

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE WOUND OF THE LANCE

ON OUR RETURN TO THE SCENE of suffering on Calvary, we find a great change has taken place. Profound silence reigns on the three crosses. Death has spread his sable wings over the sufferers. The gazing crowd which surrounded the place of execution has dispersed - in part, deeply affected and conscience smitten.

Even the little company of faithful women, almost ready to succumb with grief and sorrow, appear to have returned to the city.

We therefore find only the Roman guard, and beside them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who, after he had safely lodged Mary in his peaceful cottage, could not resist the urgent impulse to seek again the place where He that was all to him, hung on the cross. Who could we have wished as a witness to the last event on Calvary sooner than this sober-minded and sanctified disciple? He relates to us in all simplicity, what he there beheld.

The priests and scribes, accustomed to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel, think not of the heinous blood-guiltiness they had incurred, but only of the prevailing custom in Israel, to take down from the gibbets, where they had been exposed to public view, as a warning to others, the bodies of malefactors, and inter them before night. This custom was founded on an express divine command.

We read in Deuteronomy 21:22, 23, **“If a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in anywise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God) that thy land be not defiled, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.”**

This is a strange and peculiar ordinance, which we should scarcely have been able to account for, had not the Spirit of the Lord himself presented us with the key to it.

The fact that God points out those that are hung as especially burdened with His curse compelled the more thoughtful in Israel to infer that there was something typical in it; because a wicked man, though not thus put to death, could not really be less accursed than one whose dead body was thus publicly exhibited.

Thus the divine command to inter the body, and the promise connected with it, **“So shalt thou bury with it the curse that rests upon the land,”** unfolded the consoling prospect that a removal and blotting out of guilt was actually possible.

But since it followed, of course, that it could not be affected by the mere interment of executed malefactors, the idea must have occurred to them that in the divine counsels, the removal of the curse would, at a future period, be actually accomplished by the death and burial of some prominent mysterious Personage. Now, when believing Israelites hit upon such thoughts, their ideas were in accordance with God’s intention, who, in the ordinance respecting malefactors that had been put to death, had no other object in view than a prophetic symbolizing of the future redemption of Christ.

The latter is clearly evident from Galatians 3:13, 14, where the apostle says, **“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us (for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree) that”** - instead of a curse - **“the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ.”**

Here Christ is undeniably set forth as the antitype of those who were hanged in Israel. On the cross He bore the curse for us, and in doing this, died the public death of a criminal. But after He had commended His Spirit as a voluntary offering into the hands of His Father, the curse that lay upon the earth and its inhabitants was actually interred with His body, since all that believe on Him are freed from the curse, and become heirs of an incorruptible and heavenly blessing. Hence, how deeply significant does the scene on Calvary appear which we are now contemplating!

The persons who are acting there do not indeed know what they are doing. But this does not prevent them from being led by the hand of divine Providence. Without reflecting further, they call to mind the letter of the Mosaic law, and believe they ought to hasten with the taking down of the bodies from the crosses, in order to bury them, both because the day begins to decline, and because it is the preparation for the great Sabbath - that of the feast of the Passover, and hence peculiarly holy.

They, therefore, proceed in a body to Pilate, and request him to cause the legs of the three criminals to be broken, as was customary, then to be taken down, and afterward interred.

The governor does not hesitate to grant their request, and sends, at the same time, another guard to the place of execution to break the legs of the malefactors, and to convince themselves of their being really dead. It was considered an act of mercy to those that were crucified, to hasten their death by breaking their limbs with an iron bar, and then giving them a final coup de grace on the breast.

The beginning was made with the two malefactors, but when the turn came to the Lord Jesus, every sign of His being already dead was so apparent, that the breaking of His legs was thought needless, especially as one of the spearmen pierced His side with his lance, which alone would have sufficed to have caused His death, had the divine Sufferer been still alive.

In the abstract, this occurrence appears of extremely trifling importance; but the Evangelist John who so expressly states it, regarded it with other eyes.

In the twofold fact of the Saviour's limbs not being broken, and of His side being pierced by the lance, he recognizes a divine interposition by which two ancient prophecies were fulfilled. **"These things were done,"** says he, **"that the Scriptures should be fulfilled. A bone in him shall not be broken."**

This was said in reference to the paschal lamb (Exodus 12:46), to which the evangelist here expressly attributes the significance of the type of the Lamb of God, offered up for the sins of the world.

As a shadow of Him that was to come, the paschal lamb was to be a male, and in order especially to intimate the holiness of Him who was prefigured, it was required to be without blemish. But that not a bone of him was to be broken was intended to point out that Christ would offer Himself as an atonement to God, whole and undivided; and those who desired to become partakers of His salvation must appropriate Him to themselves entirely.

The Lord also in that appointment aimed at the establishment of an additional sign, which when the Messiah should appear, would contribute clearly to make Him known to everyone. And John seems to say to us in his narrative, "Behold here the predicted sign!"

The fact that the sacred vessel of His body remained un mutilated impresses the confirming seal upon the deceased as the true atoning Paschal Lamb. He is the righteous One, of whom it is said in Psalm 34:20, **"He keepeth all his bones; not one of them is broken."**

In the wound with the spear the evangelist sees the fulfillment of another passage of Scripture.

"Again," continues he, **"another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced."**

The word of the Lord by the prophet presents itself to his mind, where it is said, **"I will pour upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications, and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced"** (Zechariah 12:10).

