

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BARABBAS

THE MOST MOMENTOUS CRY that was ever heard under heaven has been uttered. To the governor's question "**Whom will ye that I release unto you, Jesus or Barabbas?**" the dreadful answer has been returned by the tumultuous crowd, "**Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas!**"

More than an echo of this cry resounds through the world to this day; for all who reject Christ as the Saviour of sinners and are eager on the contrary for the upholding of the honor, independence and liberty of their "**old man,**" likewise say in fact, "**Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas!**" But is not this the language we have inherited from our corrupt nature as such? Undoubtedly it is. Yet even from the lips of faith we hear the same.

The people, instigated by their rulers, have boldly and plainly expressed their will. They desire the pardon of the murderer and the death of the righteous Jesus. From that moment, it is pitiable to see how the judge, entirely thrown out of his course, sinks deeper at every step. Scarcely aware any longer of what he was saying, he cries out, "**What shall I do then with Jesus, which is called Christ?**"

Only think of his asking the raging multitude what he must do with Jesus, who, before he put the question to them, had already answered him in the most convincing manner.

His conscience, his inward feeling of justice, the letter of the law by which he is bound, and even the warning voice contained in the dream of his wife - all tell him, clearly and definitely, what he ought to do with Jesus. He ought to pronounce Him free, and then with all the power that stood at his command, take him under his protection against the uproarious multitude. But where is he to find courage for this? "**What shall I do then with Jesus?**" Truly these words are an eternal shame and disgrace to him.

But how many of our contemporaries share this disgrace with him, since they make what they ought to do with Jesus depend on the popular voice, the prevailing tone of society, and what is called public opinion!

I have even often thought I heard preachers in their pulpits imitate Pilate in asking, "What am I to do with Jesus?" and I cannot tell you how discordantly the question sounded in my ears. They did not appear to know whether they ought to pray to Jesus or not - whether to confess Him before the congregation to be God, or only man - whether to recommend Him to them as redeemer or teacher; and nothing seemed more disagreeable to them than to be compelled officially to have to do with Jesus.

But woe unto him who can still ask, "What shall I do with Jesus?"

Such a one's mind is beclouded and he is still very far from salvation. What has the blind man to do with his guide who offers him his arm? the sick man with the medicine presented to him? the drowning man with the rope that is thrown to him? - if we know how to answer these questions, how is it that we can be perplexed at replying to the other?

Pilate asks, "**What shall I do with Jesus?**"

The people will not leave him long in suspense. The more they see their rulers timidly give way and enter upon the path of concessions, the stronger grows their audacity.

"**Crucify Him!**" they cry, briefly and decisively. The governor, beside himself with amazement at seeing the fabric of his calculations so suddenly overthrown, comes again before them with the unavailing question, "**Why, what evil hath he done?**"

But the people, scarcely deigning an answer to the miserable judge, repeat with still greater insolence, "**Crucify Him! Crucify Him!**"

The increasing weakness and irresolution of the governor necessarily made the crowd believe that he himself did not regard it as any monstrous crime that Christ should be crucified.

Pilate appears as if he wished to say something more; but the people have now the upper hand, and they refuse to hear him. Wild uproar drowns his voice. In spite of every effort, he can no longer make himself heard. The heartless succumbing man has then recourse to a symbolical act. He calls for a vessel with water; and on its being presented to him, washes his hands before all the people and cries out as loudly as he can to the tumultuous mob, "**I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it!**"

This renewed judicial testimony to the innocence of our great High Priest is to us very satisfactory. Pilate's urgent desire and earnest endeavor to rid himself of the crime of condemning the righteous Jesus can only aid in strengthening our faith. But we are deeply affected at the sight of the poor depressed man - how he writhes under the scourge of his own conscience and ineffectually strives to wash away from his hands the bloody spots, however much he may object to acknowledge them.

"**I am innocent!**" he exclaims. But what avails such an assertion? The monitor in his bosom does not confirm it; the minutes of the proceedings are referred to a higher tribunal where the decision will sound very differently. He washes his hands.

O why this ceremony? Where is the fountain which yields water able to cleanse from spots like those that adhere to him? There is indeed a stream which would have produced the desired effect, but Pilate is ignorant of it.

