

# THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

### THE MALEFACTOR

AGAIN WE DIRECT OUR EYES UPWARD. The three crucified individuals form the center of our present meditation. The dying men are alike in their situation, in so far as each of them has now arrived at the last stage of his earthly pilgrimage, and is hovering on the solemn and awful brink of a momentous eternity. He who hangs in the midst, although exposed to a raging storm, takes in the sails for a peaceful entrance into the haven of repose.

We see the other two, on the contrary, almost shipwrecked, and threatened with the most dreadful ruin, struggling with the billows. They had opened their hearts to delusion; had pursued temporal enjoyments, and were carried along unrestrainedly from sin to sin, till arrested at length as murderers, they were crucified as an atonement to public justice. Pleasure is short, repentance long.

O folly and madness, to devote themselves to the service of the devil instead of to that of the Most High God, while the most costly rewards of the former are only Belshazzar's feasts and the hands of the executioner!

Yet immense is the number of those who, like the herd into which the unclean spirits entered, do not cease to plunge themselves into the gulf of destruction after their deluded forerunners.

The two malefactors have hung there for a while in silence; but have been unable to turn away their eyes from the wonderful Man who welters in His blood by their side, and in whom the vital and bodily appearance of a superhuman sanctity was by no means hidden from them.

At length the one on Jesus' left begins to speak. Joining in the blasphemous speeches which rise up from the crowd below, he says to the Man in the crown of thorns, "**If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.**"

The meaning of these words is doubtless manifold. The malefactor has evidently received the impression respecting the Man at his side, that if He only would, He could both save Himself and them; and his speech to Him was an attempt, though a desperate one, to lay hold of Christ by His honor, and thereby to induce Him to an act of rescue.

But the mistrust he placed in the willingness of Jesus to perform such a miracle far exceeded the hope in Him, and hence the words proceeded from him in a tone of vexation and bitter railing against Christ.

But who inspired him with the idea that the Lord, supposing He had the power, would still not save him? His conscience testified it. The spotless purity of the mysterious Sufferer threw a bright reflection even into the dark mind of the malefactor, and condemned him in his inmost soul by the mere display of its brilliance. Hence the words proceeded from him like the bite of the poisonous adder - **“If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.”**

Wretched man, now should He who by a word could have burst the bonds of hell and of death, not have been able to save Himself, if higher considerations had not induced Him to act otherwise!

**“Save thyself and us!”**

O unparalleled audacity, to degrade the Lord of heaven to a level with himself - a son of Belial, and besides this, to claim His help, although his heart was hardened against Him! Yet echoes of these taunting words of the malefactor still very frequently reach our ears. How often do we hear people say, while biting their lips, “Say no more about your God; for if He be God, why does He leave us in our wretchedness?” First humble thyself in the dust, and submit without reserve to His scepter, and then wait and see if He will not let mercy take the place of justice.

No answer is returned to the malefactor on the left. There would still have been help for the robber and murderer; but there is no deliverance for the impenitent scoffer and hardened child of unbelief. The Lord is obliged to leave the wretched man to his fate - yes, the Lord, the only Saviour in heaven and on earth. Who does not tremble? But God is a God of order, and even His mercy is never arbitrarily bestowed.

Turn your eyes now to the right of the divine Sufferer.

Here a spectacle is preparing, at which our souls may recover from the horror which took possession of them at the preceding scene. A refreshing contrast is presented by the other malefactor, whom, though equally guilty with the pitiable companion of his fate, and on the verge of hell, we behold rending and casting away the fetters of Satan, just in time, and then ascending a path which is not trodden too late even from the station which precedes the pit of destruction.

We are not expressly informed what it was that principally exercised such a blessed and transforming influence on the heart of this individual, who, as may be inferred from the Gospel narrative, had joined shortly before in the raillery against Jesus.

It might have been the Lord’s heart-affecting prayer for His murderers, and the full splendor of dignity and holiness in which He shone. Suffice it to say that the change which was wrought in the soul of the poor criminal was evidently thorough and decisive, and appears as the commencement, at least, of a complete regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

There he hangs silently on the cross; but every feature in his face, which is turned toward the divine Sufferer, unfolds and displays to us the world within him. We clearly see how the evil spirits have departed from him, and a solemn train of holy thoughts and emotions passes through his soul. The taunting attack of his companion in tribulation on Jesus' left loosens his tongue, which had been silent from contrition and reverence. He feels compelled to object against being included in the blasphemous appeal, "**If thou be the Christ, save us!**" He is constrained to renounce all participation in such insulting language. He knows the importance as well as the awfulness of the moment, which places an opening eternity before him, and feels no longer any fellowship with his companion in crime as regards the Man who is crowned with thorns.

