

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

PILATE OUR ADVOCATE

PILATE AGAIN FINDS HIMSELF in a great dilemma. By transferring the proceedings to Herod, he hoped to have escaped from his painful situation. But contrary to his expectation, the Galilean prince sends the accused back to him again, leaving it to him to terminate the affair he had once begun. The governor, not a little disturbed at this mistake in his calculations, turns again to the accusers of the Saviour and renews his attempt to rescue Jesus, and with Him his own peace of mind. He makes a speech to the priests, rulers, and the assembled populace, which, though it contains nothing but what we have already heard him state, is nevertheless worthy of our serious consideration, because in it, Pilate unconsciously and involuntarily appears as our advocate.

However strangely it may sound, Pilate becomes our advocate. He takes Christ our Head under his protection and us with Him. He legally absolves Him from all criminality and in Him His followers also.

He begins his address by saying, “**Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people.**”

In a certain sense, something of this kind may be asserted of the Saviour with truth. For even as He testifies to His believing followers that they are not of the world; so He also enjoins upon them not to be conformed to the world. He calls upon His people to “**come out from among them; for the friendship of the world is enmity with God.**”

In some degree, Christians will always be separatists. God has so organized them that a union of fire with water is sooner to be thought of than of them with the multitude. Their convictions, principles, tastes, opinions, and views of things in the world, as well as their wishes, hopes, and desires, all are directly opposed to the world's mode of thinking and acting. They are by nature and kind separated from the unregenerate world.

When the rulers of Israel charged Jesus with perverting the people, they wished it to be understood in a political sense. They declared Him to be the ringleader of a band of conspirators who strove to stir up the people against the emperor and the authorities and was therefore guilty of high treason.

Nor was our Lord either the first or the last of God's servants on whom such suspicions have been cast. Even Elijah was obliged to hear from Ahab the angry salutation, "**Thou art he that troubleth Israel;**" to which he calmly replied, "**I have not troubled Israel, but thou and thy father's house in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and thou hast followed Baalim.**"

In the same manner it was said to the king concerning Jeremiah, "**We beseech thee, let this man be put to death, for he weakeneth the hands of the men of war and seeketh not the welfare of this people but their hurt.**"

Later on we find Paul accused before Felix, much in the same manner: "**We have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.**"

And all the subsequent persecutions of the Christians under the Roman emperors took place under the pretext that the followers of Jesus were dangerous to the State, their views being directed to the weakening of allegiance and even to the subversion of the existing government. This false accusation has been handed down from age to age, although even Pilate most earnestly took us under his protection against such calumnies. We hear him loudly declare before the assembled multitude, that neither the throne nor the state had anything to fear from Jesus and His disciples.

"**Behold,**" says he, "**I have examined him before you, and find no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him; no, nor yet Herod; for I sent you to him, and lo! nothing worthy of death is done unto him.**"

Indeed, how was it possible to convict Him of a tendency to revolt who established the universal principle "**Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's;**" who seriously reproved Peter for assaulting in his defense, one of the meanest officers of the civil authorities, by saying to him, "**Put up again thy sword into its place, for all they that take the sword, shall perish with the sword;**" and who enjoins upon us to "**be subject to the higher powers, since there is no power but of God.**"

The Lord Jesus has passed through every examination; He has been put to one test after another, weighed in every scale, measured by every standard, and narrowly inspected by the light of a threefold law - the Levitical, civil, and moral. The veil has now to be removed from the result of the proceedings against him. The judge who has called the chief priests and rulers to be present at the solemn act, stands surrounded by a vast multitude; and when all are silent with expectation, he opens his mouth to pronounce the final sentence.

He declares aloud to the assembled crowd, "**Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people, and behold**" - this is said to the world at large - "**I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man, touching the things whereof ye accuse him; no, nor yet Herod, for I sent you to him, and lo! nothing worthy of death is done to him.**"

He concludes, and all are silent because they feel that Pilate has spoken the truth.

Now, although He who was free from sin, was in no wise guilty of death, either judicial or natural, which latter is called the “**wages of sin,**” yet still He dies.

He dies, who according to justice as well as the promise of God, ought not to die, but live; and dies a death which bears scarcely the remotest resemblance to martyrdom. If, by His death, He had only designed to confirm the truth of His doctrine, He would have failed in His object; since we cannot possibly think highly of a doctrine whose teacher at the gates of eternity is compelled to make the dreadful confession that God has forsaken Him.

But tell us now, why did Jesus die?

“**It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment;**” but He was not a sinner. Even the redeemed have no other way to the heavenly world than through death, because their flesh is corrupted by sin. But in Christ’s corporeality this is not the case; and yet He dies, and that in such a dreadful manner! Explain how this is. Take time to reflect. But however long and deeply you may study the subject, we tell you decidedly beforehand that you will not bring forward any rational, convincing, and satisfactory solution of this mystery.

Hear, therefore, how we view the subject, and consider whether there is room for any other. The monstrous fact that the just and spotless Jesus, notwithstanding His holiness was condemned to death, would compel us to the conclusion that the doctrine of a righteous God, who rules over all, is a delusion - that the will of man or chance alone govern the world - that there exists no divine retribution upon earth, and that it will not fare the worse with the impious than with the just - I say we should be necessarily compelled to inferences of this kind, if we were not permitted to assume that the immaculate Son of God suffered death in our stead.

This view of the subject furnishes the only key to the mystery of the ignominious end of the just and holy Jesus.

But if we presuppose an atonement made by Christ for sin - and we not only may do so, but are constrained to it by the clear evidence of Holy Writ - then all is plain; all is solved and deciphered, and a sublime meaning and a glorious connection pervades the whole.