If, in lieu of his innocence he had professed his guilt, and instead of the unavailing washing, had resorted to the blood of atonement - then he would have been safe for time and eternity, and his name have secured a place in the list of the citizens of Christ's kingdom. But Pilate, under the influence of beggarly pride will not acknowledge himself as overcome, although hell and the world never set their feet triumphantly on the neck of a more discomfited man than he. But man is by nature so constituted that he would rather give himself up to Satan in the snare of the most idiotic self-delusion than do honor to the truth, which humbles him for his good.

"See ye to it!" exclaims Pilate, hurling the entire impious act on the heads of the Jews; thereby returning upon the priests and scribes - not without God's permission **"to whom vengeance belongeth"** - the very words with which they, with cruel and unpitying coldness, repelled the despairing Judas. They feel indeed the sting of those words, but know how to conceal their embarrassment and shame behind a horrible outburst of impiety. **"His blood be upon us and our children!"** they cry in satanic defiance, and all the people join with them.

Dreadful indeed! As long as the world stands, a more horrifying, self-anathematizing speech has never been heard. But listen! Does it not seem to you as if a voice of thunder sounded down from the throne of Deity, crying out, "Be it unto you according to your wish! let his blood come upon you as you desire!" And oh! only cast a glance at the history of Israel from the moment when that unhappy demand was made to the present hour, and it will prove that you heard correctly.

How did the blood of that Righteous One come upon His murderers when the proud city of Jerusalem was laid in ashes by the torches of the Romans, and scarcely so much wood could be produced as sufficed to prepare crosses for the children of Abraham!

How did it come upon them, when having slain the Prince of Peace, they were driven out like useless chaff, to the four winds of heaven, and condemned thenceforward to roam about in inhospitable regions, without a home, the scorn of all the world!

How did it come upon them, when as the offscouring of all nations, and as if they were unworthy to tread the ground, they yielded up their lives by thousands and tens of thousands under heathen, Mohammedan, and even professing Christian swords and daggers!

And when we now look at them, as being still a proscribed people, according to Hosea's prophecy, **"Without a king and without a prince, and without sacrifice, and without an image, without an Ephod, and without Teraphim"** - is it not as if we read the cause of their miserable banishment on their foreheads, in the words, **"His blood be upon us and upon our children"**?

But the mercy of God is great. He has still thoughts of peace toward His ancient people, who are not yet given up.

In due time He will cause the horrible language of the curse they invoked upon themselves to have the validity of a prayer in His sight and the blood of His Son, as already experienced by individuals of that race, to come upon all Israel as an atonement.

The prophet Hosea adds the joyful promise to the threatening so dreadfully verified:
“Afterward, they shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king.”

And Zechariah opens to us the prospect of a time **“when ten men shall take hold, out of all languages of the nations, of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”**

The Lord Himself says, in the most significant manner, referring to the termination of their wretchedness, **“Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!”**

And what is the language of the Apostle Paul, with reference to them. **“God,”** says he, **“is able to graft in again the branches which were broken off. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”**

The people, with diabolical determination, have declared their will and sealed their fate with an imprecation, than which a more impious one has scarcely ever been heard in the world. The governor is no longer able to cope with this manifestation of firmness on the part of the people. He sees himself robbed of the last particle of his moral armor, and compelled to lay down his arms, and surrender in the most disgraceful manner.

How do we read? **“And so Pilate, willing to content the people, gave sentence that it should be as they required, and released unto them Barabbas, who for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired, but he delivered Jesus to their will that he should be scourged.”**

This is therefore the result of all the serious and powerful warnings which had been given to Pilate. He had received such decided impressions of Jesus' moral purity and innocence, and had even been admonished by a voice from the other world, as well as by his own conscience; and yet this disgraceful defeat - this cowardly retreat - this shameful yielding to the will of the crowd!

O what is man with all his propriety of feeling and will, so long as he stands in his own strength, and has not yielded himself up with his whole confidence to God and His grace! The Lord says, **“My strength is perfected in weakness;”** and hence we find Paul saying, **“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”**

Barabbas is free, although still ignorant of the decision made in his favor outside his prison, and of the fortunate lot which is fallen to him. Dejected, and even despairing of deliverance, he continues lying in his gloomy dungeon; and in every noise that reaches him from a distance, he imagines he hears the tread of the executioner coming to lead him away to the scaffold.

At length he plainly hears the massive bolts of his prison door drawn back, and the rusty hinges creak on its being thrown open-but-dare he trust his own eyes? What a sight! Instead of the executioner, a messenger from the civil authorities rushes in with a smiling countenance, and brings him the amazing and almost incredible intelligence that he is free - that his life is saved.

