

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PETER'S TEARS

OUR PRESENT MEDITATION will console us for the grief we experienced when considering the depth of Peter's fall. We here witness the shedding of tears, which, next to those that flowed from our Lord Himself at the grave of Lazarus, over ungodly Jerusalem, and in Gethsemane, may be regarded as the most remarkable that were ever shed upon earth. They have dropped, like soothing balm, into many a wounded heart. May they not fail to produce a blessed effect on many others!

We again meet with Peter at the moment when, completing his denial of Jesus, he formally abjures his discipleship with heavy curses. Observe, this is done by the very individual from whose lips the great confession had previously proceeded - **"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God;"** and the ardent and sincere declaration - **"Though all men should forsake thee, yet will not I."**

But what are even the best of men when left for a moment to themselves? And what would become of the most faithful of Christ's followers, if the Lord were only for a short time to remove the restraints of His grace? O the folly of trusting to the finest feelings, seeing that we are not sure of them for a single second!

Peter has first to learn, in the school of experience, like us all, that we presume too much if we rely upon ourselves, even in the most trifling temptation.

The love of Christ constrains us to venture everything for Him; but it is only the belief in Christ's love for us, and the trusting to His gracious power and strength, that enables us to overcome. He who trembles at himself, as being capable of denying his Master, will gain greater victories than he who deems himself sufficiently strong to be able to say, **"Though all men forsake thee, yet will not I."** **"Thou standest by faith,"** writes Paul in Romans. **"Be not high-minded, but fear."** **"Therefore,"** says the same apostle, **"I will rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."**

Peter is vanquished. Hell triumphs. Nevertheless, hell begins to cry "victory" too soon. Listen to what is passing in the judgment hall of the palace.

The appalling sentence has just been uttered in the midst of a tumultuous uproar. **“What further need have we of witnesses! He has blasphemed God, and is guilty of death.”**

“Who?” we ask, astonished. “Simon Peter?” No, another - a Holy One; even He who once exclaimed, **“I lay down my life for the sheep.”** He is now ready to do so, and Peter belongs also to His flock from whom the curse is transferred to Him, the Surety, and with respect to whom the words are henceforth applicable, **“They shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”** Yet a little while, and there is One who will be able to give such a turn to the whole affair that it must tend rather to the advancement than the injury of the Gospel.

Just as Peter has filled up the measure of his sin by a formal repudiation of his Master, the cock crows. What is the result? A return to sober-mindedness, repentance, and tears. God only knows with what clamor Satan deafened the disciple’s ears so that the first cry of the feathered watchman did not penetrate into them.

An awakener of some kind or other is appointed to everyone. Wherever we may be, there are voices which call us to repentance. Nature, as well as our whole life, is full of them, only our ears are heavy and will not hear. There is an awakening call in the rolling thunder, which is a herald of infinite majesty - in the lightning, which darts down before thee, carrying with it destruction - in the stars, which look down upon thee - in the flower of the field, which, in its transient blooming and fading, depicts thy own brief existence upon earth.

Nay, where are we not surrounded by awakening voices?

They sit upon the tombstones of our church-yards, and their language is, **“It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that the judgment.”** Their warning voice resounds from every funeral car that rolls past thee. It may be heard on every birthday which thou celebratest; in every fit of illness by which thou art attacked; in every danger that threatens thy life; as well as in that secret uneasiness which incessantly steals through thy soul.

And besides these general calls to repentance, do we not find something similar in every family circle and in each individual? One misfortune after another has lately crossed thy threshold. O how many alarming voices have been contained in these strokes of the Almighty’s rod! You feel your strength decaying, and that the sun of your life is declining. Do you not hear in this fact the crowing of the cock? On every side we may be conscious of it - in visions of the night, in the events of the day, in serious thoughts, which we are unable to prevent, in sermons and admonitions which are addressed to us.

The cock in the court-yard of the high priest crows a second time, and this call enters and finds a response. Day begins to dawn upon Peter, awakened by the remembrance of his Master’s warning, and while reflecting on the abyss into which he has plunged himself.

Let us, however, return for a few moments, to see what occurred in the council hall just before this second warning. Something of importance has just taken place. The Accused has declared upon oath that He is the Son of the living God.