This passage was an inexplicable riddle to the Jews, on which account in the Greek version of the Septuagint the word, without any ground for so doing, instead of **"pierced,"** has been rendered *"despised."*

But the only true meaning of these prophetic words has, since then, been made evident to thousands, and will become so to thousands more - yea, even to the whole world, either in the day of grace or of judgment. Either they who have hitherto denied Christ the homage due to Him shall be enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and with weeping eyes and supplicating hearts shall look up to Him; or they shall experience what the apostle announces beforehand in the book of Revelation, **"Behold he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so. Amen."**

Thus you see how the profound evangelist discovers, in all that occurs on Calvary, even in the most unimportant circumstance, a striking divine hieroglyphic, which has solely reference to the acknowledgment and glorification of Christ as the true and promised Messiah and Redeemer of the world. But who does not perceive that in all these various events the hand of a living God overrules and causes them to occur in such a manner that one passage of prophecy after another is fulfilled by them to the letter? How highly the evangelist estimates them as a means of strengthening our faith, he proves very impressively by the words, **“And he that saw it, bare record, and his record is true, and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.”**

The narrative states that **“one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith there came thereout blood and water.”**

It has been supposed that John laid so much stress upon this circumstance, because he believed it might serve to refute certain erroneous spirits of his day who assigned to Christ an imaginary and not a real body. It is certainly possible that, in giving his account of the matter, he was partly induced by such a motive.

But it is the miraculous nature of the event that chiefly excited his interest in it. In dead bodies the blood always coagulates, while from the wound above mentioned, on the contrary, it flowed clearly and abundantly, unmixed with the water which burst forth from the pierced pericardium of His heart, and ran down from the cross.

That which most deeply affected the soul of the beloved disciple was the divine symbol he perceived beneath the wondrous event.

In the water and the blood he sees represented the most essential blessings of salvation for which the world is indebted to Christ.

We know that in his first epistle he points out the fact of His coming with water and blood, as well as with the Holy Spirit, as the most peculiar characteristic of the Redeemer of the world; and who does not perceive, in these words, that the wondrous event on Calvary must have been present to his mind?

But what do these three elements imply?

Water chiefly symbolizes to the evangelist, in accordance with the figurative language throughout the Holy Scriptures, the moral purifying power of the word of Christ - yea, the atmosphere of His kingdom.

Wherever the Gospel penetrates, it changes the moral aspect of nations, apart from regeneration and conversion, in the more limited and specific sense of these words. Decorum and mental culture expel barbarism. Discipline and order take the place of a licentious service of sin. Animal carnality finds its bound in the rising apprehension of a superior ideal of human life.

Even as justice establishes its claims in legislation and civil institutions, so does also love.

Men become conscious of the obligation for mutual assistance and kind offices. Attention to the poor and the sick erects its hospitals, and opens to the destitute its places of refuge. There is nothing which is not cemented, ennobled, and transfigured, as soon as affected by the gentle breath of the Christian religion.

Compare even the most degraded of the nations of Christendom with any of the heathen, and say if in comparison with these they may not, in a general sense of the word, be termed regenerated? It is in these effects that the water of Christ and His Gospel manifests itself.

Suffice it to say that by means of His Word, and the planting of His Church, a moral purification ennobling and transforming the human race emanates from Christ, and to these results the water which flowed from Jesus' opened side symbolically points.

But water alone would not have saved us.

We are deeply involved in guilt in the sight of God; and though we might cease to accumulate fresh guilt, yet our former offenses would not on that account be undone and blotted out. Besides, notwithstanding all the cleansing and ennobling of our lives by the Word - when measured according to the model of the divine requirement - we remain poor sinners as before, and exposed to the curse.

We therefore need, besides a moral reformation, and more urgently than that, a deliverance from the sentence of condemnation which impended over us, and a being replaced in a state of grace.

For this necessity - the most urgent of all - that which is requisite is supplied by the blood we see streaming along with the water from the wounded side of Jesus. It points out the ransom paid for our guilt once for all before God, as well as the atoning sacrifice by means of which the reconciliation of divine justice with God's love to sinners is brought about. The blood flowed separately from the water; justification must not be mingled with, much less exchanged for, personal amendment.

That which again recommends us to the love of God is solely the merit of Christ, and by no means the work of our own virtue. Certainly, union by faith and life with Christ is requisite on our part, but in Christ's righteousness and in that alone, do we receive the absolution from deserved punishment; even as, for its sake alone, we are reinstated in the privileges of divine adoption.

But we know that water and blood by no means exhaust the exhibition of the saving efficacy of Christ's merits. There are three, says the apostle, that testify for Him and of Him on earth - the water (the power of the Word), the blood (the atoning and peace-bringing effect of His vicarious sufferings), and the Holy Spirit, who not merely amends, but renews, not only prunes away the twigs from the tree of sin, but roots it up, and plants in its place an essentially new being and life.

He who passes through the world adorned with the threefold seals of such powerful credentials must be the Redeemer and Messiah ordained of God.

John regards it as scarcely possible that anyone can mistake this, and vehemently urges us to swear fealty to Him along with himself, while most impressively exclaiming, “**He that saw it bare record, and his record is true; and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.**”

Let us, then, also believe that we may likewise experience the Lord of Glory as Him who cometh with water, blood, and the Holy Spirit - that is, cleansing, reconciling, and regenerating.

Let us give ourselves wholly and without reserve to Him, after He has thus given Himself up to death for us.

~ end of chapter 52 ~

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