is what none of the others is found to have done: by his services both dedicated and faithful, he has surpassed all others who were seen to serve. He is the good servant who served his flesh as food, his blood as drink, his life as ransom. Plainly good, energetic in spirit, fervent in love, devoted in affection, he not only leapt upon the mountains, but bounded over the hills, that is, he triumphed and vanquished by his swiftness of service, for he it was whom God, his God, anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows; in him he uniquely rejoiced like a giant to run his course. For he bounded over Gabriel and preceded him to the Virgin, as the archangel himself witnesses when he says: 'Hail, Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with you.' What is this? He whom you just left in heaven do you now find in the womb? He flew, even flew ahead, on the wings of the wind. You are beaten, O Archangel, overleapt by him who sent you ahead.

'For though the Lord is high He has respect for the lowly, but the haughty He recognizes from afar.'

**Let us attend to this
so as to make sure we prepare ourselves,
for fear that if He perceives us to be unworthy
of His visitation,
He may also pass us by...**

12. What I mean is this. Fear is water, because it cools the heat of carnal desires. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it says, and again: 'she gave him the water of wisdom to drink.' If fear is wisdom and wisdom is water, then fear is water. Hence, 'the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life.' Moreover, your mind is a water jar. Each of them, scripture says, contain two or three measures. Three measures, three fears. 'And they filled them to the brim', it says. Not one fear, not even two, but all three together fill the mind to the brim. Fear the Lord at all times, and from your whole heart, and you have filled the jar to the brim. God loves an entire gift, a total affection, a perfect sacrifice. Take care then to bring to the heavenly nuptials a water jar that is full, so that it may be said of you, too, 'the spirit of the fear of the Lord filled him'. He who fears like this neglects nothing. For how can negligence insinuate itself into fullness? In any case something which still has room for more is not full. For the same reason you cannot possess this fear and at the same time be puffed up. Filled with the fear of the Lord you have no means of entertaining pride. And other vices must be similarly judged, all are of necessity excluded by the fullness of fear. Then at last, if your fear is full and perfect, love, at the blessing of the Lord, will add flavor to your waters. For without love fear expects punishment. Love is the wine that gladdens man's heart. 'Perfect love casts out fear', and what was water becomes wine, to the praise and glory of the Church's bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is above all things God, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 55

2. When he appeared in the angels long ago to the patriarchs, he was surely leaping in the mountains, which seems more in accord with the letter of the text. It does not say 'leaping upon the mountains', but 'in the mountains', so that he who causes and enables them to leap would appear himself to leap in them, just as he speaks in the prophets and works in the righteous when he supplies words to the former and deeds to the latter. Furthermore, some of them represented him in person, so that each of these spoke not as an angel but as the Lord. For example, the angel who spoke to Moses did not say 'I the Lord's', but 'I, the Lord', and repeated this frequently. Therefore he was leaping in the mountains, that is, in the angels, in whom he both spoke and revealed his presence to men. For he leaped down to men, but in the angels, not in himself; not in his own nature but in a subject creature. For anyone who leaps goes from place to place, which does not happen to God. And so he who could not leap in himself leapt in the mountains, that is, in the angels; and he leapt even to the hills, to the patriarchs and prophets and other spiritual men on earth. But he bounded over the hills too when he chose to speak and manifest himself in the angels not only to great and spiritual men, but to ordinary people, and even to women.

Or perhaps hills mean the powers of the air that are no longer classed as mountains, since through pride they fell from the loftiness of the virtues, but have not yet subsided through penitence to the lowly ways of the valleys, or to the valleys of the lowly. It was about these that I think the psalmist said: 'The mountains melt like wax before the Lord.' He who leapt upon the mountains surely bounded over these bloated and barren hills, situated between the mountains of the perfect and the valleys of the penitent. Spurning them as he passed he went down to the valleys, that the valleys might abound with grain. The hills are thereafter condemned to an endless dryness and barrenness, as you may take the curse of the prophet: 'Let no dew or rain fall on you.' And to bring home to you that these words were addressed to the angels who had stayed under the image of the mountains of Gilboa, he says: 'where many wounded have fallen'. How many of the army of Israel have fallen in these accursed mountains from the beginning, and fall day by day! The same prophet refers to these when he says to God: 'Like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.'

3. No wonder then if what are but airy hills rather than heavenly mountains remain barren and fruitless, for neither dew nor rain falls on them. He who is the source of grace and profuse blessings bounds over them and goes down to the valleys, to drench with heavenly showers the humble who live on earth, that they may bring forth fruit with patience, 'some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty'. And there he visited the earth and saturated it, and multiplied its riches. He visited the earth, not the air, since 'the earth is full of the mercy of the Lord'. There he brought about salvation throughout the earth'. Did he also do it up in the air? Here I oppose Origen, who by an impudent lie crucified the Lord of glory again in the air for the redemption of the devils; whereas St Paul, the confidant of this mystery, affirms that 'being raised from the dead he will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him'.

