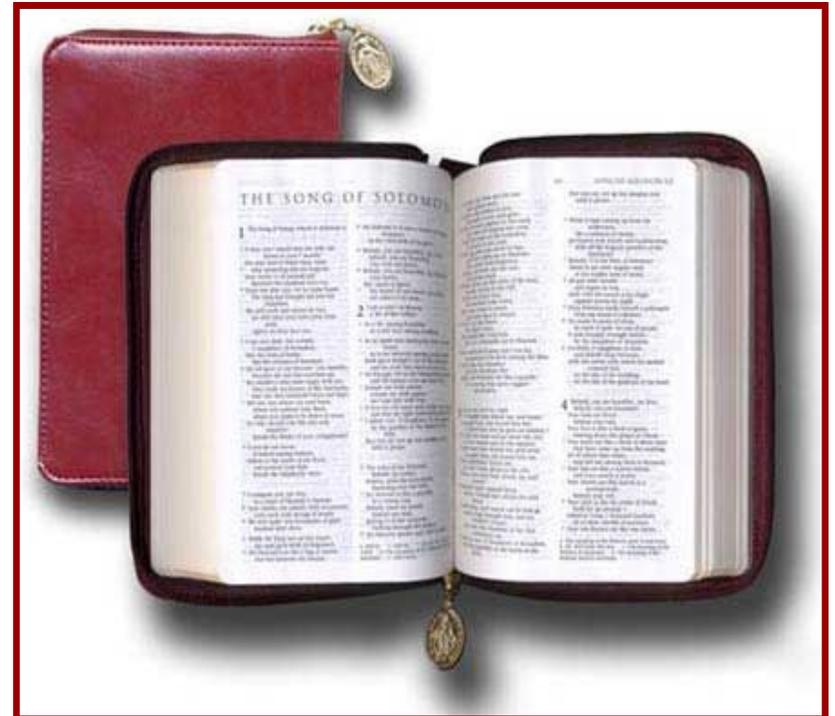




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SONG OF SONGS—38

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***KNOWLEDGE
AND IGNORANCE
OF GOD AND OF SELF***

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.

Knowledge and Ignorance of God and of Self

I presume there is no need today to remind you to stay awake, because I feel that the remarks I made as recently as yesterday, friendly remarks, will be enough to keep those concerned on the alert. You remember that you have agreed with me that no one is saved without self-knowledge, since it is the source of that humility on which salvation depends, and of the fear of the Lord that is as much the beginning of salvation as of wisdom. No one, I repeat, is saved without that knowledge, provided he is old enough and sane enough to possess it. I say this because of children and mental defectives, to whom a different principle applies. But what if you have no knowledge of God? Is hope of salvation compatible with ignorance about God? Surely not. For you cannot love what you do not know, nor possess what you do not love. Know yourself and you will have a wholesome fear of God; know him and you will also love him. In the first, wisdom has its beginning, in the second its crown, for "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and "love is the fulfilling of the law." You must avoid both kinds of ignorance, because without fear and love salvation is not possible. Other matters are irrelevant in this context: to know them does not guarantee salvation, nor does ignorance of them mean damnation.

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7. You run no risk therefore, no matter how much you lower yourself, no matter how much your self-esteem falls short of what you are, that is, of what Truth thinks of you. But the evil is great and the risk frightening if you exalt yourself even a little above what you are, if in your thoughts you consider yourself of more worth than even one person whom Truth may judge your equal or your better. To make myself clearer: if you pass through a low doorway you suffer no hurt however much you bend, but if you raise your head higher than the doorway, even by a finger's breadth, you will dash it against the lintel and injure yourself. So also a man has no need to fear any humiliation, but he should quake with fear before rashly yielding to even the least degree of self-exaltation. So then, beware of comparing yourself with your betters or your inferiors, with a particular few or with even one. For how do you know but that this one person, whom you perhaps regard as the vilest and most wretched of all, whose life you recoil from and spurn as more befouled and wicked, not merely than yours, for you trust you are a sober-living man and just and religious, but even than all other wicked men; how do you know, I say, but that in time to come, with the aid of the right hand of the Most High, he will not surpass both you and them if he has not done so already in God's sight? That is why God wished us to choose neither a middle seat nor the last but one, nor even one of the lowest rank; for he said, "Sit down in the lowest place," that you may sit alone, last of all, and not dare to compare yourself, still less to prefer yourself, to anyone. See how great the evil that springs from our want of self-knowledge; nothing less than the devil's sin and the beginning of every sin, pride. What ignorance of God leads to, we shall see on another occasion. We have been late in coming together here today and the shortness of the time does not permit it now. For the present it suffices that each one has been warned about want of self-knowledge, not only by means of my sermon but also by the goodness of the Bridegroom of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God, blessed for ever. Amen.

