

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

MATTHEW 27:27-56

THESE verses tell the story of the Passion and Passing of the King. To say that, is to recognize the difficulty of exposition, and to fill the soul with that awe and reverence without which all such attempts would be sacrilegious.

There are matters here too profound for words, things that cannot be fully apprehended by our finite minds. Here, as never before in the reading of this Gospel, we see the King in a loneliness and a dignity which defy explanation. The story is full of contradictions, and yet wonderfully complete. If we read it as a passage out of merely human history, it would be a story of an ignominious and overwhelming defeat. It is not too late to read it in that way. Nineteen centuries have revealed the fact that the rough and bloody Roman gibbet was the throne of imperial monarchy, and spiritual empire.

As we come to the story, we have the great advantage of all the gathered light of the experience of the Church, and the experience of the world, and we see these things as it would have been utterly impossible for men to see them at the time. The seeing of these things in the gathered light of the centuries, creates this difference, among others, between the men who looked upon them then, and ourselves. They imagined that they perfectly understood all that was happening. We know that we do not even now understand all that happened.

Had that been an ordinary death, then all that these men said in the presence of it was true; but that is a supposition which cannot be entertained in view of the effect which has been produced in individual, social, national, and worldwide life, as the issue of that Cross. There have been other details sublimely heroic; but to speak of this merely as heroic, is almost to insult it. There have been other deaths tragic and dreadful, and while this is more tragic than any other, to speak of it as a tragedy merely, would savour of irreverence.

One is quite powerless in the presence of this story. Here exposition has to end, save as perchance it may reverently touch upon some of the outer things. To the inner heart of the mystery exposition cannot penetrate. It is well in that connection to notice the remarkable reticence of Matthew. Other evangelists tell us more than he tells us, and yet they are all reverently reticent in the presence of the Cross. Much more might have been written of that scene in the palace, when Pilate, having handed Jesus over in answer to the clamour of the mob inspired by the priests, the whole band of Jews gathered about Him; but there is a dignity and reverent reticence in the story of Matthew.

That reticence is more marked as we proceed. He does not describe the crucifixion at all.

He does not describe it, but refers to it as a fact accomplished. We need in the reading of that to remember that between verses thirty-four and thirty-five the crucifixion took place. It would seem that Matthew, when writing the story of the King, turned away as though he would say to those who would read, I cannot even look upon that. Let us observe the same attitude. The longer one lives and contemplates this central mystery of our faith, the less one can peer into it on the material side, and the less one can attempt to explain it in the profundity of its spiritual meaning.

Let us, then, reverently meditate on this paragraph, in three ways.

- First, the attitude of God as revealed;
- Secondly, the attitude of the King;
- Finally, the attitude of humanity.

The attitude of God in the presence of this Passing and Passion of the King.

One may be inclined to say that the passage says hardly anything about God. And that indeed is the first matter which arrests attention, the apparent non-interference of God. That becomes most remarkable as we remember previous matters in this Gospel, how at the close of the years of privacy God broke the silence and spoke, “**This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased;**” how on the Mount of Transfiguration when His humanity had wrought itself out to an absolute perfection and was ready for glory, and yet turned again to the earthly way, and the way of sorrow, God said to the disciples who were fearful in their obedience and their following, “**This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased: hear ye Him.**”

Think of the relation existing between the King and God as we have seen it flashing out every now and then in the course of the ministry and teaching of Jesus.

Remember how He said, “**No man knoweth the Son, but the Father.**” Then turn to this picture in which we see this One, Who was perfect in His life, Who pleased God in His teaching so that God had broken the silence of heaven to set the seal of His approval upon Him, now in the midst of a brutal band of soldiers who were making sport of Him, and there was no interference.

That is the mystery of all mysteries.

- We talk of the problem of pain; there it is focused.
- We talk of the problem of evil, there it is concrete;

That God could leave Him alone in that hour of human persecution.

All this is most apparent at Golgotha. When the King was hanging upon the Cross and the interpreters of religion, the priests, misinterpreted God, there was a great silence. God’s non-interference is the first thing that impresses one, as the story is read.

But that is not all the story. It was not wholly non-interference.

There is one touch full of beauty; **“From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.”**

That seems to have been the act of God. It would seem that in infinite tenderness God wrapped the land in darkness in the hour of His Son’s supreme suffering. About those three hours we know nothing, save the words that escaped the lips of the Sufferer Himself.

