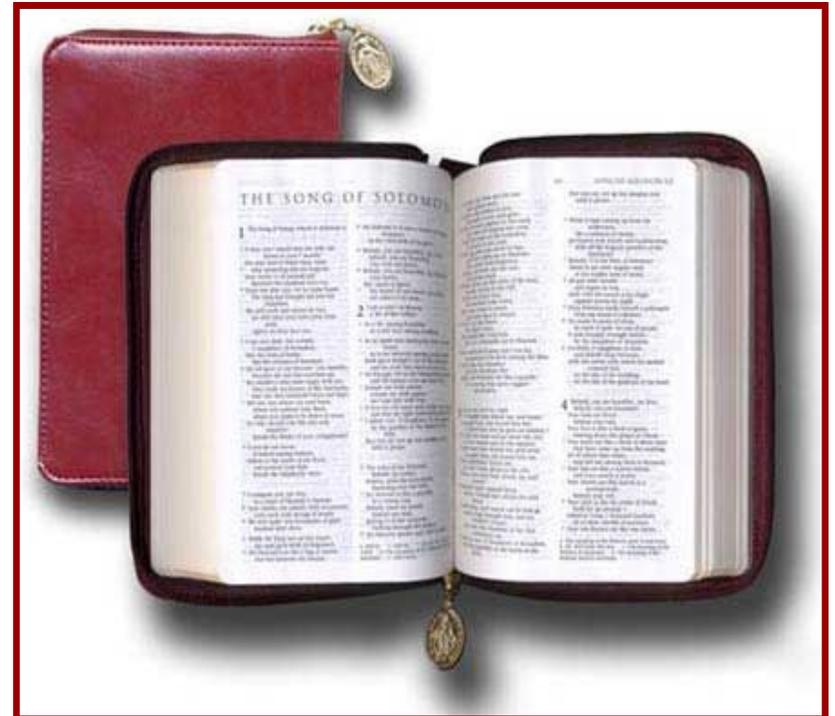




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SONG OF SONGS—22

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***THE LOVE OF THE BRIDE,
THE CHURCH,
FOR CHRIST***

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 Love of the Bride, the Church, for Christ

"Draw me after you; we shall run in the odor of your ointments." What does this mean? Is the bride an unwilling lover, even of her Bridegroom? Does she have to be drawn to him because she lacks freedom to follow him? But not everyone drawn is reluctant to be drawn. Invalids and people in frail health who find walking difficult do not object to being carried to the bath or to a meal, but a criminal will not enjoy being taken to court or to the scaffold. She who asks to be drawn wills to be drawn; she would not have asked if she possessed the power to follow her loved one of her own free will. But why should she be unable? Must we understand that the bride is weak? If one of the maidens complained of weakness and asked to be drawn, it would not have surprised us. But the bride herself who was so strong and healthy that she seemed able to draw others -- is it not hard to believe that she herself needs to be drawn like a person sick or indisposed? Is it possible to regard any person as strong and healthy if we apply the term weak to one who is named bride of the Lord because of her unique perfection and peerless virtue? Is it perhaps the Church who spoke these words as her eyes followed the ascent of her Bridegroom into heaven, filled with desire to follow him and be assumed with him into glory? For no matter how great the perfection to which one attains, as long as one is burdened with this mortal body, as long as one is confined in the prison of this evil world, cramped by necessities and tormented by sinful urges, the contemplation of sublime truths can be achieved only little by little and in weariness of spirit; one is certainly not free to follow the Bridegroom wherever he goes. And so we have that tearful cry of the distressed heart: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?" Hence too that supplication: "Free me from this imprisonment." Even the bride herself may repeat out of her distress: "Draw me after you; for a perishable body presses down the soul, and this tent of clay weighs down the active mind." Does she say this because she wants "to be gone and to be with Christ," especially since she sees that those for whom she might have felt it necessary to continue her earthly life, are making definite progress in the love of the Bridegroom, and safely grounded in charity? She had already referred to this when she said: "Therefore the maidens love you beyond measure." Now she would seem to say: "See, the maidens love you, and this love binds them to you firmly; they no longer have any need of me, there is no longer any reason for me to continue living in this life;" and so she says: "Draw me after you."