Barabbas now learns that the sentence of death has been removed from him forever, and that he has no longer to do with courts of justice, judges, or jailors; that no accusation will be listened to against him; that he is restored to the full possession of the rights and privileges of citizenship, and so situated as if he had never committed a crime; but that the sole cause of this happy change in his circumstances lies in the fact that One who was perfectly guiltless had taken his place, and trodden the path to the cross in his stead. The people at their Easter election had decided on the death of this righteous Man, and for his liberation.

All this is told to Barabbas. In the herald who informs him of it, we see the image of a true evangelist. Yes, know ye spiritually poor - ye who are bending under the weight of your transgressions, and are crying for mercy - that we have to bring you a similar message to that which Barabbas received, only of a far greater, more glorious, and incomparably more blissful nature than his.

Nor are we permitted to withhold or diminish it in any degree. After Christ has made the mysterious exchange with you, we are commissioned of God to inform you in plain terms, that from the moment in which the holy Jesus took your place, you assumed His, and are installed into all the rights and immunities of the citizens of His kingdom.

You are now justified in the sight of God, and accepted of Him. No condemnation any longer attaches to you. No sin will any more be laid to your charge, no accusation given ear to against you. This we can tell you, yet not we, but the infallible Word of God in plain terms; and we call upon you in God's name to believe this Word; and to rejoice in it to the honor of Christ.

How does Barabbas act after receiving the glad tidings?

The Bible does not tell us; but we may easily imagine it. If he had said to himself, "It is impossible that this can have reference to such a criminal as I;" and had resisted when his chains were being removed, how should we designate such conduct? You would call it senseless and be justified in doing so. But I fear that this reproach may attach to some believers. Suppose Barabbas had rejected the message with a protest and had replied to the herald, "What thou sayest is absurd and cannot be founded on truth."

What would have been the consequence? By so doing, he would have insulted the herald and the authorities that sent him, and have branded them as liars.

But such is precisely your case, my friend, who in your legality resist the grace of God in Christ. You unceasingly offend not merely a human messenger, but the Holy Spirit, who speaks to you in the Scriptures; the apostles of the Lord, who so plainly testify to you of divine mercy; and Christ Himself, who assures you that whosoever believeth shall be saved.

Yes, you infringe upon the glory of God, as if He only offered you a partial deliverance, and had not wholly and completely provided it.

Suppose that Barabbas had replied to the announcement of his liberty, “No, for the present at least I will not leave my prison, but will first become another man and prove that I have amended myself.” What do you suppose the authorities would have answered? “Dost thou imagine,” they would have said, “that thou are liberated for thy own sake? Thou wouldst never have been free on that ground. Though thou mightest have become ten times better, thou wouldst never be able to remove the guilt thou hast contracted. In the eye of the law, thou wouldst continue a murderer as before; and if thou dost not make a free use of the pardon offered thee, know that thou wilt vainly calculate upon ever being liberated.”

Take to heart this official announcement, for it is of high importance and points out the way in which you ought to walk. Suppose Barabbas had said, “I will remain a prisoner, until after being injurious to society, I have shown myself a useful member of it.” This might have sounded nobly; but strictly examined, would it not also be absurd? Doubtless you would have replied to him and said, “What folly! before thou canst become useful to society, thou must become free. For, of what service or benefit canst thou be to others, as long as thou art fettered and in prison?”

Take this lesson also to heart, my friends. It is applicable to so many, who foolishly seek to become holy before they make room for the comfort of pardoning mercy.

Probably, however, not one of all these ideas occurred to Barabbas. I doubt not, that on receiving the joyful message, he gladly accepted it and gave himself up to a transport of delight. He immediately shook off his chains, left his dark dungeon, exchanged his convict dress for the attire of a citizen, and made every use of the liberty offered him. He returned to his family, joying and rejoicing, and never forgot how much he was indebted to the mysterious man of Nazareth for life, freedom, and all that he possessed, who was condemned in his stead, and by His death, saved his life.

And you who like Barabbas may be still languishing in the gloomy dungeon of inward anxiety, care, and sorrow, go and do likewise. Believe the gospel message, that for Christ’s sake, you are eternally liberated from curse and condemnation. Listen no longer to the accusations of Satan, the world, or your own conscience. Enjoy the fruit of the suretyship of your great Representative. Live in peace and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

~ end of chapter 34

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