Here we approach that which is perhaps the matter most difficult of interpretation. There came a moment when the voice was heard amid the darkness, and it said, **“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”** The men about the Cross were quite familiar with the words. They were not strange words. They were quoted from the Psalter, from the Worship-book of the Hebrew people. They had often chanted the Psalm in solemn monotone and recited it in many an hour of heart anguish. But there are values in it far deeper and more profound than the Psalmist knew when he wrote the song.

When he wrote it, it was the expression of sorrow such as he was then passing through. But it has become for evermore full of meaning to us, because Christ uttered these words upon the Cross.

There is great value in recognizing the fact that it was a human cry, and that Jesus quoted it. And the value is all the greater if we remember that all that follows in that twenty-second Psalm is an exposition of what it is to be God-forsaken.

The Psalmist was not looking at the Cross on the green hill, he had no vision of it; he was writing of his own heart’s agony; and here this One, this King upon the Cross, stretched back through the centuries and took hold of the most awful wail of agony that ever escaped the human heart, and quoted it as His own experience.

He was of our humanity, born of the virgin, throughout the whole of His public ministry He had spoken in human terms, and yet with an unequivocal Divine authority. When we look at this Cross and listen to His words thereon, we must be very careful that we do not divide between the Deity and the humanity of Jesus. If He was God manifest in the days of His teaching; He was God manifest on the Cross; God coming into identification with the issue of the sin of man.

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

It was first of all the cry of a soul at the uttermost of sin, having lost the vision of God.

It was the cry of a soul at the uttermost of sorrow, conscious of its lack of God. All sorrow is lack. All grief is consciousness of lack. And the final lack is God. When the soul becomes conscious of the lack of God, that is the uttermost sorrow. Moreover, it was the soul in the presence of mystery, in the presence of silence, with no voice, with no answer. Here, then, because this Man was God incarnate, because from beginning to end every word that fell from His lips was a word of God, this also is the word of God. In that moment He expressed in human speech the fact that the pains and penalties of the human sin were His.

That is as far as we can see into the Atonement. That is the heart of it, and the center of it, and the soul of it, and the marvel of it, and the mystery of it! If we make this Man upon the Cross a Man merely, then the presentation is out of harmony with the rest of the Gospel story, and out of harmony with the deepest of human experience concerning Him. But when we say that this Man upon the Cross was still the unveiled God, then all the physical bruising, terrible as it was, so that eyes can hardly bear to look on it, is but a material shadow of the suffering of the Divine heart in the presence of sin, by which suffering He dealt with sin and bore it, as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. We see the Man among the soldiers, we see them press the crown of thorns upon His brow; they are thorn-crowning God!

Whence came the thorns? Let us go back to the beginning of Bible human history, and we find it was said; **“Cursed is the ground for thy sake: in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life, Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee.”** In Pilate’s judgment hall, we see the soldiers with rough hands plaiting a rude crown of thorns; and there is a suggestiveness which arrests the soul. They were pressing back into the brow of God incarnate, the very curse that followed sin. And what was He doing? We speak of the non-interference of God; it was His non-interference with Himself, for it was His determination to work out the mystery of His pain in the shedding of blood in order to cleanse the very sin of the men who crushed the thorns upon His brow.

But where was God when the last word had been spoken and the King had yielded up His Spirit? And again the answer was not the answer of speech, but the answer of an act. **“And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.”** That was a great symbolic act, indicating the fact that symbolism was for ever over. The veil of the Temple was that which excluded men from God. Think of that holy of holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, of its darkness! No light was ever there! There had been light in olden days when the glory of the Shekinah shone between the overshadowing wings of the cherubim; but that had long since passed away.

Men were outside, not permitted to enter. But when our King died, the veil was rent, and that meant first that light broke through where all had been darkness, and secondly that the God Who had been a mystery became a Revelation, shining out upon all human history; and it meant also that excluded men were admitted. What happened when the veil was rent? All the world was brought inside; and all souls were made priests, who come through the name and merit of the Priest Who that day had died. And so if we see first the non-interference of God; we see also the triumph of God by identification with men; and we see that triumph manifested, in the rending of that veil.

