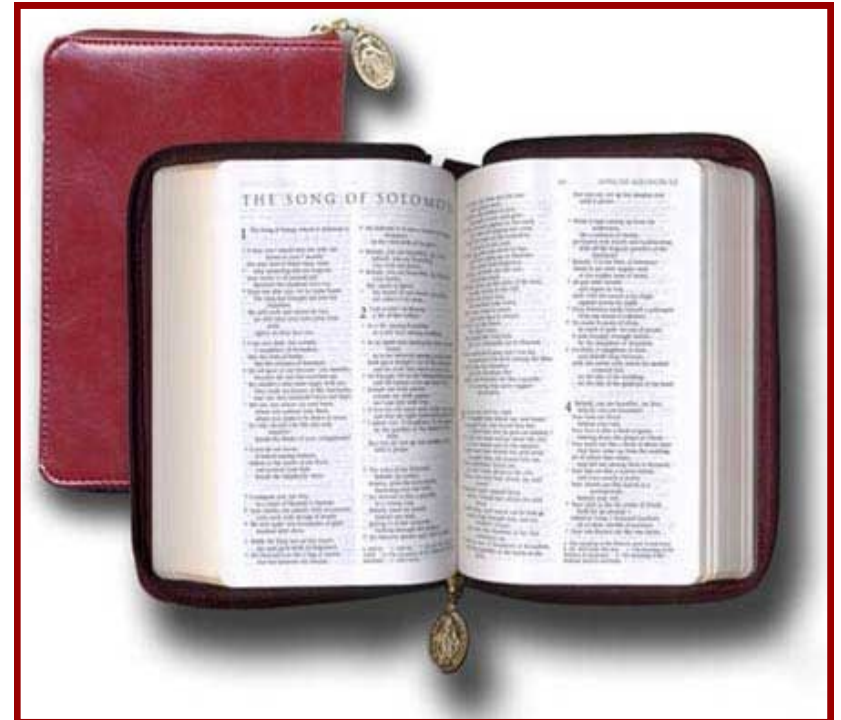




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—54***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***THE VOICE  
OF THE  
BELOVED***

*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 Voice of the Beloved**

'The voice of my beloved.' When the bride becomes aware of the unusual shyness of the maidens, a timidity so respectful that they do not dare to intrude on her holy leisure, nor, unlike yesterday and the day before, presume to molest her in her contemplative repose, she recognizes it as the fruit of the bridegroom's care and service. And full of spiritual joy, either because of their progress in curbing their excessive and superfluous levity, or because her future repose will be thence forward unimpeded, or even because of the bridegroom's esteem and favor revealed in his zeal for this repose of hers, in his eager defense of a leisure so delightful and so filled with fervor, she declares that it has been accomplished by the voice of her beloved directed to them for this purpose. For the man who presides with responsibility over others rarely if ever rests securely alone with himself, while he perpetually fears that he is removing himself from his brothers and failing to please God by preferring the pleasure of his own contemplative repose to the common good. At times, however, joy and comfort in good measure are the lot of him who rests in these delights, when, from a certain awe and respect for him divinely instilled in the hearts of his brothers, he understands that his repose is pleasing to God who enables them to support their needs with composure rather than rashly presume to disturb the rest so appreciated by their spiritual father. Now the proper fear of children is a manifest sign that they have inwardly heard that voice full of menace and rebuke that speaks through the prophet: 'It is I who announce righteousness.' It is his voice, his inspiration, the onslaught of a righteous fear.

**'The mountains and hills will sing praises before God';  
and also those words  
which the psalmist spoke to the Lord God:**

