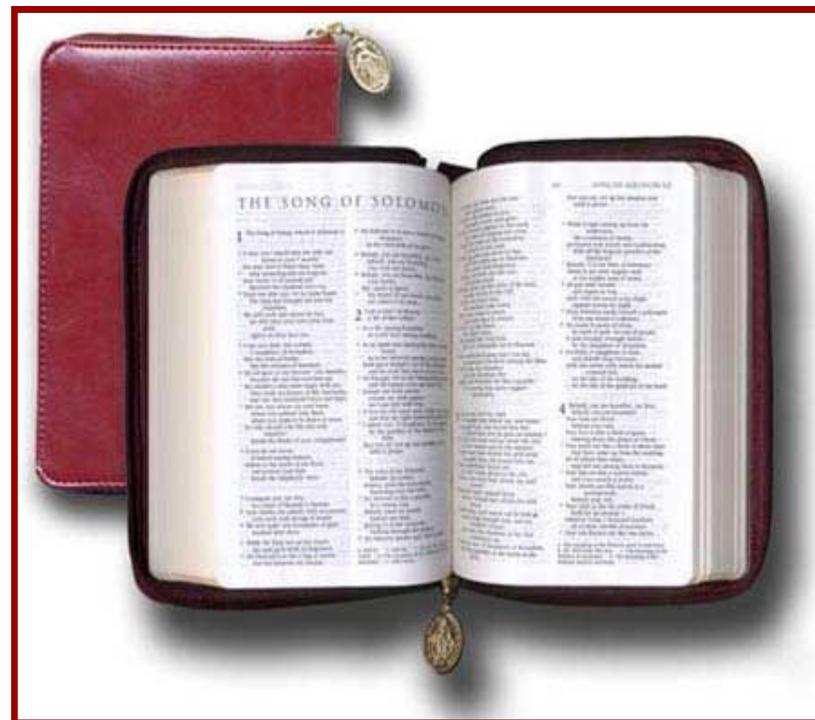




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SONG OF SONGS—52

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***CONCERNING
THE FLOWERS
AND
APPLES***

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.

Concerning the Flowers and Apples

“Prop me up with flowers, encompass, me with apples, because I anguish with love.” Love has increased because the incentives to love have occurred more often than usual. For you perceive on this occasion the abundant opportunities not only of seeing the bridegroom but of conversing with him. The very sight of him makes her happy with a serene countenance, his speech is more pleasant, his conversation more prolonged and unhurried. She is not only delighted with his conversation, but honored by his praise. Furthermore, she is refreshed in his shadow she has so long desired, is nourished with his fruit, has drunk from his cup. We must not think that she came up thirsty from the wine-cellar, into which she so recently boasted she had been introduced; and yet she is thirsty, because 'he who drinks me will thirst for more'. After all these [experiences], when the bridegroom withdrew in his usual way, she says that she languishes with love, meaning because of love. For the keener her joy in his presence, the more irksome her sense of his absence. The removal of what you love spells an increase of desire for it, and what you eagerly desire you miss painfully. Therefore in the meantime she asks to be comforted with the scents of flowers and fruits, until the return of him whose absence she so wearily endures. That is what the words sequence conveys.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God.

‘Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

**Hence there is neither fruit without a flower
nor a good work without faith..**

10. 'If you sleep in the middle of the chosen lots, there are dove-wings covered with silver.' What I think this means is that there is a place between fear and security like that between the left arm and the right, a central hope, as it were, in which the mind and conscience very happily repose on the soft bed of love. And perhaps this place is referred to in a subsequent text of this Song, where in a description of the throne of Solomon you have the following: 'the midst he covered with love for the daughters of Jerusalem.' Now anyone who feels that he is firmly established in hope no longer serves in fear but rests in love. So the bride rests and sleeps, and for her sake he says: 'I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields, that you stir not up nor awaken the beloved until she pleases'. Great and awesome concern, that he lets the soul which contemplates repose on his breast, He even guards her from intrusive cares, and protects her from disquieting action and the pressures of business. He does not permit her to be awakened except at her own wish. But this should not be examined within the confines of a sermon's conclusion. Better that it be resumed at another time, lest a theme so attractive be deprived of the diligence it deserves in its treatment. 'Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us' even then, especially in a matter so worthy, so excellent, so entirely supereminent; 'But our sufficiency is from God', the bridegroom of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 52