The high priest, in dissembled indignation, rends his clothes. Amid wild uproar sentence of death is pronounced upon the Holy One of Israel, and the minions of justice seize Him to lead Him away into the court-yard, and there vent upon Him their unlicensed fury.

The divine Sufferer has just passed through the doorway into the court-yard when the crowing of the cock reaches His ear. “**And the Lord turned;**” we know toward whom. That sound announced to Him His disciple’s fall, and His eye and His compassionate heart go in search of him.

Such is Jesus the Saviour. He embraces His followers with more than maternal tenderness, and their want of fidelity does not prevent His being faithful. What waves of sorrow beat over His head, and yet He can forget everything in His anxiety for His fallen disciple! Sooner than one of them should be forgotten, He would forget the government of the world; and would suffer the nations to take their course, rather than lose sight of one of His little ones. And happy are ye who are the weak of the flock, the poor and needy above others! It would seem that you lie the nearest to His heart.

Deeply was Peter immersed in the mire of sin, yet the Lord turned toward him.

Who among us would have troubled himself further about such a faithless deserter from the ranks? If such characters were referred to us, it would go ill with them. How ready we are to stamp and reject such stumbling brethren as hypocrites! Instead of moving a finger to restore them, we not infrequently plunge them deeper into the mire, and persecute them worse than the world does.

The Lord, on the contrary, whose right alone it is to judge in such cases, is not ashamed to deign to act the part of the woman in the Gospel, who having lost one of her pieces of silver, strikes a light, seizes the broom, and ceases not to stir up the dust till it is discovered; and when found, she calls her neighbors together, and says, “**Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece of silver which I had lost.**”

His children are dearer to Him than the brethren often are to us.

Tell me, you that are parents, do your erring sons and disobedient daughters cease to be your children because of their aberrations? Do you not rather still more deeply feel that they are bone of your bone, and flesh of your flesh? Does not your love to them increase with the danger to which you see them exposed? And are you not more fully conscious, when compelled to weep over them, that your life is bound up with theirs, than when they merely caused you joy? If ye then, being evil, cannot reject your own seed, how should He be able to forget those who are of His flesh and blood, who said, “**As my Father loveth me, so have I loved you;**” and by the mouth of His prophet, “**Can a woman forget her sucking child that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, she may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee on the palms of my hands.**”

Peter, though fallen, still belonged to Him. Though he had acted wickedly, yet his Master’s love for him remains unchanged. See how carefully He looks round after him!

Certainly, had it not been the Lord's will that we should believe that the covenant of grace, on His side, stood inviolably fast, He would have hesitated to have set before us such examples as those of David and Peter. "**And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter.**" Yes, "**though we believe not, yet he abideth faithful; he cannot deny himself;**" for "**the foundation of God standeth sure; having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his.**"

The Lord turned Himself. The conversion of every sinner begins with that for which David prays, "**Look upon me!**"

By nature we are like dry bones in a huge church-yard, and cannot come to Him. But as soon as the Lord begins to look upon us, we enter into closer connection with Him, and feel that He is near us. We are conscious of being deeply and wondrously affected by things, which, otherwise, we scarcely noticed. The idea occurs to us, in a variety of circumstances, that God intends by them to call us to repentance, and we are often inclined to say with Jacob, "**Surely the Lord was in this place.**"

The Almighty is then no longer distant from us on some far-off height, but pervades our chamber, and meets us in the daily occurrences of life. Not a day passes without something happening which compels us to say, "**It is the Lord!**" Yet this state of things may continue long without our attaining to real conversion of heart. But when the faithful Shepherd begins to follow after us, He does not leave us without accomplishing His purpose.

It was not simply the crowing of the cock that raised the disciple from his fall. Nor did the turning of the Lord toward him produce the desired effect. A third and more powerful means was added. What was it? A word, a call, an exhortation? No; a look which the eye of the Keeper of Israel cast upon His disciple, who was staggering on the brink of destruction.

This look did wonders. "**The Lord turned and looked upon Peter.**"

What a look must that have been! What divine sorrow and love must it have expressed! and how accompanied by the effulgence of the Spirit and the radiance of divine grace! It acted both as a sword to wound, and as a balm to heal. It struck like destroying lightning, and at the same time expanded itself like refreshing dew.

O there is inexpressible power in the look of the Lord!