4. Actually he who bounded over the air visited not only the earth but also heaven, for Scripture says: 'Your love, O Lord, reaches up to heaven, your faithfulness to the clouds.' Heaven up to the clouds is where the holy angels dwell: over these the Lord does not bound, but so leaps in them that he impresses on them the prints of his two feet, his mercy and his truth; I recall having discoursed fully on these footprints of the Lord in previous sermons. But, from the clouds downward, in the foul and darksome air, is the dwelling place of the devils. The bridegroom does not leap in these, he bounds over them and goes by, so that they retain no imprint of God's passage. How can the devil possess truth? Truth's statement about him in the Gospels is clear: 'he does not stand in the truth', but is a liar from the beginning. Neither will anyone call him merciful who is convinced by the very same gospel truth that he was a murderer from the beginning. Furthermore, as the master of the house is, so are the members of his household. Hence the Church so excellently sings of her bridegroom that he dwells in the heights and cares for the lowly in heaven and on earth; she makes no mention of those proud spirits who live in the air, because 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'.

10. So then we must fear when grace is present. What if it departs? Must we not then fear much more? Obviously much more, because when grace fails you, you fail. Just listen to what the giver of grace says: 'without me you can do nothing.' Fear, therefore, when grace is withdrawn, like a man who is liable to fall. Fear and tremble, as you become aware that God is angry with you. Fear, because your keeper has abandoned you. Do not doubt that pride is the cause, even if it does not seem so, even though you are not conscious of it. For God knows what you do not know, and he is the one who judges you. 'It is not the man who commends himself who is accepted, but the man whom the Lord commends.' Does God in any way commend you when he deprives you of grace? Is it possible that he who gives grace to the humble takes his gift away from the humble? Therefore the deprivation of grace is a proof of pride. There are times though when it is withdrawn, not because of pride already present, but because of pride that will occur unless it is withdrawn. You have clear evidence of this from the Apostle, who unwillingly endured the thorns of his flesh, not because he was puffed up but lest he be puffed up. But whether already, or not yet existing, pride will always be a cause of the withdrawal of grace.

11. Now if grace returns appeased one must then fear all the more lest he suffer a relapse, as that gospel text teaches: 'See, you are well, go and sin no more, that nothing worse befall you'. You hear that a second fall is worse than the first. As the danger increases, then, let fear also increase. You are fortunate if you have filled your heart with that threefold fear: that you fear when grace is received, even more when it is lost, and far more when it is recovered. Do this and you will be a water jar at Christ's banquet, filled to the very brim, containing not two measures merely but three, and so you shall win the blessing of Christ who will change your waters into the wine of gladness, and perfect love will banish fear.

9. Dear sons, this thought puts an end to haughtiness of the eyes, attracts grace, prepares for the leapings of the bridegroom. I have applied these things to myself for your sake, that you may do likewise. Be my imitators. I am not talking now of the practice of virtues, or disciplined behavior, or the glory of holiness: for I would not rashly claim in myself any of these gifts worthy of imitation. But I want you not to spare yourselves, but to accuse yourselves as often as you discern, even slightly, that grace is getting lukewarm, that virtue is languishing, even as I, too, accuse myself of such things. This is how a man acts who cautiously assesses himself, who examines his tendencies and desires and in everything watches relentlessly for the vice of arrogance, lest it take him by stealth. In very truth, I have learned nothing is so efficacious for the gaining, the retention, and the recovery of grace as to discover that in God's presence you must always stand in awe rather than yield to pride. 'Blessed is the man who is always fearful.' Fear therefore when grace smiles on you, fear when it departs, fear when it returns again; this is to be fearful always. These three fears succeed each other, one after another, in the soul, according as grace is sensed as gently present, as withdrawing when offended, or as coming back appeased. When it is present, fear lest your actions be unworthy of it. Now the apostle warns us, saying: See to it you do not receive the grace of God in vain'. To his disciple he said: 'Do not neglect the grace that is in you'; and concerning himself he said: 'God's grace to me was not in vain.' This man, confidant of God's plans, knew that to neglect a gift, not to use it for its intended purpose, would redound to contempt for the giver, and he considered it intolerable pride. So he himself zealously guarded against this evil and instructed others to beware of it. But yet another pitfall is hidden here that I must uncover for you, because, as you have in the psalm: the spirit of pride himself lurks there like a lion in his den, all the more dangerous as it is the more concealed. For if he fails to prevent the action he attacks the intention, suggesting and wheedling how you may ascribe to yourself the effect of grace. Have no doubt that this kind of pride is more intolerable by far than the other. For what is more hateful than the voice in which some have said: 'It was our triumphant hand, and not the Lord, that performed all these things'?

5. She sees him then, leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills, in accord with that curse of David which says: Let the Lord visit all the mountains round about it— that is, round Gilboa—but let him pass by Gilboa. There are mountains which the Lord visits on two sides of this Gilboa which designates the devil: angels above, men below.