2. I am far from saying however, that knowledge of literature is to be despised, for it provides culture and skill, and enables a man to instruct others. But knowledge of God and of self are basic and must come first, for as I have already shown, they are essential for salvation. This was the viewpoint of the Prophet, this was the order of precedence he inculcated when he said: "Sow for yourselves righteousness, and reap the hope of life." and then: "Set alight for yourselves the light of knowledge." He puts knowledge in the last place, because, like a picture that cannot stand on the air, it requires that the solid structure of the other two precede and support it. I may safely pursue studies if my hope of eternal life has first been rendered secure. You therefore have sown righteousness for yourself if by means of true self-knowledge you have learned to fear God, to humble yourself, to shed tears, to distribute alms and participate in other works of charity; if you have disciplined your body with fastings and prayers, if you have wearied your heart with acts of penance and heaven with your petitions. This is what it means to sow righteousness. The seeds are our good works, our good desires, our tears, for the Psalmist says: 'They wept as they went forth, sowing their seeds.' But why? Shall they always weep? God forbid! "They shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." And so rightly do they shout for joy, since they bring back sheaves of glory. But you say: "That is for the resurrection on the last day; a long time to wait! "

Do not permit your will to be broken, do not yield to pusillanimity; you have in the meantime the first-fruits of the Spirit, which even now you may reap with joy. "Sow for yourselves righteousness, and reap the hope of life." These words do not postpone your triumph till the last day, when the object of your desire will be possessed, not hoped for; they refer to the time now at your disposal. But when eternal life does come, what great gladness there will be, what joy beyond imagining!

3. And can the hope of this great happiness be without happiness? The Apostle speaks of rejoicing in hope. David, when he expressed the hope of entering the house of God, said that it gave him happiness now, not in the future. Eternal life was not yet his, but his hope reached out to it; so that in his heart he experienced the Scriptural truth that the just man finds joy not only in the reward but even in the expectation of it. The assurance of pardon for sins begets this joy in the heart where the seeds of righteousness are sown, if that assurance is corroborated by a holier life inspired by the efficacy of the grace received. Everyone among you who enjoys this experience understands what the Spirit says, for his voice never contradicts his activity. This is why one understands what is said; what one hears from without he feels within. For one and the same Spirit both speaks to us and works within you, distributing gifts to each individual at will, giving to some the power to speak what is good, to others the power to do it.

4. Anyone therefore who has the happiness of being borne aloft on the wings of grace and of breathing freely in the hope of consolation after the early period of conversion with its bitterness and tears, already in this life gathers the fruit of his tears; he has had a vision of God and heard the voice that says: "Give him a share of the fruits of his hands." If he has tasted and seen that the Lord is sweet, has he not seen God: Lord Jesus, how pleasant and sweet must you be to him whom you have not merely blessed with forgiveness of sins but endowed too with the gift of holiness; and along with that, added to the treasury of his goods, the promise of eternal life. Happy the man with all this for a harvest, who now has the fruits of holiness and at the end eternal life. It was but right that he who wept when faced with the truth about himself, should rejoice on seeing the Lord, whose all-merciful eyes gave him strength to carry those precious sheaves: forgiveness, sanctification, and the hope of eternal life. It bears out the truth in the Prophet's words: "Those who sow in tears shall reap in jubilation!" We find the two kinds of knowledge within these words: that of ourselves in the sowing in tears; and that of God, in the reaping in joy.

5. If we have first made sure of this two-fold knowledge, we are less likely to become conceited by any other learning we may add to it. The earthly gain or honor it may confer on us is far beneath the hope conceived and the deeply rooted joy in the soul that springs from this hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. It does not disappoint because love fills us with assurance. Through it the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirit that we are sons of God. What advantage can we derive from any amount of our learning that is not less than the glory of being numbered among God's sons? Small indeed; nor can the earth itself with its fullness be compared to it, even if one of us gained possession of it all. But if we are ignorant of God how can we hope in one we do not know? If ignorant about ourselves, how can we be humble, thinking ourselves to be something when we are really nothing? And we know that neither the proud nor the hopeless have part or companionship in the inheritance of the saints.

6. Let us consider therefore with what extreme care we ought to banish from our minds these two kinds of ignorance. One is responsible for the beginning, the other for the consummation of every sin, just as in the case of the two kinds of knowledge where one begets the fear of God and is the beginning of wisdom and the other begets the love that is its crown. These roles of knowledge have already been explained, now let us examine the roles of ignorance. Just as the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, so pride is the beginning of all sin; and just as the love of God is the way to the perfection of wisdom, so despair leads to the committing of every sin. And as the fear of God springs up within you from knowledge of self and love of God from the knowledge of God, so on the contrary, pride comes from want of self-knowledge and despair from want of knowledge of God. Ignorance of what you are contributes to your pride, because your deluded and deluding thoughts lie to you, telling you you are better than you are. For this is pride, this is how all sin originates - that you are greater in your own eyes than you are before God, than you are in truth. Hence it has been said of him who first committed a grave sin of this kind - I mean the devil - that he did not abide in the truth, but was a liar from the beginning, since what he was in his own mind was not what he was in truth. But what would be the consequences if his departure from truth consisted in thinking himself less important than he was? His genuine ignorance would excuse him and no one would call him proud; rather than his error exposing him to scorn, we should have humility leading him to grace. For if each of us could clearly see the truth of our condition in God's sight, it would be our duty to depart neither upwards nor downwards from that level, but to conform to the truth in all things. Since God's judgment however, is now in darkness and his word is hidden from us, so that no man knows whether he deserves to be loved or hated, it is certainly the better thing, the safer thing, to follow the advice of him who is truth, and choose for ourselves the last place. Afterwards we may be promoted from there with honor, rather than cede to another, to our shame, the higher seat we had usurped.