2. Now, under the Spirit's guidance, let us try to draw out the spiritual fruit contained in them. And if the speaker here is taken to be the Church, the communion of saints, it is we who are designated by the flowers and fruits, along with all those converted from a worldly life in the whole world. In the flowers we are shown the fresh and still tender life-style of beginners, and in the fruits the fortitude of those making progress, the maturity of the perfect. Surrounded by these, the pregnant and fruitful mother, for whom to live is Christ and to die is gain bears with greater equanimity the irksomeness of her waiting, since, according to Scripture, she is given a share in what her hands have worked for, in the first fruits of the Spirit, and her works proclaim her praises in the city gates. If, however, you want to attribute both of these, the flowers and the fruit, to the one person according to their moral sense, understand the flower as faith, the fruit as action. Nor do I think that this will seem wrong to you, if, just as the flower by necessity precedes the fruit, so faith ought to come before good works. Without faith, moreover, it is impossible to please God, as Paul attests. And he even teaches that 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Hence there is neither fruit without a flower nor a good work without faith. But then, faith without good works is dead, just as a flower seems vain where no fruit follows. 'Prop me up with flowers, encompass me with apples, because I languish with love.' Therefore the mind accustomed to quietude receives consolation from good works rooted in a sincere faith whenever, as often happens, the light of contemplation is withdrawn. For who can enjoy the light of contemplation - I do not say continually but even for long - while she remains in the body? But, as I said, as often as she falls away from contemplation she takes refuge in action, from which she will surely return to the former state as from an adjoining place, with greater intimacy, since these two are comrades and live together: for Martha is sister to Mary. And though she loses the light of contemplation, she does not permit herself to fall into the darkness of sin or the idleness of sloth, but holds herself within the light of good works. And that you may know that good works are light Christ said: 'Let your light shine before men': and there is no doubt that this was said about works that men could see with their eyes.

3. 'Prop me up with flowers, encompass me with apples, because I languish with love.' When that which is loved is at hand, love thrives; when absent it languishes. This is simply the weariness of impatient desire by which the mind of the ardent lover is necessarily afflicted when the loved one is absent; wholly absorbed in expectation, she reckons even any haste to be slow. And therefore she asks for an assortment of the fruits of good works made fragrant by faith in which she may rest while the bridegroom tarries. I am telling you of what comes within my own experience. Whenever I discover that any of you have benefitted from my admonitions, then I confess that I never regret preferring the preparation of my sermon to my personal leisure and quietude. When, for example, after a sermon the angry man is found to have become gentle, the proud man humble, the timid man brave; or when someone who is gentle, humble and brave has made progress in these gifts and admits that he is better than before; when those who perchance were lukewarm and tired of spiritual studies, benumbed and sleepy, are seen to grow eager and vigilant again through the burning words of the Lord; when those who, deserting the fountain of wisdom, have dug for themselves wells of self-will that cannot hold water and, afflicted in consequence by every command, have been murmuring in dryness of heart because they possessed no moisture of devotion—when these, I repeat, are shown through the dew of the word and the abundant rain that God provides for those who are his, to prosper again in works of obedience, to be prompt and devoted in all things, there is no reason for sorrow to invade the mind because it is interrupted in its pursuit of sweet contemplation, for I shall be surrounded by these flowers and fruits of love. Where the fruits of your progress grow in profusion about me I patiently accept being torn away from the unfruitful embraces of Rachel. The interruption of my leisure in order to prepare a sermon will not trouble me in the least when I shall see my seed germinating in you and an increase in the growth of the harvest of your righteousness. For love, which does not seek what is its own, has long since easily convinced me not to prefer my own cherished desires to your gain. To pray, to read, to write, to meditate, or any other gains that may result from the study of spiritual things: these I consider loss because of you.

4. 'Prop me up with flowers, encompass me with apples, because I languish with love.' This is what the bride said to the maidens in the bridegroom's absence, counseling them to advance in faith and good works till he comes, knowing that this insured the approval of the bridegroom, the welfare of the maidens, and her own consolation. I know that I have explained this passage more fully in my book on the love of God, and under another understanding. Whether it is better or worse, the reader may judge, if he cares to look up both. A prudent man will not condemn me for this difference of meaning, just as long as the truth is upheld in both, and love, which the scriptures must serve, shall thereby build up more people as it draws from them more true understandings for its purpose.