As he fell, from heaven he was allotted for punishment that place in the air midway between heaven and earth, where he might see sights to envy and be tormented by that envy, according to Scripture: 'The wicked man sees and is angry; he gnashes his teeth and consumes away'. How wretched [he is] when he looks up to heaven and sees the countless mountains shining with a divine brightness, echoing with the divine praises, excelling in glory, abounding in grace! More wretched still when he looks to the earth that also possesses so many mountains of the people claimed by God, solid in faith, ennobled by hope, enlarged by love, accomplished in virtues, laden with the fruit of good works, and gathering a daily blessing from the dew of heaven, even the leaping of the bridegroom! Let us consider with what great remorse and spite he gazes on those splendid mountains all about him, ravenous for glory, while he despises himself and his followers as utterly uncouth, benighted, fruitless in every good, aware that he, who taunted everybody, is scorned by men and angels; as the psalm says: 'here is the dragon whom you have made your plaything.'

6. All this because the bridegroom bounds over them in their pride, leaping amid the mountains round about him like the fountain welling up in the midst of paradise, irrigating all things and filling every animal with blessing. Happy those who sometimes, even if rarely, deserve to drink from this fountain of delight. And even if it fails to flow in them continually, at least there are times when the water of wisdom, the fountain of life, leaps up, that it may become in them too a fountain of water 'welling up to eternal life'. Yes, the onrush of this river refreshes the city of God perennially and abundantly. How I wish that it would inundate our mountains here on earth from time to time, that he would sometimes condescend to leap on them, so that thus irrigated they might distill even rare droplets on us valleys, lest we remain entirely dry and barren. Misery and indigence and deadly famine prevail in that region which is never moistened by those leapings and sprinklings, as the fountain of wisdom abounds over it and flows by: 'Because they lack wisdom', it says, 'they perished for their own folly.'

7. 'See how he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.' He leaps in order to overleap, for he has no wish to extend himself to all: many of them did not please God.

Brothers, if, as Paul in his wisdom says, these things 'were written down for our instruction', let us observe the discreet and circumspect leaping of the bridegroom, how, both among angels and ourselves, he leaps among the humble and bounds over the proud; 'for though the Lord is high he has respect for the lowly, but the haughty he recognizes from afar.' Let us attend to this so as to make sure we prepare ourselves for the redemptive leaping of the bridegroom, for fear that if he perceives us to be unworthy of his visitation, he may also pass us by like the mountains of Gilboa. What are you proud of, dust and ashes? The Lord overleaped even the angels, abominating their pride. Let this rejection of the angels result in man's correction, for this was recorded for his instruction. Let even the wickedness of the devil contribute to my good, let me wash my hands in the blood of the sinner. How? you ask. Listen. A terrible and fear-inspiring curse is hurled at the proud devil by the prophet David, speaking in the spirit, who says under the figure of Gilboa, as previously noted: Let the Lord visit all the mountains round about, but let him pass by Gilboa.

8. And indeed when I read this and turn my eyes on myself and look very carefully, I find myself infected by that pestilence which the Lord so abhorred in the angel that he shunned him because of it, while he honored with the favor of his visitation all the mountains round about, whether of angels or of men. So in fear and trembling I say to myself: 'If this is what happened to an angel, what will happen to me, to dust and ashes? He got puffed up in heaven, I on a dung-heap. Does anyone not see that pride is more tolerable in the rich than in the poor? Woe to me! If one so powerful was chastised so harshly because his heart was inflated, and the pride so congenial to the powerful availed him nothing, what will be demanded of me, so despicable in my pride? Even now I pay the penalty. I am bitterly flogged. It is not without reason that this languor of soul, this dullness of mind has laid hold of me since yesterday and the day before, an unwonted impotence of the spirit. I was running well; but there in the way was the stumbling block: I tripped and fell. Pride was discovered in me, and the Lord has turned away in anger from his servant. Hence the barrenness of my spirit and the resourcelessness of devotion that I suffer. How has my heart withered like this, congealed like milk become like land without water? That sorrow from which tears spring I cannot find, such is my heart's hardness. The psalms are stale, reading is disagreeable, prayer is devoid of joy, the accustomed meditations irretrievable. Where now that intoxication of the Spirit? Where that serenity of mind, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit? This is the reason for repugnance for work, drowsiness at vigils, quickness to anger, obduracy in hatred, over-indulgence of tongue and appetite, greater indifference and dullness in preaching. Alas! The Lord visits all the mountains round about me, but he does not approach. Am I one of those hills over which the bridegroom bounds? For I observe that someone else stands out for abstinence, another for admirable patience, still another for perfect humility and meekness, yet another for great mercy and devotion; this person is often rapt in contemplation, that one knocks at and penetrates the heavens by the urgency of his prayer, still others excel in other virtues. All of these, I repeat, I consider to be fervent, all of them prayerful, all of one mind in Christ, all enriched with grace and heavenly gifts, like real spiritual mountains that are visited by the Lord, that frequently welcome the bridegroom as he leaps among them. But I, who find within me none of these things, how else shall I regard myself than as one of the mountains of Gilboa, whom the kindest of all visitors passes by in his anger and indignation?'