

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE GREAT CONFESSION

WE RETURN to the judgment hall of the Sanhedrin at a moment when profound and gloomy silence reigns. But even this pause has its import. The Spirit of Truth does His office in the assembly. Shame and embarrassment take possession of every mind. The false witnesses have acted their part most wretchedly, and stand unmasked. Their contradictory evidence only tends to their own disgrace. The sublime bearing of the Accused, expressive only of innocence, completely paralyzes His adversaries.

Every eye is now fixed on the presiding head of Israel. Every look seems to ask with amazement, "What art thou about, thou priest of the Most High? Where is thy wisdom; what is become of thy dignity?" He, meanwhile, finds himself in the most painful situation in the world. Anxiety, both for the preservation of his official dignity, and for the result of the whole affair, torments his soul. There the proud hierarch sits, and his thoughts take tumultuous counsel how the difficulty may be overcome, and how he may escape from the pressure.

Such is the end of the judicial procedure against the Holy One of Israel. I ask, who has lost the cause? - Jesus or His judges? Be assured that the world's great process against Christ will eventually end in a similar manner. It will terminate in the utter confusion and despair of all who oppose Him. Therefore let not His adversaries imagine that they have brought the case against Him to a close.

The perplexity of the high priest is great. How can he conceal his embarrassment? He must give the affair another turn. But of what kind? His ideas whirl round like a fiery wheel. All at once a thought occurs to him, which he deems fortunate. But it is not by mere accident that it presents itself to him. A greater than he overrules and controls the scene.

The hierarch convulsively snatches up his falling dignity from the dust, and, with visible effort, while enveloping himself in the gravity of his office, he solemnly steps forward a few paces, and makes known his intention to cite the Accused before the throne of the Almighty, and to call upon Him to testify on oath, and under invocation of the name of the Most High God, who He is; whether He is really the person whom He is regarded as being and lets Himself be taken for by His followers, or whether He is a false prophet and a deceiver.

We rejoice at this measure, though evidently more the result of desperation than of calm consideration. The affair will now be decided. Think of a testimony on oath by Jesus respecting Himself! There was nothing else wanting to satisfy our utmost wishes.

Now, give heed. The greatest and most solemn moment of the whole process has arrived. The high priest, re-assuming all his dignity, opens his mouth to utter the sublimest of all questions. **“I adjure thee,”** says he, **“by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.”**

He makes use of the legal form of adjuration which was customary in Israel. It was in this form that the oath was administered and taken. The person sworn answered without repeating the form itself, with a single “Yes” or “No;” being conscious at the same time, that the answer he gave, if it deviated from the truth, would be punished by the High and Lofty One, who had been invoked as a witness, with His righteous displeasure and the loss of eternal salvation.

The high priest thus solemnly calls upon Jesus, as it were, for His credentials, while making the basis of the entire Christian religion the object of his inquiry, and in so doing, he is perfectly justified by his official position.

What is it, therefore, to which Jesus is to swear? Let us above all things be clear upon this point.

He is, in the first place, to testify whether He is the Christ - that is, the Messiah.

Caiaphas, the steward of the divine mysteries, indicates by that name the Object of prophecy, who, as Prophet, is to bring down the light of eternity to the earth; as High Priest, to give His own life as an atonement for the sins of the world; and as King, to establish an everlasting kingdom of grace and peace.

This dignified Being is called the **“Lord’s Anointed,”** or **“Christ.”** But Caiaphas knows that this **“Christ”** will be a Man, and yet at the same time **“the Lord Most High:”** such as David and Daniel saw in vision; and Micah, as one **“whose goings forth have been of old, from everlasting.”**

He knows that the Messiah will be the Son of God, in a manner such as no one else in heaven or on earth is entitled to be called. He will not only be like The Lord, but The Lord’s equal, and thus really God. From this sublime point of view, Caiaphas asks, “Art thou he?” and believes that in the event of Jesus affirming it, he would be perfectly justified in pronouncing Him a blasphemer, and as such, in condemning Him to death.

What greater or more momentous question was ever put than this?

What would have been the consequences, had an answer in the negative ensued? What mercy would then have been the portion of the sinful race of man? Jesus might then have been whatever He pleased - the wisest philosopher, the chief of the prophets, the most perfect model of virtue - nay, an angel and seraph of the first rank - all would not have availed us, and hell would have been the termination of our pilgrimage.