The horror which seizes him at the impious words of his fellow-sufferer is indescribable; and he begins to say to him, "**Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?**" Ah, he himself trembled at the thought of the Judge of quick and dead! O how moving and heart-affecting is this call to repentance from one delinquent to another! But hear him further: "**And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds!**" O hear this language of sincere abasement before the majesty of the law. Listen to this self-accusation in which as far as regards criminality he places himself on the same footing with the other malefactor! It is the language of manly self-deliverance from the net of delusion-of courageous homage offered to truth - and of a resolute return from the way of darkness to that of light and salvation.

Let us listen further to this malefactor. "**But this man,**" continues he, "**has done nothing amiss.**" What a fresh and pleasing testimony this is to the innocence of Jesus. O how evident it must have been from the Saviour's whole deportment, that, as the apostle says, "**He knew no sin.**"

From all the clouds of ignominy and accusation which covered Him, the light of His divine spotlessness and beauty shone so victoriously forth that the blindest shrank back from it in amazement; and every moment His well-known prediction was almost literally verified, "**If these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out!**"

Something really astonishing now succeeds. The work of grace in the heart of the malefactor throws off its last veil. Who would have expected that we should have witnessed anything of the kind on that awful hill! After the malefactor has rebuked his blaspheming fellow-sufferer, he turns his face again to Him, who increasingly became his only hope and the object of his affection, and says to Him, unpresumingly, humbly, devoutly and confidently, "**Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.**"

Here is divine illumination in midnight darkness. Even the enlightenment of an apostle scarcely reaches to this malefactor's height of faith. "**Lord,**" says he, not Rabbi, not teacher, or master, no, in the word "*Kyrie*," he applies to him the title of Majesty. By this expression he brings out of the appearance of a worm that is trodden upon, the heavenly King of Glory.

"**Remember me,**" continues he, with a boundless reliance and confident childlike supplication.

O how much is implied in this ejaculation! It is the expression of the most vital conviction of the existence of a future world; for it is not help from the bodily distress in which he languishes; but the malefactor desires something very different and superior. It is further a loud testimony to the necessity of a mediation, if sinners are to be saved. "Intercede for me," he means to say, "speak a kind word for me a sinner; put in a word of entreaty on my behalf." Yes, it is a frank confession that the Man in the crown of thorns is the Mediator, and therefore he flees to Him with the confidence that His intercession with the Father, and that only, can save him from eternal death.

To the supplication contained in the words "**Remember me,**" the malefactor adds, "**when thou comest in** (not into) **thy kingdom.**" What does he mean by this? Does he mean, "Thy undertaking has not failed. Die, and from Thy prison of death Thou shalt again come forth triumphant? Thy kingdom shall come, and Thy throne exist forever?" Certainly he means nothing else. He intends to say, "To thee belongs the world; the banner of Thy peaceful kingdom will wave from pole to pole. When Thou shalt have established Thy throne, then grant that I, a poor criminal, may be received among the meanest of Thy servants."

What a herald of Christ in the midnight darkness of the crucifixion! What a bright and guiding star for all who seek a haven of rest on the stormy sea of life! We feel astonished at the great and penetrating faith of this malefactor. But here convince yourselves anew how rapidly the profoundest mysteries of heaven display themselves to the awakened feeling of the need of salvation.

O if thou ever becomest powerfully conscious of thy estrangement from God, and dost feel that thou needest nothing so much as mercy, truly the spirit of illumination from above would soon descend upon thee, and thou wouldst be aware that in the Gospel and its plan of salvation, there is the only conceivable way of escape for beings who come short of the glory of God. Yes, we should then soon hear from thy lips the words "**Lord, remember me in thy kingdom!**" The malefactor has spoken. Now listen to the Lord's reply. It will reveal something very astonishing.

The high and lofty One, whom the criminal discovered beneath the thorn-crowned bleeding form by his side now comes actually forth in His glory. Calvary becomes a palace, the cross a throne of the Judge of all worlds. The Man in the crown of thorns accepts the prayer which the poor criminal addressed to Him, and impresses the confirming seal upon his distinguished faith. There is no rejection, as if he were mistaken in his hope - no reproof, as if he were an enthusiast and expected too much from Him, but rather an encouragement to hope still more boldly, since he was not mistaken in Him. With the full conviction of being the only-begotten Son of the Father, which He was, as well as the true and only Mediator between God and man, the Lord says, turning to the malefactor with a look full of grace and mercy, and loud enough for those who stood around Him to hear, "**Verily, I say unto thee, to-day shalt thou be with me in paradise.**"

Here you have the great and majestic words which, if they were the only testimony Jesus had given of Himself, would forever decide the question who He was - the words which, bursting the bonds of death, and opening a heaven of consolation, have sounded like a peaceful chord of paradise in the ears of millions on their dying beds; the words which comprehend the whole result of the sufferings and death of Christ, the Bridegroom of our souls.

O attend well to these words! They are the most precious boon which Christ has thrown into our lap from His cross.