Thus you see, that he who is guided by the Spirit does not always remain in the same state.

***He does not always advance with the same facility.
"The course of man is not in his control."***

***It rather depends on the guidance of the Spirit
who sets the pace as he pleases...***

And so we have that tearful cry of the distressed heart:

***“WHAT A WRETCHED MAN I AM!
WHO WILL RESCUE ME FROM THIS BODY DOOMED TO DEATH?”***

2. This is what I should have thought if she had said: "Draw me to you."

But because she says "after you," she seems rather to appeal for the grace to follow the example of his way of life, to emulate his virtue, to hold fast to a rule of life similar to his and achieve some degree of his self-control. This is a work for which she needs all possible aid in order to deny herself, take up her cross, and follow Christ. Here surely the bride needs to be drawn, and drawn by no other than he who said: "Without me you can do nothing." "I know," she says, "that I have no hope of joining you except by walking after you; and even in this I am helpless unless helped by you. Therefore I entreat you to draw me after you. Happy the man whose help is from you. He prepared in his heart in this valley of tears his going up, to attain to union with you one day in the mountains where joys abound. How few there are, Lord, who wish to follow you, and yet there is not one who does not wish to reach you, because all know that at your right hand are everlasting pleasures. All men therefore wish to enjoy you, but not to the extent of following your example; they will reign with you but not suffer with you. One of these said: 'May I die the death of the just! May my end be one with theirs!' He wanted his last days to resemble those of the just, but not the years of early manhood. Even worldly men who know that a saint's death is an event dear to God want to die with the dispositions of spiritual men whose holy lives repel them; for 'when sleep comes to the loved ones, the Lord's heritage is at hand.' 'Happy are those who die in the Lord' but on the contrary, in the Prophet's words: 'The death of the wicked is an evil one.' They are not concerned to search for the Lord though they should like to find him; they want to get to him without following him. Not so those to whom Christ said: 'You are the men who have stood by me faithfully in my trials.' Happy those, dear Jesus, who are privileged to have you as their witness. They followed after you in every truth, with their feet and with their hearts. You have revealed to them the paths of life, calling them after you because you are the way and the life. 'Follow me,' you said, 'and I will make you fishers of men;' and again: 'If a man serves me he must follow me; wherever I am, my servant will be there too.' And hence that ring of triumph in their words: 'See, we have left everything and followed you.'

3. "So too with the one you love. For your sake she has left all things, eager always to journey after you, ever to walk in your footsteps, to follow you wherever you go." She knows that your ways are delightful ways, that your paths all lead to contentment, that anyone who follows you will not walk in darkness. She requests, however, to be drawn, because 'your righteousness is like the mountains of God,' and she cannot attain to it of her own strength. She requests to be drawn because she knows that no one comes to you unless your Father draws him. But those whom the Father draws are drawn also by you, for whatever works the Father does the Son does too. There is a more intimate note however about her request to be drawn by the Son, for he is her Bridegroom, sent before her by the Father as leader and teacher. He would be the exemplar of her moral life, preparing the way of virtue; he would teach her to become like himself, and share with her his prudence; and having thus given her the law of life and discipline, he would inevitably be attracted by her beauty.

4. " 'Draw me after you; we shall run in the odor of your ointment.' It is indeed necessary that we be drawn, because the fire of your love has quickly cooled within us. We cannot run now, because of this cold, as we did in former days. But we shall run again when you restore to us the joy of knowing you are our Savior, when the benign warmth of grace will have returned with the renewed shining of the Sun of Justice. The troubles that hide him from us like clouds will then pass, the soft breath of the caressing breeze will melt the ointments and the perfumes will rise to fill the air with their sweet odor. Then we shall run, run with eagerness where the wafted perfumes draw us. The lethargy that now numbs us will vanish with the return of fervor, and we shall no longer need to be drawn; stimulated by the perfumes we shall run of our own accord. But now again, draw me after you."

Thus you see that he who is guided by the Spirit does not always remain in the same state. He does not always advance with the same facility. "The course of man is not in his control." It rather depends on the guidance of the Spirit who sets the pace as he pleases, sometimes torpidly, sometimes blithely, teaching him to forget the past and to strain ahead for what is still to come. If you have been attentive I think you will have seen that your inward experience re-echoes what I have outwardly described.