God warned Adam in paradise, saying, “**In the day that thou eatest of the fruit of this tree, thou shalt surely die.**” We did eat of that fruit and incurred the penalty. But the eternal Son now appears, removes the penalty from us to Himself, and we live.

On Sinai it was said, “**Cursed be every one who continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.**”

We did not continue in them, and our fate was decided. But our Surety presents Himself, endures the curse for us, and we are justly delivered and absolved. God has resolved to save sinners, notwithstanding He has said, “**I will blot the name of him that sinneth out of my book.**”

We believe in our salvation, for He inflicted upon Christ the punishment due to us. God promised the crown of life only to the obedient; but after Christ as our representative obeyed in our name, God can bestow the crown on sinners and yet continue holy.

Thus all becomes clear, and the most striking opposites harmoniously agree. And yet men dare to call Our doctrine of the atonement made by Christ irrational, and even absurd. Look how Pilate unconsciously stands in the breach for us, by testifying to the truth that Jesus was not guilty of death. Attempt in a satisfactory and rational manner, if you can, to explain it otherwise than by the atonement made by Christ, how it was that even the holy and immaculate Son of God paid the wages of sin.

Pilate takes our part once more. He clears us of a new cause of reproach. He does not, indeed, do this directly, but he gives occasion for our being freed from it. We are accused of dispensing Scripture consolation too lavishly. We are reproved for extending the grace purchased for us by Christ to the greatest sinners and most depraved criminals. We are told that we are not justified in so doing, and that such conduct is dangerous and injurious to morality. But there is something intimated in that part of the narrative under consideration which fully repels the narrow-minded reproof, and justifies our procedure as being quite evangelical.

After Pilate has solemnly declared that no guilt attaches to the accused, he continues, “**I will therefore**” -release him? not so, but “**chastise him** (that is, with rods) **and release him.**”

Only think, what injustice! We are ready to say, “O Pilate, how is it possible that thou shouldst have recourse to such an expedient! Wilt thou scourge Him as a malefactor who said to thee with the clearest expression of truth, ‘**I am a King and to this end was I born, that I should bear witness of the truth,**’ and from the whole of whose deportment shone the radiance, not only of spotless holiness, but also of supernatural descent? O to what length does the miserable fear of man mislead thee and the pitiful anxiety for a little worldly honor and temporal comfort!”

But let us be silent. Pilate’s speech, “**I will chastise him and then release him,**” is still the language of numbers of this world’s children. He is chastised when men tear the crown of deity from His brow, and when they silently brand Him as a deceiver and blasphemer; but then begin to commend His excellences and virtues, and thus release Him after having maltreated him. They deny that He is the only way to heaven, although He Himself has said so, and in this way He is chastised; but then again, they applaud Him as the most eminent of teachers; and thus He is let go.

Men chastise Him by insulting His members upon earth, and vilifying those who boast of His meritorious sufferings as the sole ground of their salvation; but again release Him by making an outward obeisance at His communion-table, or by confessing that He was more than Socrates or Solon. Alas! we all carry about with us by nature a secret scourge for the Lord Jesus and never omit to use it in one way or other. But if our conscience asks, after such a chastising, why we are so averse and opposed to this Just One, who never injured us, we are wont instead of feeling penitent, to hide our own naughtiness behind the traitorous kisses we bestow upon Him, and again release the ill-treated Saviour by dubious marks of respect.

But to return. It was customary in Israel to chastise those with rods who after trial were convicted only of slight transgressions and then to release them.

Pilate was anxious to treat Jesus as a delinquent of this kind. One might have expected after all that had passed, by which the innocence of Jesus was placed in so clear a light, that his mediating proposition would have been responded to. But no; God had determined otherwise. It was intended that Christ should suffer as a criminal of the worst description, and that the lot of a murderer and an outcast of the human race should be His, and that not till then should the hour of redemption arrive.

But why was this? For what other reason than that, according to God's counsel and will, sinners and criminals like Manasses and Rahab might have reason to believe that the great Surety suffered for them also. Jesus was obliged to descend into the regions of darkness, into the being abandoned by God, and into the extreme of ignominy and suffering, that the vilest transgressors might not despair of mercy.

If this doctrine is dangerous, why do the apostles proclaim it as from the housetops? If it is contrary to God, why has he confirmed it in the case of David, Saul, Mary Magdalene, and even in that of greater sinners than these? If it is pernicious why do those who in themselves experience the truth of it exceed all others in their hatred to sin, and their zeal for God and his glory? Does it make them negligent and unfruitful in good works? The very reverse; for he that participates in the merits of Christ becomes also by Christ's Spirit a noble tree in the garden of God, which brings forth its fruit in its season. It is well for us that the case is as we have described it! If Christ had not endured the fate of the chief of sinners, who even among the enlightened could glory in Christ, since the Holy Spirit teaches all such to testify with Paul, **"Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief!"**

Pilate has done us a good office. Not only has he cleared us from a grievous accusation, but by the testimony he bore to the innocence of Jesus, he has also justified our view of the Lord's death and its import; and by his fruitless attempts to treat the Redeemer as a petty offender, he gave occasion to the Judge on the throne of majesty to frustrate his project, and by so doing, to make it known that Christ was to bear the curse even of the greatest sinner, according to the will and counsel of the Almighty. We feel ourselves deeply indebted to the Roman for the two last pieces of service which he has rendered us, for we confess that, with the atonement and satisfaction made by Immanuel, our peace as well as our hope stands or falls.

~ end of chapter 32 ~

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