Let every syllable of them be well weighed by us.

“**Verily,**” says our Lord at the commencement, and this is the confirmation of His words. How important is this assertion, uttered by such a mouth, at such a time, when on the threshold of eternity! How suited to dispel all our doubts. Unspeakably elevating is the fullness of confidence and certainty manifested in our Lord’s speech to the dying criminal. The fact is firm as a rock, that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life-immutably firm; that He bears the keys of hell and of death; that He will conduct the penitent sinner through the night of death into eternal life; and how greatly does this His own assurance tend to confirm and animate our faith in Him!

That which so highly ravishes us in His words, next to His confidence, is the repetition of the poor criminal’s request in a superior degree. To his appellation of “**Lord!**” the thorn-crowned Jesus replies with the words, “**I say unto thee.**” And what else does this imply, but “I am so; thou art not mistaken in Me. Thou canst not think too highly of Me.”

Upon the petition, “**Remember me,**” follow the Lord’s words, “**Thou shalt be with me**” - that is, “I shall not need first to think of thee;” for we think not of those who are present, but of those who are absent. The period indicated by the word “**when,**” the Lord responds to by the assertion, “**this day**” - not at some distant period, but this day shall be the happy day of thy deliverance and redemption.

To the criminal’s appeal, “when thou comest into thy kingdom, or appearest in thy regal glory,” the Lord replies: “I am a King already. I will take thee with Me into paradise. With this bleeding hand will I open to thee the gates of the world of blessedness.”

The words addressed by the Sufferer to the malefactor produce lastly, such a beneficial effect upon us, because they bear in them an infallible testimony to the perfection and all-sufficiency of the redemption accomplished by Him for us. For on what ground is it that Jesus so confidently promises instead of the curse, salvation to a sinner? He promises paradise solely on the ground of His ever valid work of mediation and atonement.

The three crosses on Calvary present to us a very important subject for consideration. They afford us an image of the world, Christ in its midst; but to the one He is set for the rising, and for the falling of the other - a savor of life unto life to the one, and of death unto death to the other. You behold a sinner on His right hand and another on His left; but He is so little ashamed of their society that on the contrary, He then feels in His element and at home, because He can there exhibit His love to man - there heal and save.

You see in the three crosses, further, an actual exposition of the Saviour’s words, “**I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.**” For who is it that serves the malefactor on His right, in opposition to His fellow-sufferer on the left, as a bridge on which he may pass from a state of curse to that of grace?

Who is it that enlightens him by that marvelous light, whose rays penetrate into his inmost soul, and expel all the phantoms of delusion from him? And lastly, who is it that takes from his bosom the consciousness of a state of death, and replaces it with the most blissful and vital hope? - yea, that imparts to his soul, even on this side eternity, a new life of peace, supernatural joy, divine consciousness of adoption, and the most heartfelt longing after heaven? Is it not the thorn-crowned Sufferer there who is the author of it all?

Finally, the scene on Calvary affords us a representation of the boundless power and wonderful efficacy of the merits of our great High Priest. For even as the word “**to-day**,” in our Lord’s announcement, represents all future purging and purifying fires as forever extinguished in His blood, as regards His believing people-so the expression, “**This day shalt thou be with me in paradise**,” affords us a stupendous proof that Christ’s vicarious satisfaction perfectly suffices for the sinner’s justification and beatification.

Certainly we must duly observe that the malefactor was in a state of true and thorough repentance, and that after breaking with sin by penitential grief, and opening his heart to Jesus by a living faith, he had received into himself all the germs of a subsequent sanctification-germs which immediately began to unfold themselves in the compassionate love in which he took to heart the critical state of his companion to come.

Anticipate the next few moments, and what do you see occur above the summit of Calvary? The three who were crucified bow their heads, and the great separation is accomplished. Alas! he on Jesus’ left descends also to the left; and the powers of darkness will have received him who, even in death, could insult the Lord of Glory. The criminal to the right, on the contrary, soars heavenward, at the side of the Prince of Peace, and received into His triumphal chariot, passes amid the acclamations of angels through the gates of paradise. He was the first herald who by his appearing there brought the glorified spirits the intelligence that Christ had won the great battle of our deliverance. As the first-fruits of the sufferings of the divine Surety, as well as of the blessed human harvest which should spring up from the wondrous seed of His blood, he may still be especially embraced by the worshipers of the Lamb in the realms above as a particularly dear citizen of the heavenly kingdom. To us he remains both an incomparable monument of the all-sufficiency of the blood of Christ, and a lofty candlestick on which the free grace of God beams as a flame, and an extremely significant beacon, yea., a light-house established by God for us on our passage through life. O, be assured that the spiritual footsteps of the dying malefactor, with the words, “**Remember me!**” on his lips, point out to us to this day the only path that leads to Zion.

~ end of chapter 45 ~

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