**'Happy are those who dwell in your house O Lord!  
They will praise you for ever and ever.'**

8. He leapt therefore upon the mountains, upon the highest angels, when he descended to them, graciously revealing to them the mystery hidden throughout the ages; the great mystery of devotion. But passing over these higher and more renowned mountains, the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Dominations, Principalities, Powers and Virtues, he was pleased to come down, all the way down to the hills, even to the lowest angels. But did he remain upon them? He bounded over even the hills. For it was not the angels but the seed of Abraham that he took to himself, a state even lower than the angels, that the word might be fulfilled which the prophet just mentioned said to the Father about the Son: 'You have made him a little less than the angels.' Although this could be understood as praise of human nature, since man is made in the image and likeness of God and endowed with reason even as an angel, he is yet a little less than the angel because of his earthly body. But listen to what the apostle Paul pointedly says of Christ: 'Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and in condition found as a man'; and again: 'when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.' He then who was born of woman, born under the law, in his downward flight not only bounded over the mountains, that is over the greater and higher spirits, but also over the lower angels, who when compared with those above them are rightly named hills. But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than anyone living bodily on earth, even if he should be the great John the Baptist. For although we confess that God made man as far above and incomparably superior to every Principality and Power even in his manhood, yet it is certain that even if he surpasses them in majesty he falls short of them in his weakness. And so he leapt upon the mountains, bounded over the hills when he graciously manifested himself as inferior not only to the higher angels but even to the lower ones. Nor was it to the spirits of heaven only that he subjected himself, but also to those who dwell in houses of clay, bounding over and exceeding by his lowliness even the lowliness of men. As a boy in Nazareth he was obedient to Mary and Joseph, and at the Jordan, in his youthful manhood, he bowed beneath the hands of John. But the day is moving on, and we may not yet descend from these mountains.

9. And so, if for the occasion we should wish to investigate at our pleasure all these things of beauty, to search into secret things, we must fear that the sermon will either lack becoming brevity or that a matter so excellent and promising will be deprived by hastiness of due consideration. If you agree, then let us rest here today in these mountains, because it is good for us to be here, gathered by Christ together with the holy angels in a place of pasture, to be fed with sweeter and richer fare. For we are indeed the flock of his pasture. Like clean animals therefore, let us ruminate the repast from the Good Shepherd, what we have swallowed down so greedily in today's sermon, all the more eager to lay hold in another sermon on what remains of this text, by the generosity of the Church's bridegroom, Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is over all things God, blessed for ever. Amen.

***END OF SONG OF SONGS — 54***

2. Having identified the voice therefore, the bride exults with joy saying: 'the voice of my beloved.' She is a friend and 'rejoices with great joy at the bridegroom's voice'. And she continues: 'See how he comes leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.' Being certain of the beloved's presence from the sound of his voice, she at once, unerringly, turns inquisitive eyes to see him whom she has heard. Hearing leads to sight; 'faith comes from what is heard'. By its hearts are so cleansed that God can be seen; hence you have the expression: 'cleansing hearts by faith.' Accordingly she sees him coming after hearing his voice. Even the Holy Spirit maintains here the order which the prophet thus described: 'Hear O daughter, and see'. And to convince you more surely that it is neither by accident nor by chance but by deliberate purpose and for the reason we have already alleged that hearing in this context is put before sight, take note whether this order of words was not also observed by the holy man who spoke as follows to God: 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.' But again when we recall the Holy Spirit's descent on the apostles on the day of Pentecost, is not hearing presented as a prelude to sight? The text says: 'Suddenly a sound came from Heaven like the rush of a mighty wind'; after which 'There appeared to them tongues as of fire.' Here the coming of the Holy Spirit is said to have been perceived first by hearing, then by sight. But enough on this, since you too, if you try to concentrate on this line of research, can perhaps find similar passages in other parts of scripture.

3. Now let us consider that point which demands more diligent research and whose meaning is more difficult of access. For this I confess my absolute need of the help of the Holy Spirit, that I may throw light on the significance of those mountains and hills over which the Church beheld with joy her bridegroom leaping and bounding, hastening to the redemption of her whose beauty he had desired. I am convinced beyond doubt that this is so, because I recall a similar passage from the prophet who clearly foresaw in spirit and foretold the coming of the Savior: 'He pitched his tent in the sun, and comes out of his pavilion like a bridegroom. He exulted like a giant to run his race: his going out is from the highest heavens and his circuit touches their farthest ends.' The journey and the return are well known; by whom begun and brought to completion, and why, are also very well known. What then? Whether our reading be in the psalms or in the present song, shall we imagine for ourselves a powerful man of great stature, captivated by the love of an absent girl-friend and hastening to her desired embraces by bounding over those mountains and hills whose massive bulk we see towering to such heights above the plain that the peaks of some seem to penetrate the clouds? Surely it will not do to fabricate physical images of this kind, especially when treating of this spiritual Song; and it is certainly not legitimate for us who recall reading in the Gospel that 'God is a spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit'.