9. Consider with me now whether one so disposed, one who has attained a position of such great happiness, may not suitably apply to herself the words of the psalm and say 'I will lie down in peace and take my rest', especially when the reason which follows is present: 'For you alone, O Lord, make me rest secure'. That's how it is. As long as one is oppressed by a slavish spirit, one has little hope and much fear. He enjoys neither peace nor rest as his conscience wavers between hope and because he is greatly tormented by the fear of supreme excellence, 'fear expects punishment'. And so it is not for him to say: 'I will lie down in peace and take my rest', for he cannot as yet say that he is firmly established in hope. But if, with an increase of grace, fear begins to diminish and hope to grow strong, until finally he comes to a state where perfect love entirely casts out fear, will a soul of this kind not seem firmly established in hope, and thereby to lie down in peace and rest?

8. Therefore, as adversity and prosperity are usually designated by the left hand and by the right, it seems to me that here the left may be interpreted as the Word's threat of punishment, the right as his promise of the kingdom. Now there are times when our mind is slavishly oppressed by the fear of punishment; and then the left arm can be said to be by no means under the head but on the head; anyone so afflicted cannot say at all that 'his left arm is under my head'. But if, abandoning this slavish attitude, he passes over to a worthier disposition of spontaneous service, insofar as he is rather challenged by the rewards than coerced by penalties, especially if he is inspired by love of the good itself, then certainly he can say: 'his left arm is under my head'. Anyone who has overcome that slavish fear which is in the left arm by a better, more excellent habit of mind, and by worthy desires has drawn near to the right arm which holds the promises, can say to the Lord with the prophet: 'in your right hand are everlasting pleasures'. This engenders the hope by which she confidently asserts: 'his right arm will embrace me.'

5. Then come the words: 'His left arm under my head, his right arm will embrace me'. This too I remember having discussed elaborately in the work I mentioned: but let me explain the sequence of this text. It is clear that the bridegroom has returned for the purpose of comforting the distressed bride by his presence. How could she who had been prostrated by his absence not grow strong in his presence? Therefore he does not tolerate the affliction of his beloved. He is at her side, nor can he delay when summoned by desires so great. And because he found that during his absence she had been faithful in good works and eager for gain, in that she had ordered that flowers and fruits be given to her, of course, he returns this time with an even richer reward of grace. As she lies back he cushions her head on one of his arms, embracing her with the other, to cherish her at his bosom. Happy the soul who reclines on the breast of Christ, and rests between the arms of the Word! 'His left arm under my head, his right arm will embrace me.' She does not say 'embraces', but 'will embrace me', to show that far from being ungrateful for the first grace, she anticipates the second by giving thanks.

6. Learn not to be tardy or sluggish in offering thanks, learn to offer thanks for each and every gift. Take careful note, scripture advises, of what is set before you, so that no gift of God, be it great or mediocre or small, will be deprived of due thanksgiving. We are even commanded to gather up the fragments, lest they be lost, which means that we are not to forget even the smallest benefits. Is that surely not lost which is given to an ingrate? Ingratitude is the soul's enemy, a voiding of merits, dissipation of the virtues, wastage of benefits. Ingratitude is a burning wind that dries up the source of love, the dew of mercy, the streams of grace. For this reason the bride, as soon as she sensed the grace of his left hand, offered thanks without waiting for the teeming fullness in his right. For on mentioning that his left hand was under her head, she did not go on to say that she was embraced at the same time by his right. She said rather it 'will embrace me'.

7. What more are we to think the left hand and the right are for the bridegroom, the Word? Does, that which is called the word of man have within it separate bodily parts, distinct features, and a difference between the left side and the right? All the more does he who is God and the Word of God not admit diversity of any kind, he is who he is, so simple in his nature that he has no parts, so much one that he is without number. For he is the wisdom of God, of whom it is written: his wisdom is beyond numbering. But that which is unchangeable is incomprehensible, and hence cannot be expressed in language. Where, I ask, can you find the words to pay worthy tribute to that majesty, or properly describe it, or adequately define it? But we speak as well as we can of that which we do our best to understand, as the Holy Spirit reveals. We are taught by the authority of the Fathers and the usage of the scriptures that it is lawful to appropriate suitable analogies from the things we know, and rather than coin new words, to borrow the familiar with which these analogies may be worthily and properly clothed. Otherwise you will make an absurd attempt to teach the unknown by the unknown.