11. "We are drawn when we are tested by temptations and trials; we run when inwardly suffused by consolations, breathing in the ointment-scented air. Therefore when I encounter what is hard and austere I confine it to myself, being strong and healthy and perfect, and I speak in the singular: 'Draw me.' What is pleasant and sweet I share with you, the weak one, and I say: 'We shall run.' I know quite well that girls are delicate and tender, ill-equipped to endure temptations; so I want them to run in my company, but not to be drawn in my company. I will have them as companions in hours of consolation, but not in times of trial. Why so? Because they are frail, and I fear they may tire and lag behind. It is me that you must correct, my Bridegroom" she says, "me that you must test, put on trial and draw after you, because I am ready for the lash and strong enough to persevere. Apart from that we shall run together; I alone shall be drawn, together we shall run. So let us run and run, but in the odor of your ointments, not by trusting in our own worth. We pin our hopes for the race, not in the durability of our powers but in the abundance of your mercies. For although when we ran we did so willingly, it depended not upon man's will or exertion but upon God's mercy. Let mercy but return and we shall run again. You with your giant's power can, run with your own strength; we can run only when your ointments breathe their scent. You whom the Father has anointed 'with the oil of gladness above your fellows,' run by virtue of that anointing; we run in the odor it diffuses. You enjoy the fullness, we the fragrance."

This should be the time to fulfill a promise about the ointments of the Bridegroom that I recall having made to you so long ago, but the length of this sermon forbids it. It must be postponed, for the exalted nature of the theme will not brook the distortion of an abbreviated treatment. Pray therefore to the Lord who confers this anointing, that he may bless the instructions that I so willingly impart, that I may fill your desires with the memory of the generous kindness of him who is the Church's Bridegroom, our Lord Jesus Christ.

END OF SONG OF SONGS — 22

5. Therefore when you feel weighed down by apathy, lukewarmness and fatigue, do not yield to cowardice or cease to study spiritual truths, but look for the hand of the one who can help you, begging like the bride, to be drawn, until finally, under the influence of grace, you feel again the vigorous pulse of life. Then you will run and shout out: "I run the way of your commandments since you have enlarged my heart." But while this state of happiness remains, you must not use it as if you possessed God's gift by right of inheritance, secure in the conviction that you could never lose it; for if he should suddenly withdraw his hand and withhold his gift, you would be plunged into dejection and excessive unhappiness. When you feel happy beware of boasting: "Nothing can ever shake me!" For you may be compelled to repeat for yourself the Psalmist's sad comment: "But then you hid your face and I was terrified." If you are wise you will try to follow the advice of the Wise Man: "in the time of adversity not to be unmindful of prosperity, and in the time of prosperity not to be forgetful of adversity."

6. Do not, then, pin your hopes on ephemeral well-being, but cry to God like the Prophet and say: "Do not desert me when my strength is failing." Be consoled in the time of trial and say with the bride: "Draw me after you; we shall run in the odor of your ointments." This will keep your hopes buoyant in times of hardship, and give you foresight when fortune favors you. You will ride above the vicissitudes of good and evil times with the poise of one sustained by values that are eternal, with that enduring, unshakeable equanimity of the man of faith who thanks God in every circumstance. So even amid the fluctuating events and inevitable shortcomings of this giddy world you will ensure for yourself a life of durable stability, provided you are renewed and reformed according to the glorious and original plan of the eternal God, the likeness of him in whom there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a change. Even in this world you will become as he is: neither dismayed by adversity nor dissolute in prosperity. Living thus, this noble creature, made to the image and likeness of his Creator, indicates that even now he is re-acquiring the dignity of that primal honor, since he deems it unworthy to be conformed to a world that is waning. Instead, following Paul's teaching, he strives to be reformed by the renewal of his mind, aiming to achieve that likeness in which he knows he was created. And as is proper, this purpose of his compels the world itself, which was made for him, to become conformed to him by an admirable change of relationship, according as all things in their true and natural form begin to co-operate for his good. They become aware of the Lord for whose service they were created, and shed every trace of degeneracy.