4. Who then are those spiritual mountains and hills? When we know this we may in consequence understand how the bridegroom—who is God and therefore a spirit—leapt upon and over them, and what the leapings mean. If we consider them as those in which, according to the Gospel, the ninety-nine sheep were left behind while their dutiful shepherd came on earth to seek the one which was lost, the matter remains no less obscure and the mind is baffled, for it is difficult to ascertain who and of what nature are those spiritual mountains and hills in which the spiritual and happy citizens of high heaven dwell and feel—for undoubtedly they are the sheep who stay there. If they had no real existence Truth would not have said this. Nor long before that would the prophet have alleged of the Jerusalem that is above that 'its foundations are in the holy mountains', if no holy mountains were there. And finally, that this heavenly dwelling-place really possesses not only spiritual but also living and intellectual mountains and hills, listen to Isaiah: 'The mountains and hills will sing praises before God.'

5. Who are they then, but those same spiritual inhabitants of heaven who, as we said, were named sheep by the Lord's voice, so that the sheep are mountains, though it may seem absurd to say that the mountains feed on mountains or the sheep on sheep?

Taken literally it does indeed seem uncouth; but in its spiritual sense it has a delightful flavor if we examine with sensitivity how the shepherd of both flocks, namely Christ the Wisdom of God, serves the same food of truth in one way to the sheep on earth, in another way to those in heaven. For we mortal men, while living as pilgrims, are compelled to eat our bread in the sweat of our brow, begging it from without with hardship and anguish, that is, either from learned men or holy books, or certainly in those things that are made, seeing the invisible, understandable attributes of God. Angels however receive it in all fullness, though not from themselves, with a facility as great as the happiness by which they live. For they are all taught of God. It is promised as certain truth that those chosen from among men will one day attain to this; as yet they cannot enjoy it with secure happiness.

6. The mountains therefore feed on mountains and the sheep on sheep when the spiritual creatures of heaven—themselves both the mountains and the sheep—find abundantly within themselves, from the Word of life, the means -of perpetuating their blessed life. They are mountains because of their loftiness and fullness, sheep because of their gentleness. Filled with God, made sublime with rewards, adorned with virtues though they be, they nevertheless yield and bow their lofty heads in total and humble obedience to the rule of him who utterly transcends them in majesty. Like the gentlest of sheep they do at all times what their shepherd wills, following him wherever he goes. These, in the prophet David's words, are the real holy mountains, and on them, as on wisdom the first of all things made, the foundations of the city of God stand firmly fixed from the beginning. Though in part reigning in heaven and in part pilgrimaging on earth, it is still one city. And nevertheless, according to Isaiah, from these as from sweetly echoing cymbals the song of praise and thanksgiving is ever resounding, fulfilling in this lovely and unceasing song words we previously recalled from the same prophet: 'The mountains and hills will sing praises before God'; and also those words which the psalmist spoke to the Lord God: 'Happy are those who dwell in your house O Lord! They will praise you for ever and ever.'

7. To return to that from which we digressed a little—though necessarily I think— these then are the mountains and hills over which the Church saw her heavenly bridegroom leaping with astounding swiftness as he sped to her embraces: and not only leaping but bounding over them.

Do you want me to show you these leapings from the words of the prophets and apostles? Not that I intend now to disclose everything on this matter, since those who have time may go to the sources for it. It takes a long time, and is not necessary. I propose only what seems to support briefly and clearly the references to the leapings of the bridegroom. David says of him that 'he pitched his tent in the sun, and comes out of his pavilion like a bridegroom. He exulted like a giant to run his race: his going out is from the highest heavens.' What a leap he made from the highest heavens to the earth! Indeed I can discover no place, other than the earth, where he would pitch his tent in the sun: that is, where he who dwells in unapproachable light would deign to reveal his presence openly and in the light. For 'he appeared upon earth and lived among men'. Upon earth, I say, in plain sight, which is meant by pitching his tent in the sun, namely, in the body which he was pleased to prepare for himself for this purpose from the Virgin's body, that in it he who is by nature invisible might be seen, and so all mankind should see the salvation of God on his coming in the flesh.