If a negative had followed upon the high priest's question, it would have extinguished all our hopes; it would have fallen like a lighted torch into the citadel of our consolation; the whole edifice of our salvation would have been overthrown, and we should have been hurled into the open jaws of despair. For think of what is included in this one question. "**Art thou Christ, the Son of God?**"

In it Caiaphas inquires if the hour of our redemption has arrived; if there is a possibility of a sinner being saved; if an atoning power can be ascribed to the obedience of Jesus; and if the Suretyship of Christ can in reality be of any avail to transgressors. All these questions and many more are answered in the negative, if a simple negation had issued from the lips of Jesus to the interrogatory, "**Art thou the Son of God?**"

But if it be answered in the affirmative then they are affirmed to all eternity. And who is there that is not anxious for the reply? Well, then, give me your attention, and open your hearts to the truth.

The all-important question is propounded. Deep silence reigns in the assembly. Every heart beats audibly, and every eye is fixed on the Accused. Nor do our hearts remain unmoved. We also stand, trembling with expectation, before the high-priestly tribunal. We are aware of the astonishing miracles by which Jesus has magnified Himself. We were witnesses how He displayed His superhuman glory at the bier of the young man of Nain and at the grave of Lazarus. We have seen Him in the endangered vessel, when the rage of the elements ceased at His beck, and on the stormy lake, where the wild waves became firm beneath His feet, and spread a crystal carpet for the King of nature.

But all these might have been the acts of a prophet sent from God, and the marvelous performances of a human possessor of divine power. Such a person, however, could not have coped with our misery.

We heard Him say, "**He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father also,**" for "**I and the Father are one,**" and "**before Abraham was, I am,**" with other expressions of a similar kind. But still, with reference to these expressions, the tempter might suggest to us that they must not be apprehended literally, but are only to be understood of the moral glory of Jesus.

And thus an assertion was still requisite, which should put to shame all the arts of infernal perverters of language; a testimony was still desirable concerning the person of Jesus, the undoubted nature of which would be able to annihilate all the objections of skepticism; and how could this be done in a more satisfactory manner than by a solemn declaration on oath? It is this which is about to take place.

Jesus is asked if He is the true God and eternal life? - for this is all comprised in the appellation, "**Christ, the Son of God,**" in the mouth of a believing Israelite. He therefore that hath ears, let him hear what the Person at the bar of Caiaphas testifies of Himself, before the face of the Almighty, the Man in whose mouth, even according to the confession of His murderers, was found no guile.

There He stands in the presence of the council of the nation, to all appearance “**a worm and no man.**” Greatness and dignity appear to rest only on those who surround Him. In Himself you perceive nothing but lowliness and poverty. There He stands, with His head bowed down, His hands bound, and surrounded by armed men like a robber. He stands there, ready to sink with weariness from the sufferings He has already endured, forsaken of His friends, inveighed against by His enemies, apparently the offscouring of the earth, and incomparably wretched. To this deeply abased and sorely stricken Man, the question is solemnly put by the first and principal person in the nation, whether He will swear by the living God that He is the Son of the Blessed?

He is therefore now constrained to lay aside all disguise; and for our sakes He gladly lifts the veil. As long as the investigation was confined to wretched accusations, Jesus was silent; but after the affair had taken such a different and much more serious turn, it was requisite to bear testimony to the truth, and declare Himself definitely with regard to His Person.

He knows that His answer will cause His death, but He dares no longer refrain.

He is constrained to speak by the reverence which fills His heart for the sacred Name by which He is adjured. He is constrained to it by the submission which He owes to the dignity of him who calls upon Him to answer on oath.

He is constrained to it by His love and holy zeal for the truth, and especially by His tender solicitude for us, poor sinners, on whose behalf He appears at the bar of judgment.

It is not the Sanhedrin alone, before which He feels Himself placed; He sees, in spirit, His whole Church assembled around Him; He sees a whole world in breathless excitement, and all the kindreds of the earth, grouped around Him, full of expectation. The ear of His whole Church to the end of time hangs upon His lips; and He knows that the moment has arrived when He must place a firm and immutable support beneath its faith, for thousands of years to come. He therefore opens His mouth, and testifies before the throne of the living God, with clear consciousness, considerately, formally, and solemnly, “**Thou hast said.** [I am].”

Here you have the great confession. What an affirmation is this! It lifts us up above all doubt and apprehension. It places our faith on an everlasting foundation. It establishes and seals our entire redemption, and is the grave of every scruple. But that no shadow of obscurity might rest on the real meaning of His testimony.