7. For this reason the words uttered by God's Only Begotten Son about himself: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all things to myself," can also be true of all his brothers, all those whom the Father "foreknew and predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brothers." And therefore if even I be lifted up from the earth, I say unflinchingly that I shall draw all things to myself. For it is not rash for me to make my Brother's words my own if I have put on his likeness. If this be true, the rich of this world must not imagine that because Christ said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," that the brothers of Christ possess heavenly gifts only. If the promise mentions only heavenly things, it does not follow that these alone are meant. They do possess earthly things, but with the spirit of men who possess nothing; in reality they possess all things, not like unhappy beggars who get what they beg for, but as masters, masters in the best sense because devoid of avarice. To the man of faith the whole world is a treasure-house of riches: the whole world, because all things, whether adverse or favorable, are of service to him; they all contribute to his good.

8. The miser hungers like a beggar for earthly possessions, the man of faith has a lordly independence of them. The first is a beggar no matter what he owns, the latter by his very independence is a true owner. Ask any man whose heart is insatiably bent on earthly riches what he thinks of those who, by selling their possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor, bartered their earthly goods for the kingdom of heaven. Did they do wisely or not? Almost certainly he will say: "Wisely." Then ask him why he in turn does not practice what he approves of. He will answer: "I cannot." And why? Simply because avarice is his mistress and will not allow it; he is not free because the things he seems to possess are not his own, he is not his own master. "If they are really yours, spend them profitably and exchange earthly goods for those of heaven. If you cannot, then admit that you are not the master of your money but its slave; a caretaker, not an owner. In short you adapt yourself to your purse like a slave to his mistress; he must be happy when she is happy, sad when she is sad. And you: when your purse swells your mood expands, when it grows slack you are deflated. When it is empty you are crushed with misery; when it is full you melt with joy, or rather become puffed up with pride." Such is the miser.

We, however, must be more concerned to imitate the liberty and constancy of the bride who, well taught on every topic, her heart schooled in wisdom, knows how to handle riches and how to suffer want. When she asks to be drawn she shows that she stands in need not of money but of strength. But since she is consoled by the hope that grace will return to her, she proves that despite her need she is not disheartened.

9. Let her say then: "Draw me after you; we shall run in the odor of your ointments." Where is the wonder that she needs drawing who chases after a giant, striving to catch him as he goes "leaping on the mountains, bounding over the hills"? "His word runs swiftly." She is not able to match his running, cannot compete in swiftness with him "who exults like a giant to run his race;" it is beyond her own strength, so she asks to be drawn. "I am tired," she says, "I grow weak; do not desert me, draw me after you or I shall begin to stray after strange lovers, I shall be running aimlessly. Draw me after you, for it is better that I be drawn by you, that you use any force you please against me, terrifying me with threats or harassing me with scourges, rather than spare my lukewarmness and abandon me to false security. Draw me even against my will, and make me docile; draw me despite my indolence and make me run. A day will come when I shall not need to be drawn, when we shall run with a will and with all speed. For I shall not be running alone even though I ask that I alone be drawn: the maidens will be running with me. We shall run at equal pace, we shall run together, I in the odor of your ointments, they under the stimulus of my example and encouragement, and hence all of us running in the odor of your ointments." The bride has her followers just as she is the follower of Christ, so she does not speak in the singular: "I run," but: "we shall run."

10. But the question comes up: why did she not include the maidens along with herself when she asked to be drawn? Why did she say "draw me" and not "draw us"? Does she have need to be drawn and the maidens do not? O beautiful, O happy, O blessed one, explain to us the meaning of this distinction. "Draw me", she says. "Why 'me,' and not 'us'?" Do you envy us this favor? Surely not. You would not have mentioned so soon that the maidens would run with you if you had wished to travel alone after the Bridegroom. If therefore you intended to add 'we shall run' in the plural, why did you formulate in the singular the request to be drawn? She answers: "Charity demanded this. Learn from me by means of these words to expect a twofold help from above in the course of your spiritual life: correction and consolation. One controls the exterior, the other works within; the first curbs arrogance, the latter inspires trust; the first begets humility, the latter strengthens the faint-hearted; the first makes a man discreet, the latter devout. The first imbues us with fear of God, the latter tempers that fear with the joy of salvation, as the words of Scripture indicate: 'Let my heart rejoice that it may fear your name;' and 'Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice before him with reverence.'