- With a look of majesty He beholds the earth, and it trembles.
- With a judicial look He overtakes the sinner, who exclaims, "**I perish at His presence.**"
- His dying look on the cross melts stony hearts, and transforms lions into lambs.
- With a look of forgiving mercy, He makes a contrite soul forget heaven and earth in its happiness;
- By means of a grieved and loving look, He restores lambs to His fold, which had long gone astray in the wilderness.

To this day His people feel that His eyes are upon them, and according to what they read in them, their peace or joy rises or falls.

The Lord's look does not fail of its effect upon Peter.

No sooner do the disciple's eyes meet His, than the magic band which held him is dissolved, the infernal intoxication dispelled, his ear opened, and reflection returns - nay, sin is acknowledged - his heart is melted - the snare is broken, and the bird has escaped.

"Gracious God," is now his language, "how deeply have I fallen! Wretch that I am, was not all this foretold me? Said He not on the way, '**Before the cock crows twice, thou shalt deny me thrice?**' Woe is me, that in foolish presumption I repelled the warning, and only remember it now, when it is too late! I vowed to go with Him to prison and to death; and yet I am the first to deny and abjure Him! How is it that the earth still bears me, and that heaven's lightnings do not blast me! Instead of which, He who so kindly forewarned me, and whom I nevertheless abjured and ignored, deigns me still a look of pity and compassion!"

Such may have been the language of Peter's soul, when, as the narrative informs us, "**he remembered the word of the Lord, which he had spoken to him.**"

He would have infallibly become a prey to despair, had not the Saviour's lovingkindness made every arrangement for preventing Satan from sifting the poor disciple too severely.

His Master's prayer, that his faith might not fail, had surrounded the abyss, as it were, with a balustrade, and by His injunction, that after his conversion, he should strengthen his brethren, had made preparation for wiping away his tears long before they fell.

O how did the soothing influence of all the words which the gracious Friend of sinners had spoken to him, shed itself upon his heart, when to them was added that look so full of mercy and compassion!

Peter, by the look of his Master, is wholly dissolved in grief and humiliation. As if he were unworthy to appear before God or man, he begins to "**weep bitterly.**"

O how much is reflected in these tears! What thorough contrition before God, what holy indignation against sin, what an ardent thirst for grace, and what fullness of fervent love to the Lord beam forth from their pure light!

"**Cast me not away from thy presence! Whom have I in heaven but thee?**" are the aspirations which issue from his heart. All his desire and longing center in this, that he may again rejoice in the favor of the Lord. Though he were to become an outcast from the world all the days of his life, yet he would gladly submit, if he might only again hope for mercy. His tears announce the birth of a new man. The old, presumptuous, self-seeking, self-trusting Adam is dead, and a man of humility, filial resignation to God, and sincere desire that the name of the Lord may alone be glorified, rises, phoenix-like, from his ashes.

It is said that a tear glistened in Peter's eye as long as he lived. If this is anything but a legend, it was not a tear of sorrow only, but of joy at the mercy experienced. The remembrance of his fall never left him for a moment; and in the degree in which it kept him low, it sharpened his spiritual vision for the mystery of the cross and of salvation by grace.

This is abundantly evident, especially in his first epistle. He there comforts believers with the cheering assurance that they are **"kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation."**

He calls upon them to **"hope to the end for the grace that shall be revealed."**

He impressively reminds them of the weakness and evanescent nature of everything human, while calling to their recollection the words of the prophet: **"All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away."**

He speaks of **"the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without spot,"** with a fervor which immediately indicates him as one who had deeply experienced its healing power.

It is he who addresses the warning to us, **"Be sober, be vigilant; for your adversary the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."**

And when he quotes the psalm in which it is said, **"The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous; and his ears are open to their cry; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil"** - does it not seem as if he intentionally referred to that look from his Master which had once so overwhelmed him and cast him to the ground?

O how much of the guilt of denying Christ, either in a gross or subtle manner, rests upon us all! How much reason have we to be alarmed at the words, **"He that denieth me, him will I also deny before my Father in heaven."**

Let us therefore cover Our heads with our mantles, and with Peter, go out and weep bitterly; that a day of grace may also dawn upon us, and that the words of the apostle may be also applicable to us, **"Such were some of you, but ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of Our God."**

~ end of chapter 22 ~

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