He makes an addition to His affirmation. He unveils the future, and says, “**Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.**”

It was impossible that it could be more clearly testified who Jesus was - than was now done.

If His testimony is true, it is then also true that all are lost who will not believe on Him, and that nothing remains for those who refuse to bend the knee to Him, but “**a fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.**”

It is true that whoever is not born of water and of the Spirit, cannot enter into the kingdom of God, and that he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him. For this likewise is testified by Him, who answered, "*I am,*" before the council; and if the latter be true, so is also the former. Hasten, therefore, to commit yourselves to the hands of Him, beside whom there is none to help you, either in heaven or on earth; nor be such enemies to yourselves as to choose death and the curse, now that life and immortality are brought to light, and offered to you freely in the Gospel. In reliance on the sacred oath of the Saviour, turn your backs upon the world, and cast yourselves into the arms and upon the heart of the only Mediator.

"*I am!*" - answered Jesus; and if He had not been, at the same time, the sacrificial Lamb destined to suffer for the human race, millions of voices would have sealed His testimony with their "Amen!" The seraphim with their golden harps would have hovered over Him and have exclaimed, "Jesus, thou art He!" From the foundations of the earth, which were laid by Him, would have resounded the same testimony; and the Eternal Father, with that voice which causes the mountains to tremble, would have called down from heaven, "**This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.**"

But silence reigns above, below, and around Him. The Priest of God is in the sanctuary, engaged in offering up His sacrifice. There all is silent. His enemies are permitted only to rage.

When Caiaphas hears the unequivocal confession, in order to manifest his hypocritical indignation at this supposed piece of impiety, he rends his clothes, by which act he unconsciously intimates symbolically the approaching dissolution of the typical priesthood, now that in the person of Christ, the true Priest had appeared.

In a few hours the temple will close; the offering up of lambs and of goats will have reached its termination in the sight of God. The Lord of heaven and earth will then retire forever from the Holy of Holies, made with hands, in order in future to take up His abode in those who are of a humble and contrite heart.

The high priest rends his clothes and says, "**What further need have we of witnesses?**"

The man is in the right. Had Jesus unwarrantably presumed to declare Himself to be the Son of God and the Judge of the world, He could not have been guilty of a more heinous blasphemy than by so doing. But why, ye judges of Israel, must that necessarily be false which He had just testified of Himself? Why should it be utterly inconceivable that He was the promised Lord from heaven? Was there anything in His life to contradict the assertion?

In spite of all your efforts, what did you find that was disreputable in it?

You can accuse Him of nothing, except that, in the declaration just made, He had unduly exalted Himself - which you must first prove - and in an unauthorized manner had appropriated divine honor to Himself. You were compelled to confess that He came forth from your examination pure as the light of heaven.

And tell me, is the testimony to His Sonship which He has just given, wholly isolated and unsupported? On the contrary is not His entire manifestation on earth a confirmation of it? Was it not established by voices from on high? Did not numbers of unheard-of signs and wonders surround it, like so many proofs of its truth? And has it not, as powerful witnesses in its favor, the whole choir of prophetic announcements which were most literally fulfilled in Him?

Such are the questions we might put to you, ye judges of Jerusalem.

But you would not that this Man should reign over you; and, therefore, you refused to acknowledge Him as that which He declared Himself on oath to be. Woe unto you, ye models of all judicial in justice! What will become of you when the day draws nigh in which you will be brought up for judgment, and when everything shall be brought to light that was hidden in obscurity!

“**What think ye?**” asks the high priest.

The whole assembly, then, as with one voice, taking the word from his lips, exclaim aloud, “**He is guilty of death.**”

Just so - as standing in our room and stead, it is really the case. Other and more exalted voices than those of the council mingle in the verdict. But what kind of death is it of which He is declared to be guilty? The death to which Jesus was condemned, He endured as the Representative of our guilty race. By His death He took from ours its sting, which is sin. All fear of death in the children of God is henceforth needless and groundless; and His saying remains forever true, that “**Whosoever believeth on him shall never see death.**”

We close our present meditation. You see the alternative which is placed before you - either forever to break with Jesus, and approve of the bloodthirsty sentence of the Sanhedrin, or to cry “Hosanna” to the lowly Nazarene, and fall in humble adoration at His feet, as God manifest in the flesh. There is here no middle path. How, therefore, do you decide? Even sound reason advises you to take part with us. In Jesus’ affirmation on oath before the high priest, behold the immutable Rock which bears and sustains our belief in Him! Build the house of your hopes for eternity thereon, and you shall never be confounded; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it!

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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