Now let us reverently look at the King Himself. We begin exactly where we began before. Mark these words for a moment as the very words of the King Himself:

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

Notice that they indicate His identification with God in the experience of that issue. No one can read this story consecutively from the beginning of the Gospel until this point and imagine that in the Cross there was some kind of conflict as between Christ and God.

There was nothing to mar the perfect harmony between God and Christ in that Cross. He was neither persuading God to love us, nor overcoming reluctance in the heart of God to save us. He was co-operating with the work of God in the revelation of the love that makes man know what the heart of God really is.

As we listen to the voice of the King, we detect the perfect harmony, and realize how here, as everywhere, the first recorded words of Jesus were still true, “**Knew ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?**”

This also was His business, and the King was in perfect accord with the law and purposes of God.

He cried with a loud voice. Matthew does not tell us what He said, but that having spoken, He yielded up His Spirit; very literally, He sent His Spirit away. This was a phrase in common use to describe death.

In the Cross of Christ, it was justified. We have seen as we have traced the story, how, in the last days of the King’s Passion, as He was approaching the Cross, He compelled circumstances to His own will, and the same fact is revealed here. That was the King’s triumph. He triumphed, not merely by resurrection, and not alone in that He compelled the hour of His dying to fall in with the counsels of God and with the symbolism of the ancient system, but in that, at the moment when He had passed through all, “**He yielded up the ghost.**”

As we look at the attitude of humanity we need do no more than indicate certain lines of thought.

It is a very interesting study, that of the people who gathered about the Cross of Jesus.

We see humanity materialized, in the soldiers.

- They began by making sport of Him in the palace.
- Then they manifested a touch of rough pity as they offered Him the wine and the gall.
- This was succeeded by an awful indifference, as, having done their work of crucifixion, in the sight of the Cross they gambled for His garments; and “**they watched Him.**”

To what depths humanity falls when its ideals are materialized! To these men there was no beauty that they should desire Him, because they were blind to all high and spiritual things.

But there is a worse picture than that. It is that of religion in the presence of the Cross.

The most devilish thing in human history is religion when it becomes false.

The higher and the nobler a thing, the lower and the more ignoble it becomes when it is false.

Begin on the lowest level of illustration.

A lost woman is a greater tragedy than a lost man. All reformers and all workers know that it is most difficult to lift and reclaim a woman. And why is this? Because her nature is finer, nearer the spiritual.

One is appalled by the ignorance of the priests, far more than horrified by their brutality. **“He saved others, Himself He cannot save.”**

Now had these men had any spiritual understanding at all, they would have known that this was not true of Jesus merely, but has always been true of humanity. In order to save any one to the highest degree, from the lowest plane, the saviour must be willing not to save himself. It is only by the giving of our life away that we can hope to save another life.

The whole of life is built upon that great principle, and yet here were interpreters of moral and spiritual things, flinging this as a gibe and a taunt into the face of the dying Christ Himself, **“He saved others, Himself He cannot save.”**

Then observe their misinterpretation of God:

“He trusteth in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him; for He said, I am the Son of God.”

How ignorant they were of God!

All the things they said to Him were true, but not as they meant them. These final taunts of the priests constitute a great revelation of the heart of atonement.

There is one other group at which we will glance, that of the women.

Reverently, though perplexed; loyal, though disappointed; standing afar off and waiting; were the women who had ministered to Him. We leave them there, that sorrow-stricken company. We shall meet them again; and we shall find that some of them stayed and watched His burial. No apostles did. Some of them watched through the darkness of the night for the break of day. No apostle did.

As we look back at that scene, we thank God for the women who waited!

Look finally at that Cross. It is the throne. See how it divides to the right and the left.

It divided the soldiers. One of their number looked, and looked, the captain of the band, the centurion, and the truth broke upon him, and he said, **“Truly this was the Son of God.”**

It divided the thieves; the dying Christ had no word for one but the imperial word of entrance to light for the other.

It divided attitudes of mind; priests and women; priests laughing and mocking in their ignorance of spiritual things; women waiting and worshipping in their ignorance of what He was doing.

So to-day we are judged by that Cross, and when we pass our verdict upon it, the verdict we pass upon it is, if we could but hear and understand it, its verdict upon us. Ever since that hour, that has been His throne for present administration. Presently He will change it for the throne of glory, and the throne of empire. To that throne of the Cross He brings us now; and according to what we do with it, He will do with us, when He sits on the throne of His glory.

~ end of chapter 71 ~

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